



# Trump's Attacks On Musk Threaten U.S. Space Program

By **Rainer Zitelmann** July 03, 2025

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Donald Trump has launched a fresh attack on Elon Musk, along with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Trump declared it “the monster” that “that might have to go back and eat Elon.” On his Truth Social platform on Monday, Trump continued his attack: “Elon may get more subsidy than any human being in history, by far, and without subsidies, Elon would probably have to close up shop and head back home to South Africa. No more Rocket launches, Satellites, or Electric Car Production, and our Country would save a FORTUNE.”

Trump acts like an autocratic dictator, responding to critics with threats of punishment. Musk was quite right to criticize Trump’s plans to continue the colossal debt orgy – as were some other Republican politicians, such as Rand Paul.

Trump may not know – or simply not care – that carrying out his threats would set U.S. space exploration back by two decades. November 14, 2011 marked a low point in U.S. manned space exploration when the American astronaut Daniel Burbank had to be transported to the International Space Station (ISS) aboard a Russian Soyuz rocket because the United States was no longer able to send its own astronauts into orbit. This happened after the discontinuation of the Space Shuttle program. In the years that followed, American astronauts made 30 such flights to the ISS using Russian Soyuz rockets – until a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket took Americans astronauts to the ISS on May 30, 2020, and at a much lower cost.

What had gone wrong? Despite the triumph of landing on the Moon, the U.S. manned space flight program failed. In the three decades from 1981 to 2011, the U.S. Space Shuttle program cost almost 200 billion dollars, but failed to live up to expectations. In his study, *Dark Star: A New History of the Space Shuttle*, Matthew Hersch came to a sobering conclusion: “By every measure, the shuttle had fallen short of even the modest hopes that had surrounded it. And the shuttle remained flying only because every effort to replace it with a better-winged, reusable craft also failed.”

Things only changed with the emergence of Musk’s SpaceX. Awarding contracts to the private company SpaceX was the only way NASA could move forward.

Musk succeeded in massively reducing launch costs. As Harry W. Jones from the NASA Ames Research Center noted in his essay “The Recent Large Reduction in Space Launch Cost,” from “1970 to 2000 the average launch cost was \$18,500/kg. A major drop in cost occurred in 2010 with the Falcon 9 at \$2,700/kg. The Falcon Heavy reduced the cost to \$1,400/kg. The Shuttle’s launch cost was about 20 times that of the Falcon 9 and about 40 times that of the Falcon Heavy.”

And today?

1. Without SpaceX, the United States would be in second place, way behind its chief rival, China. In 2024, SpaceX launched almost twice as many rockets as China,

the No. 2 in space travel. Of 261 space missions worldwide in 2024, 134 were launched by SpaceX. If SpaceX were a country, it would by far surpass China, which registered 68 launches. Without SpaceX, the U.S. would not even have managed two dozen rocket launches last year.

2. Of 12,952 active satellites in space, 8,530 have been deployed by the USA. However, 7,855 of these belong to Starlink, another of Musk's companies. If Starlink is excluded from the count, the U.S. would be left with fewer than 700 satellites in space, relegating it to fourth place behind Russia (1,559), China (906), and the UK (763).
3. Starship is a marvel of engineering, surpassing everything that has come before it. Starship's most distinctive feature is its reusability. Imagine if every airplane had to be discarded after a single flight – air travel would be out of reach for the vast majority of people. This is why Elon Musk has spent so long making sure his rockets are reusable. He has already achieved partial success with his standard carrier, **Falcon 9**. Starship's first-stage booster and second-stage orbital spacecraft are both reusable. The booster returns to Earth shortly after launch, allowing for its reuse in future missions. Similarly, the second stage can return to Earth once its mission is complete, whether that be hours, days, weeks, or months after launch. Some versions will never return to Earth again. They will remain—suitably equipped—at their final destinations as space station modules, refueling stations in Earth's orbit, lunar shuttle vehicles, or as permanent bases on the Moon, Mars, asteroids, or beyond. Whether the USA will succeed in getting to Mars without Space X is more than debatable.

What Trump refers to as subsidies – with his usual degree of hyperbole as the allegedly largest subsidies ever received by a human being in history – are in fact mainly NASA contracts for which SpaceX provides services that NASA could either not provide itself or only at a much higher cost. Cancelling or reducing these contracts would please China in particular – the very country that Trump has singled out as his main rival.

*Rainer Zitelmann is a German historian, sociologist and multiple bestselling author, whose books include "How Nations Escape Poverty", "The Power of Capitalism" and "Hitler's National Socialism." He published 29 books that have been translated into more than 30 languages. In recent years, he has written articles and been the subject of interviews in leading media such as Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Newsweek, The Daily Telegraph, The Times, Le Monde, Corriere della Sera, Israel Hayom, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and numerous media in Latin America and Asia.*