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Echoes of Rome: Elon Musk's Governmental Reforms and the Lessons From History

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SYNOPSIS

This article analyses Elon Musk's governmental reforms through the historical lens of the Gracchi brothers' reforms in ancient Rome. It explores how ambitious attempts to streamline governance and disrupt entrenched interests can lead to elite resistance, political instability, and unintended consequences. It draws parallels between Musk's bureaucratic overhaul and Rome's slide into factional conflict.

COMMENTARY

Recently, an [AI-generated](#) video has captivated audiences by portraying American tech billionaire Elon Musk as a Chinese official from the ancient Ming Dynasty, delivering a fervent speech on "governmental efficiency" with a touch of Kung Fu flair. This creative depiction not only entertains but also prompts a deeper reflection on the parallels between Musk's contemporary initiatives and historical reformers' efforts to reshape their societies.

Reflections From the Roman Republic

While the viral video provides an engaging introduction, Western history offers a more pertinent analogy. America has long considered itself the "[New Rome](#)", drawing inspiration from the Roman Republic's ideals and structures. The late Roman Republic, in particular, grappled with profound socio-economic disparities, political polarisation, and institutional sclerosis – conditions that resonate with contemporary American society.

In this context, the roles of Elon Musk, appointed by US President Donald Trump to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), bears a resemblance to that of the Gracchi brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, who emerged as reformers during a

tumultuous period in Rome's history. The Gracchi brothers, hailing from a patrician background, recognised the Republic's systemic issues and sought to implement reforms to address economic inequality and restore civic virtue. Their methods and the ensuing political upheaval offer valuable insights into the potential trajectories of Musk's modern-day reforms to adapt in the face of evolving challenges of America today, characterised by societal divisions and partisan polarisation.

The Gracchi Brothers: Reformers of Rome

[Tiberius Gracchus](#), elected as tribune in 133 BCE, was alarmed by the concentration of land ownership among the elite and the resulting disenfranchisement of ordinary citizens. He proposed the *Lex Sempronia Agraria*, a law aimed at redistributing public land to those in need, thereby revitalising the agrarian economy and strengthening the numbers of citizen-soldiers, by providing land to the poor, who would then qualify for military service. Circumventing the Senate, which was dominated by the aristocracy, Tiberius took his proposal directly to the Popular Assembly, which escalated tensions between the ruling class and the masses. His actions culminated in his assassination by senatorial opponents, marking a violent turn in Roman politics.

A decade later, following in his brother's footsteps, [Gaius Gracchus](#) expanded upon Tiberius' vision with a broader reform agenda. He sought to address issues such as grain prices, military service, and judicial corruption. Gaius also attempted to extend Roman citizenship to allied Italian states, aiming to strengthen the Republic through inclusivity. However, his reforms threatened entrenched interests, leading to political alliances that ultimately resulted in his death and the massacre of many of his supporters.

Historical Echoes and Contemporary Implications

Elon Musk's appointment to lead the DOGE underscores President Donald Trump's commitment to overhauling federal operations and reducing government expenditure. Musk's mandate involves identifying inefficiencies, eliminating redundant agencies, and centralising decision-making authority, with the ambitious goal of cutting approximately [US\\$2 trillion in federal expenditures](#).

Unlike historical reformers such as the Gracchi brothers, who aimed to address economic inequality, Musk's focus is on consolidating executive power and restructuring the federal bureaucracy. This initiative seeks to diminish what is perceived as "Deep State" resistance, reduce government intervention, and align federal agencies more closely with the administration's objectives. Such efforts mirror those of historical figures like Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who restructured Rome's power dynamics to strengthen executive authority.

Musk has acknowledged the potential risks associated with aggressive reforms. In a 2024 [X \(formerly Twitter\) post](#), he referenced the Roman proscriptions, stating, "The proscriptions of Marius led to the proscriptions of Sulla". This remark highlights the cyclical nature of political retribution, where one wave of purges begets another, leading to instability and the erosion of republican norms. Musk's awareness of these historical precedents suggests a recognition of the need for caution in implementing transformative policies.

The AI-generated video portraying Musk as a Ming Dynasty official further amplifies these historical parallels. In the video, Musk's character asserts, "Let me show you what DOGE is: we'll cut the budgets the federal government can't and fire those it's too afraid to fire". This dramatisation underscores the boldness of his reform agenda but also serves as a reminder of the potential resistance from established institutions and the risks of centralising authority.

The Global Context

History demonstrates that while radical political reforms can accelerate national and societal progress, they often carry significant risks, including social division, unrest, and even civil war. The Gracchi brothers' attempts to redistribute land in ancient Rome, though well-intentioned, led to political polarisation and violence, contributing to the [Republic's eventual decline](#). These examples underscore the potential dangers inherent in swift and extensive reforms.

In the contemporary context, Elon Musk's aggressive restructuring of the US federal bureaucracy through DOGE has already led to significant upheaval. Mass layoffs, including the [dismissal](#) of approximately 85,000 government employees, have disrupted essential services and fostered a sense of betrayal among public servants.

Critics argue that such measures, while aimed at streamlining operations, may undermine the very functions they seek to improve. Moreover, Musk's consolidation of power and influence over federal agencies raises concerns about potential conflicts of interest and the erosion of democratic oversight. The rapid pace of these changes has left little room for public discourse or legislative scrutiny, echoing historical instances where unchecked reforms led to unintended and often detrimental consequences.

The potential for backlash is significant. Opponents of Musk's reforms may seek to dismantle DOGE or target Musk personally, leading to a cycle of political retribution. Such internal conflicts, as Musk himself cautioned in his reflections on Roman proscriptions, could destabilise the nation, erode public trust in institutions, and hinder effective governance.

The implications of these reforms extend beyond America's borders. The world is closely observing how the United States navigates this transformative period, as many nations are grappling with rising government spending and inefficiency.

The resurgence of geopolitical tensions, particularly in Europe, [has ended the "peace dividend"](#), necessitating new funding sources to bolster defence capabilities while maintaining social programmes. Leaders like Argentina's Javier Milei [have adopted radical austerity measures](#), and Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto has [implemented significant budget cuts](#), drawing parallels to Musk's initiatives. China has also undertaken bureaucratic restructuring to [consolidate power and streamline state functions](#), albeit with different ideological motivations.

The world watches closely to see whether Musk's approach will serve as a model for governmental reforms or a cautionary tale of overreach.

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