

Insane Musk doubles down in fight with Trump administration, risking his empire

Story by Faiz Siddiqui, Aaron Gregg

Over the next several years, Elon Musk aims to take astronauts to the moon using a 403-foot rocket, launch a fleet of autonomous vehicles that lack a steering wheel or pedals, and turn millions of existing Teslas into self-driving cars overnight.

Musk has acknowledged his ambitions require overcoming regulatory hurdles, roadblocks presented by NASA, the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Throwing caution to the wind, Musk took aim at the man overseeing each one of those agencies in X posts this week — Transportation Secretary and acting NASA administrator Sean P. Duffy — igniting a new public feud with the Trump administration through an official who possesses direct oversight of his business empire.

“Having a NASA Administrator who knows literally ZERO about rockets & spacecraft undermines the American space program and endangers our astronauts,” Musk said in an X post on Wednesday.

Behind the scenes, his business decisions appear to express even more defiance.

In recent days, Tesla has launched a new mode, dubbed “Mad Max,” a version of its advanced driver assistance intended to allow vehicles to weave through traffic and maneuver more confidently, but has been [reported](#) to roll through stop signs and exceed the speed limit.



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Elon Musk aims to deploy robotaxis to serve half the US population by the end of 2025

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The Biden administration took a hard line against similar aggressive maneuvers, leading Tesla in 2022 to issue an update eliminating a “rolling-stop” function, which sent cars through intersections without coming to a complete halt, and a [recall of more than 50,000 vehicles](#). (Tesla [said](#) it was not aware of any collisions, injuries or deaths related to the issue at the time.)

The new Mad Max feature, rolled out quietly during the shutdown, which has diminished resources across the federal government, reprises the type of driving behavior previously rejected by regulators for pushing cars afoul of traffic laws.

NHTSA, the federal traffic safety regulator Duffy oversees, disclosed for the first time to The Washington Post that it has now made an inquiry into the Mad Max mode.

A NHTSA spokesman said Tuesday the agency “is in contact with [Tesla] to gather additional information” on the feature. The agency [opened a probe earlier](#) this month into reports of traffic violations while Full Self-Driving was active, including running red lights and crossing into opposing lanes of traffic.

Tesla’s quiet addition of features similar to previously scrutinized capabilities and Musk’s skirmishes with people in the Trump administration have caused longtime Musk observers and backers of his companies to say he’s putting his businesses at risk. Musk’s sparring goes beyond Duffy; he has exchanged barbs with trade adviser Peter Navarro, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and even Trump himself.

“You’re essentially fighting with the guy in charge,” said Tesla investor Ross Gerber, who has become a prominent Musk detractor in recent years. “It’s so much self-sabotage.”

The Department of Transportation did not respond to an inquiry regarding whether Duffy had any response to Musk’s criticisms or how they might impact the agency’s work; a DOT spokesperson referred a reporter to NASA. Tesla, SpaceX and Musk did not respond to requests for comment.

Tesla vehicles sit at a charging station in Glendale, California, on Sept. 23. © Caroline Brehman/EPA/Shutterstock

Tesla has long aimed to deploy a more aggressive version of its driver-assistance system, Full Self-Driving. But rolling out a feature that includes humanlike driving characteristics is complicated by the fact that such programming often causes vehicles to run afoul of traffic laws.

“When you take an AI-driven system like Tesla’s ... and you say, ‘Well let’s take away a little of its guardrails,’” said Gerber, “This can only make it more dangerous.”

“It’s more confidently making the mistake,” he added.

During Tesla’s quarterly earnings call on Wednesday, Musk described a new wave of innovations he expects the company to fulfill. “We’re really just at the beginning of scaling, quite massively, Full Self-Driving and Robotaxi and fundamentally changing the nature of transport,” Musk said. “There are millions of cars out there that with a software update become full self-driving cars,” echoing a promise he has made for years.

Still, Musk said, Tesla’s ability to expand its Robotaxi ride-hailing service to around 10 metro areas by year’s end hinges on “various regulatory approvals.”

Meanwhile, Musk has berated Duffy in a smattering of posts on X continuing more than 36 hours after making his opening jab.

Musk took umbrage with Duffy's suggestion that [Artemis III](#), a NASA mission to land a [crewed rocket](#) on the Moon, would be opened to vendors besides Musk's rocket company SpaceX. After initially being awarded \$2.89 billion contract, SpaceX has faced numerous setbacks and delays in its effort to deliver a functional moon lander.

Potential competitors include [Blue Origin](#), founded by Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos.

NASA spokeswoman Bethany Stevens said Wednesday that the agency is giving both Blue Origin and SpaceX the opportunity to present "acceleration approaches," while also asking other companies for proposals to speed up the moon mission. "At the President's direction, Sean has focused the agency on one clear goal — making sure America gets back to the Moon before China," she said.

The agency's current plan requires SpaceX's Starship to be refueled in space, a feat that has never been accomplished by any company or government agency.

"A lot of people have questions on that and they haven't got into to orbit to even demonstrate [the refueling]," said a NASA employee familiar with the matter, speaking on the condition of anonymity fearing retribution. "If we had five more years there would be less concern."

NASA had planned the Artemis III launch for 2024 before delaying it to 2027, but many experts believe that timeline, too, is unrealistic. Duffy, in an appearance on "Fox & Friends," seemed to suggest the timeline would slip another year. "We're going to beat the Chinese and do it in President Trump's term ... so, before 2029 January," Duffy said.

Scaffolding surrounds the Artemis solid rocket boosters at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, March 7. © Steve Nesius/Reuters

SpaceX has tested Starship 11 times with a mixed record of success. The [first](#), in 2023, saw the rocket lift off successfully before exploding, sending debris hurtling onto a nearby beach. A major breakthrough last October, with a system successfully catching a returning rocket booster, proved short-lived after four subsequent tests ended in [explosive failures](#).

Using Starship for the moon mission will require it to reach complex milestones, causing experts to worry the system won't be ready in time for the maneuvers required by NASA's Artemis III plan.

"SpaceX is far behind in meeting all of the progress milestones it must meet before [Artemis III]," Todd Harrison, a space policy analyst with the American Enterprise Institute, said in an email.

There are numerous other companies working on moon landers. The defense contractor Lockheed Martin has been working on technical and programmatic analysis for lunar landers that would provide more options to NASA, according to an emailed statement from Bob Behnken, the company's vice president of exploration and technology strategy. Texas-based Firefly Aerospace and Japan's iSpace both sent uncrewed landers to the moon earlier this year.

Musk's tirade against Duffy came after the latter singled out SpaceX in comments to CNBC.

"I love SpaceX; it's an amazing company," Duffy [said](#) on CNBC's "Squawk Box." "The problem is they're behind. They pushed their timelines out and we're in a race against China. The president and I want to get to the moon in this president's term, so I'm going to open up the contract."

Musk responded to Duffy directly — with a juvenile meme. Later, he settled on a nickname, “Sean Dummy is trying to kill NASA!” he [wrote](#).

The fraught dynamic is complicated by mutual dependence. Musk’s SpaceX has received billions of dollars in U.S. government contracts, while NASA is dependent on SpaceX’s equipment and ability to propel people into orbit.

While Duffy, as NASA’s acting administrator, seeks to consolidate power over the space program, Musk has pushed for his preferred candidate, Jared Isaacman, to lead the space agency. [Trump withdrew Isaacman’s nomination](#) in May over his [Musk ties](#) and alleged Democratic leanings, though Isaacman responded that he has “been relatively apolitical.”

Meanwhile, Musk drew criticism from fans who said he was playing with fire by picking a fight with the person overseeing the Department of Transportation and NASA.

“It’s not a smart idea to [upset] the DoT when you need them for [Full Self-Driving] and Robotaxi Elon,” one X [user](#) responded, referring to Tesla’s plans for an autonomous vehicle ride-hailing service.

That hasn’t stopped Tesla from enthusiastically touting its new mode.

“If you are running late, this is the mode for you,” another person said on X, a [testimonial](#) reposted by Tesla with two words: “Mad Max.”