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Fashion**Ellie Violet
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What Elon Musk wore to the White House foreshadowed his downfall



📷 'Dressed for a gamers' convention' ... Elon Musk before leaving the Department of Government Efficiency. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty

The sloppy sartorial style of political insiders, from Musk to Dominic Cummings, reveals who has the privilege to be scruffy - but it may also signal their undoing

In case you missed it, [Elon Musk](#) and Donald Trump have fallen out.

For some - and in particular anyone looking at the tech billionaire's White House wardrobe - this will come as little surprise. Long before anyone hit send on those inflammatory tweets, or tensions spilled out over Trump's "[One Big Beautiful Bill](#)" (OBBB), Musk's political downfall was written in the stitching.

During his time in the White House, Musk shunned the sartorial rulebook of someone at the shoulder of a president, where suits and ties are the common code. He wore dark Maga baseball caps at the Oval Office and told a rally in New York: “I’m not just Maga, I’m dark gothic Maga.” Then there were the T-shirts with slogans such as “Occupy Mars”, “Tech Support” and “Doge father”. At campaign rallies, commentators [noted](#) he looked “more like he belonged at a Magic: The Gathering tournament than a political event”, his dress sense the style equivalent of the k-holes that it is claimed Musk frequently disappeared into.

The more casual styles of Musk and his Silicon Valley tech bros - where stiff collars are eschewed in favour of crewnecks, tailored jackets softly pushed out the door by padded gilets - are light years away from those of the suited-and-booted US Capitol.

But if Musk’s clobber signalled a new DC power shift, it also spoke to different norms. “Disruption might be a badge of honour in the tech space,” says DC-based image coach and style strategist [Lauren A Rothman](#), “but in politics, chaos has a much shorter runway. The White House has been around for a long time. We’re not going to stop wearing suits ... This is the uniform.”



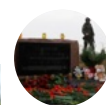
📷 Deliberately dishevelled ... Dominic Cummings, right, in 2019, with a foldback clip instead of a tie and a gilet. Photograph: Hollie Adams/Getty

All of this dressing down, dressing objectively badly and dressing “inappropriately” has form. Consider, if you can bear to, the case of [Dominic Cummings](#). The former Boris Johnson aide subjected Westminster to dishevelment, Joules gilets, beanies, Billabong T-shirts and tote bags advertising the 1983 gothic-inspired horror novel *The Woman in Black*. He wasn’t just a Tory, he was a gothic horror Tory.

As Jonathan Freedland, the Guardian columnist and host of the Guardian’s Politics Weekly America [podcast](#), notes: “Dressing down is usually a power move in politics, just as it is in the boardroom: only the most powerful can get away with it.” That was, he says, the message Cummings sent “when he roamed Number 10 in a gilet: ‘You lot are worker bees who have to wear a uniform, whereas I’m so indispensable to the man at the top, I can wear what I like’.”

It was the same with Musk, whose threads were a flipped bird to all those Oval Office stiffers in suits. As Rothman puts it: “His uniform of casual defiance stands in sharp contrast to that traditionally suited corridor of political

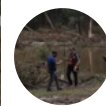
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power.” And that contrast screams out his different, special status.

Before him, there was “Sloppy Steve” Bannon, a man never knowingly [under-shirted](#). On this side of the Atlantic, Freedland points to former David Cameron adviser Steve Hilton and his penchant for turning up to meetings barefoot: “ditching the shoes was an instant way of signalling his membership of the inner circle”.

It’s that age-old question: who has the privilege to be scruffy? As Freedland puts it: “Musk was happy to stand next to the Resolute desk of the president looking like he was dressed for a gamers’ convention. That was his way of reminding everyone of his superior wealth and unique status, outside conventional politics.”

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📷 Doge days of summer ... Elon Musk in late May, before falling out with Trump. Photograph: Allison Robbert/AFP

But what Cummings and Musk share in sartorial disorder, they also share in political trajectories. Scruffy Icaruses who flew too close to the sun; their clothes a foreshadowing of their fall. Trump might talk about draining the swamp, but his Brioni suits are very much swamp-coded - plus, while Johnson might have had strategically unruly hair and ill-fitting suits as crumpled as a chip wrapper, suits they still were.

Ultimately, nobody likes a bragger. Because dressing in a way in which your privilege is omnipresent if not outright stated, is a surefire way to piss people off. Not least Trump, who noted that Musk had “some very brilliant young people working for him that dress much worse than him, actually”, in an interview on Fox in February.

“The contrast between Musk’s garb and Trump’s cabinet,” according to Freedland, “made them look and seem inferior: servants of the president rather than his equal. It was one more reason why more than a few in Trumpworld are glad to see the (poorly tailored) back of Elon Musk.”

To read the complete version of this newsletter - complete with this week’s trending topics in [The Measure](#) and your wardrobe dilemmas solved - [subscribe to receive Fashion Statement](#) in your inbox every Thursday.

At this dangerous moment for dissent

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you close this tab, I wanted to ask if you could support the Guardian at this crucial time for journalism in the US.

When the military is deployed to quell overwhelmingly peaceful protest, when elected officials of the opposing party are arrested or handcuffed, when student activists are jailed and deported, and when a wide range of civic institutions - non-profits, law firms, universities, news outlets, the arts, the civil service, scientists - are targeted and penalized by the federal government, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that our core freedoms are disappearing before our eyes - and democracy itself is slipping away.

In any country on the cusp of authoritarianism, the role of the press as an engine of scrutiny, truth and accountability becomes increasingly critical. At the Guardian, we see it as our job not only to report on the suppression of dissenting voices, but to make sure those voices are heard.

Not every news organization sees its mission this way - indeed, some have been pressured by their corporate and billionaire owners to avoid antagonizing this government. I am thankful the Guardian is different.

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Betsy Reed
Editor, Guardian US



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