

## **Trump and Musk refusing to pay USAID's bills threatens far more than foreign aid.**

By [Hayes Brown](#), MSNBC Opinion Writer/Editor, 2 Mar 2025

It takes a certain kind of mindset to believe that there are no consequences for paying the people who have already provided their labor.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday night [temporarily paused a looming deadline](#) for the Trump administration to release more than \$1.5 billion in foreign aid funding. Chief Justice John Roberts' order was brief but still a [major win for the White House](#) in its effort to tear down the U.S. Agency for International Development. In coverage of and reaction to the Supreme Court's ruling, one fact has gone underemphasized: The lower court order, which is now on hold, required the government to pay for work that has already been completed.

The administration's withholding of that money represents a stunning disregard for contracts signed and executed in good faith. This culture of deliberate default on display can't spring from nowhere — it must be encouraged and supported at the top. Given the history of the two men driving this rapid, and [likely illegal](#), dismantling of USAID, it follows that President Donald Trump and Elon Musk see paying bills as merely an option that can be discarded.

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Since Trump was inaugurated, USAID has been the [most imperiled test subject](#) of his administration's mad experiment to consolidate control of the federal government. The foreign aid freeze that he signed on his first day immediately [jeopardized thousands of projects and many more lives](#) around the world. A [lack of understanding of how federal payment systems work](#) reportedly led [Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency](#) to say they believed USAID workers were willfully skirting the freeze — and deserved to be made into an example.

Musk tried to dodge blame for one of the “accidentally canceled” programs, claiming that DOGE quickly “restored” funding for Ebola prevention that USAID administers. [Current and former USAID officials told The Washington Post that is false](#). In fact, most of the aid work USAID was doing remains paused. Earlier this month, U.S. District Judge Amir Ali ordered the administration to disburse funding that USAID had previously promised to pay contractors and grant recipients. When the State Department's lawyers dithered in court Tuesday on whether that money had been released, the judge on Tuesday [issued a follow-up order](#) to have USAID pay up for work that had already been done prior to his initial Feb. 13 order. The Trump administration [argued to the Supreme Court](#) that there wasn't enough time to carry out Ali's order, leading to Roberts' stay.

[‘Machete being taken to the system’: Elon Musk's Ebola prevention cuts set off global alarm bells](#)

Purposefully letting bills go unpaid is something that most Americans have been conditioned to regard as rightly punishable; it is only the rich who can afford to disregard paying their creditors. Over the years, Trump and Musk have both been accused of renegeing on deals after already receiving the benefit of others' labor.

Trump and his companies have been subject to numerous legal actions from contractors and others accusing the real estate developer of welching on deals. "The actions in total paint a portrait of Trump's sprawling organization frequently failing to pay small businesses and individuals, then sometimes tying them up in court and other negotiations for years," [USA Today reported in 2016](#). "In some cases, the Trump teams financially overpower and outlast much smaller opponents, draining their resources. Some just give up the fight or settle for less; some have ended up in bankruptcy or out of business altogether."

Another investigation that year from [The Wall Street Journal](#) found "a pattern over Mr. Trump's 40-year career of his sometimes refusing to pay what some business owners said Trump companies owed them." Trump told the Journal he paid "thousands of bills on time," which is not the same as all of his bills. He likewise told Reuters in a separate inquiry about his business practices: "'I've had many people that when they work for me they get very rich,' Trump said ... but, 'sometimes I renegotiate.' Adding: 'I'll do that with probably 10 or 15 percent of contractors.'"

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Musk's companies have also been subject to similar complaints. Within four months of his takeover of Twitter (now dubbed X) in late 2022, six companies sued his new business [over unpaid bills](#). After less than a year under Musk, the number of lawsuits over unpaid bills had grown to more than two dozen. "Suing X," [wrote Ars Technica's Jon Brodtkin](#), "seems to be the most effective method of collecting on unpaid invoices."

Reuters also [reported last year](#) that based on a review of Texas property records, Musk's rocket company SpaceX has been slow to pay bills for work done as it expands. Reuters noted at the time that it "couldn't determine for every lien whether outstanding bills were owed by SpaceX or by one of its contractors who commissioned work or materials on its behalf," and Musk has [attacked Reuters' reporting](#) repeatedly via his X account. As with Trump, many of those cases involving Musk have been settled while others face ongoing, potentially very expensive, litigation.

**[SCOTUS must decide if the federal government is worth saving from its own president](#)**

The amount that Musk and Trump have been accused of not paying totals somewhere in the millions — but the federal contracts at play are measured in the billions. State Department lawyers blamed the delay in restoring that funding on the complexity of the system, claiming it couldn't be turned back on like a spigot. But in the same filings, they also noted the administration is [eliminating 90% of the contracts USAID administers](#) and more than \$60 billion in foreign assistance. In short, the Trump administration is arguing that the spigot is under its sole control, not the courts' or Congress', and effectively claiming the right to break legally binding contracts on a whim.

Based on the sweeping and arbitrary cuts to staff and funding we're seeing, USAID won't be the only agency whose partners and contractors will be subject to this kind of capriciousness. It is entirely possible, though, that the work that still needs to be done in the areas where staffing has been cut and contracts ended will now [be much more expensive](#) in the long run. (Think about how Trump's reported [issues with paying his lawyers](#) on time [drove up the prices](#) for those attorneys willing to still take him on as a client.)

Musk and DOGE claim that decimating USAID will save taxpayers money and increase government efficiency. Growing doubts that the federal government will pay for services rendered will likely be seen as a bonus for [the architects of this quest](#) to fracture the administrative state. If anything, removing trust in government contracts will more likely lead to higher costs for taxpayers, as expensive contractors require upfront payments to ensure that the U.S. won't simply leave them on the hook once the job is done.

Moreover, blatantly disregarding USAID's contracts poses a danger to the entire underpinning of our civil court system, which is built on the idea that contracts signed without duress are sacrosanct. Musk and Trump's actions have suggested instead that for a powerful enough agent — be it a company or the federal government — there can be no enforcement, no accountability should they change their mind. For that reason alone, the Supreme Court's hold cannot be allowed to stand on the merits, not if contracts are to have any weight of law.