

The Man Behind Trump's Push for an All-Powerful Presidency: Russell Vought

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Russell T. Vought, the White House budget director, has exerted his influence over nearly every corner of President Trump's Washington with his command of the levers of the federal budget. Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

The Man Behind Trump's Push for an All-Powerful Presidency

Russell T. Vought spent years drawing up plans to expand presidential power and shrink federal bureaucracy. Now he is moving closer to making that vision a reality, threatening to erode checks and balances.

Russell T. Vought, the White House budget director, has exerted his influence over nearly every corner of President Trump's Washington with his command of the levers of the federal budget. Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

Russell T. Vought, the White House budget director, was preparing the Trump administration's 2026 budget proposal this spring when his staff got some surprising news: Elon Musk's cost-cutting team was unilaterally axing items that Mr. Vought had intended to keep.

Mr. Vought, a numbers wonk who rarely raises his voice, could barely contain his frustration, telling colleagues that he felt sidelined and undermined by the haphazard chaos of the Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency, according to six people with knowledge of his

comments who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

“We’re going to let DOGE break things, and we’ll pick up the pieces later,” Mr. Vought told his staff during one flash of irritation, according to three of those people. Mr. Vought’s spokeswoman, Rachel Cauley, denied that he made those comments, and that he felt frustrated by Mr. Musk.

This had not been Mr. Vought’s plan.

Mr. Vought, who also directed the White House Office of Management and Budget in President Trump’s first term, had spent four years in exile from power. He worked through Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s presidency from an [old rowhouse](#) near the Capitol, where he complained of [pigeons infesting his ceiling](#) and coordinated with other Trump loyalists to draw up sweeping, detailed plans for a comeback.

He had carefully analyzed mistakes from the first term. And he had laid out steps to achieve the long-sought conservative goal of a president with dramatically expanded authority over the executive branch, including the power to cut off spending, fire employees, control independent agencies and deregulate the economy.

Mr. Musk, [who spent more than \\$250 million to help elect Mr. Trump](#), had celebrity, access to the president and political capital that the budget director could never hope for.

But Mr. Vought ([pronounced](#) “vote”) had something Mr. Musk did not: He had done his homework.

In the months since Mr. Musk fell out with the president, Mr. Vought has at last begun to put his plans into action — remaking the presidency, block by block, by restoring powers weakened after the Nixon administration. His efforts are helping Mr. Trump exert authority more aggressively than any modern president, and are threatening an erosion of the longstanding checks and balances in America’s constitutional system.

Now, as the government heads toward a shutdown when federal funding lapses on Tuesday, Mr. Vought, 49, is leveraging the moment to further advance his goals of slashing agencies and purging employees, with his office telling agencies to [prepare for mass firings](#) unless Congress can strike a deal to keep the government open.

The ultimatum follows a string of achievements for Mr. Vought.

This summer, he pressured lawmakers to [enact his plan](#) to cancel \$9 billion for foreign aid and public broadcasting that they had previously approved — an unusual bow by Congress to the White House. The new law claimed another prize for conservatives: the death of [the Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#). And a deal Mr. Vought cut with House Republicans helped secure passage of Mr. Trump's [domestic policy law](#) that slashed spending on Medicaid and food stamps.



Representative Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, left, and Representative Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, right, conferring during a House committee meeting to advance a bill to claw back \$9 billion for foreign aid and public broadcasting. Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

He has spearheaded a [push to erase hundreds of regulations](#) on the environment, health, transportation and food and worker safety, [telling Mr. Trump at an August cabinet meeting](#) that his efforts had led to 245 deregulatory initiatives this year. He has asserted White House power over independent agencies like the Federal Reserve, championing an [executive order](#) that forced them to submit their regulatory actions to his office for approval.

As the acting head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the agency charged with enforcing rules to protect people from predatory financial practices, he [halted nearly all of the agency's work](#), and sought to fire 90 percent of its staff.

At the heart of Mr. Vought's plan, associates say, is the intentional engineering of a legal battle over Congress's power to decide how government money is spent, potentially creating a new legal precedent for the president to block spending on any programs and policies he dislikes.

The next step in the fight is a legally untested maneuver in which the Trump administration would [cancel another \\$4.9 billion in foreign aid spending](#) — this time without congressional approval. The gambit, known as a "[pocket rescission](#)," involves the White House eliminating the spending unless Congress votes to stop it by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year.

The threat has enraged many lawmakers, including some Republicans: Senator Susan Collins, the chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, called it illegal. But as the deadline has neared, they have done nothing to stop it. Mr. Vought is confident that the White House would win a Supreme Court battle over the moves to stop spending, according to his associates.

"He is lining up the billiards shots, getting each ball in place, one by one, for each consecutive move," said Grover Norquist, the anti-tax activist.

For the leaders of Mr. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” movement, Mr. Vought is seen as the disciplined architect who channeled the passion of MAGA into an actionable policy blueprint. The slain activist Charlie Kirk, whose podcast was one of many where Mr. Vought regularly shared his views with the Republican base, [called Mr. Vought “an absolute rock star.”](#)

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To many legal experts, Mr. Vought’s work is a threat to the foundations of democracy.

“One of the main sources of power that Congress has over the executive branch is the budget,” said Eloise Pasachoff, a law professor at Georgetown University. “If the executive branch isn’t controlled by the power of the purse, then there is very little that will control the President.”

She added: “It’s a fundamental challenge to liberty for every single person in America.”

Mr. Vought, who declined through his spokeswoman to be interviewed, sees it differently. He said in a [speech](#) earlier this month that his mission was to bring to heel an unelected federal bureaucracy he likened to a “cartel working behind closed doors.”

“We have now been embarked on deconstructing this administrative state,” he said. “Step after step, it’s to move quickly, trying to think through what the founders would have done in the circumstances, and be aggressive.”

Over the years, Mr. Vought has made clear how he views his targets. He has said the Education Department promotes “woke-rot” propaganda like

“grooming minors for so-called gender transition.” That the Federal Reserve has “been wrong for decades.” That the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development “actively embarrass the United States.” That the Internal Revenue Service targets “struggling families in a craven effort to sustain the broader bureaucracy’s radical progressive agenda.” And, in a remark [captured on video](#) unearthed by ProPublica that stung many in Washington, he said he wanted federal employees to be “in trauma.”

Once the budget director has the power to starve those government agencies, Mr. Vought has said, they can wither away. “We want to make sure that the bureaucracy can’t reconstitute itself later in future administrations,” he said on Mr. Kirk’s [podcast](#).

MAGA’s ‘Bulldog’

Mr. Vought started envisioning a blueprint to slash the federal government long before Mr. Trump was a Republican.

He grew up the youngest of seven children in a religious blue-collar family in Trumbull, Conn. [His father, a Marine Corps veteran, was a union electrician](#), and his mother was a public school teacher.

In Mr. Vought’s telling, he grew up watching his parents dragged down by big government.

“My parents worked really long hours to put me through school,” he said at his [first Senate confirmation hearing](#). “But they also worked long hours to pay for the government in their lives, and I have often wondered what they would have been free to build and give without such a high burden.”

After graduating from Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school in Illinois, Mr. Vought went to Washington to work for [Senator Phil Gramm](#) of Texas, a Republican champion of fiscal austerity.

Mr. Gramm recalled his young staff member as prodigiously hardworking, attending law school by night while working by day to help his boss

shrink the government.

“Russ worked for me as a child, and I’m proud of what he’s doing now,” said Mr. Gramm, who retired from the Senate in 2002.

Mr. Vought went on to direct budget policy for House Republicans during the rise of the Tea Party movement, when populist demand for smaller government propelled a wave of hard-line conservatives into Washington.

It was not a given that he would join the first Trump administration. Mr. Vought, who friends say is deeply driven by his faith and often leads adult Bible study classes at his Baptist church, considered opting out of Washington to attend seminary and become a pastor. In 2017, he heeded the call of the White House.

During Mr. Trump’s first term, Mr. Vought [argued](#) that the president had the power to block federal spending Congress had approved. He was part of a group of White House officials who froze military spending for Ukraine [in defiance of Congress](#), paving a path to the president’s [impeachment](#).

He also helped come up with the idea of using emergency powers to [build a border wall without Congressional approval](#), and pushed an executive order that could have enabled the president to [easily fire tens of thousands of career civil servants](#).

The budget office was eventually forced to restore the Ukraine money, and the other moves were [reversed by the Biden administration](#).

After the 2020 election, Mr. Vought started the Center for Renewing America, a think tank devoted to sustaining Mr. Trump’s policies.

The clawing of either rats or [pigeons](#) in his office walls was so loud that it distracted visitors, according to a recent book, “[Mad House](#).” But Mr. Vought remained focused on his mission.

In 2022, he released a [104-page “shadow budget,”](#) a prescription to

remove “the scourge of woke and weaponized bureaucracy aimed at the American people”: deep cuts to Medicaid, foreign aid, scientific research and other programs.

Outraged when Kevin McCarthy, the Republican House speaker, [cut a deal with Mr. Biden to raise the debt ceiling](#), Mr. Vought pushed House Republicans to take the extraordinary step of ousting their leader.

Mr. Vought was a constant presence in the group text thread of the House Freedom Caucus, the hard-line conservatives who toppled Mr. McCarthy — bucking them up and pushing them to take what felt like an enormous political risk, said former Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida, who led the effort.

“When people got scared or concerned about political impact, committee assignments, he was always there, strongly encouraging them,” Mr. Gaetz said. “He was instilling backbone in people.”

Mr. Vought’s public comments began to take on a more hard-line tilt. His think tank [published papers](#) establishing a rationale for [why it would be lawful to deploy troops on U.S. soil](#), and advocating the [elimination of the post-Watergate norm of Justice Department independence](#).

Stephen K. Bannon, the former Trump adviser whose “War Room” podcast is popular with the base, declared him “[MAGA’s Bulldog](#).”

Back to the White House

After Mr. Trump won a second term, Mr. Vought devoted himself to preparing for a do-over — one that was bigger, bolder and, crucially, lasting.

Eyeing his next role, Mr. Vought described how the White House budget director would be critical in transforming the federal government.

“Presidents use the O.M.B. to tame the bureaucracy, the administrative state,” [he told conservative commentator Tucker Carlson days after the 2024 election](#).

Mr. Vought's research was featured in Project 2025, the policy blueprint prepared by the conservative Heritage Foundation for Mr. Trump's return to office. Mr. Vought also drafted potential executive orders.

But tensions emerged soon after Mr. Musk parachuted into Washington with a mandate to upend the federal bureaucracy.

Mr. Vought was outraged when DOGE sowed chaos by sending out an email requiring federal workers to [detail five accomplishments](#) each week or lose their jobs, said three people with knowledge of the matter. Mr. Vought supported purging federal workers, but complained that the email had skirted the legal process for personnel matters, creating what he saw as needless liability.

While Mr. Vought has called for the abolition of the Education Department, he was annoyed when [DOGE moved to dismantle the agency's data office](#), which tracks student academic performance, according to two people familiar with the events. The administration needed the data to inform [efforts to discourage race-based college admissions](#), cut certain programs for poor and disabled students, and promote charter schools, these people said.

Mr. Vought's spokeswoman, Ms. Cauley, called the accounts of those episodes "false." Mr. Musk and his representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Vought later restored portions of the office, but with limited staffing. The Education Department [has posted job openings](#) to refill some of the positions.

"DOGE would have been far more effective from day one had they bothered to ask Russ and team how to achieve their goals," said Joe Grogan, a friend of Mr. Vought's who led the White House Domestic Policy Council in the first Trump administration.

Now, in the post-Musk era, Mr. Vought appears to be relishing his moment.

He works long hours and weekends in his suite in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next to the White House, where he oversees a staff of more than 500.

On the wall is a photo of his favorite president, [Calvin Coolidge](#), the farm boy and small-town mayor historians say most purely embodied the conservative principles of small government and fiscal austerity.

Around his home in a Virginia suburb, his neighbors — including former federal workers who lost their jobs under the Trump administration — have planted lawn signs that read “We Support Our Federal Employees.”

In the White House, Mr. Vought is not seen as a part of Mr. Trump’s inner circle, according to four people with knowledge of the dynamics. He regularly quotes the Bible and never curses — a sharp contrast with a president who sometimes refers to Christians in the third person. But people familiar with the relationship between the two men say that the president recognizes in Mr. Vought something that he highly values: a seasoned loyalist who knows how to use the federal budget to deliver what Mr. Trump wants.

“Russ knows exactly how to dismantle the Deep State and end weaponized government,” Mr. Trump wrote in a [statement](#) when nominating Mr. Vought.

Now Mr. Vought is building the case to achieve one of his primary objectives: securing the president’s authority to block congressionally approved spending on programs he dislikes.

To that end, Mr. Vought is laying the groundwork for a legal battle over [the Impoundment Control Act of 1974](#), enacted by Congress in the wake of President Richard Nixon’s moves to [block agency spending](#) he opposed.

Mr. Vought, who says the law is unconstitutional, would like to see it overturned.

That goal has driven him to his current “pocket rescissions” package.

Mr. Vought’s friends say that his actions are designed to provoke a lawsuit from the Government Accountability Office, the congressional watchdog, which has said the pocket rescission is [illegal](#) and “would cede Congress’s power of the purse.”

“Russ absolutely believes he is on sound legal footing and that he will be vindicated at the Supreme Court,” Mr. Grogan said.

Edda Emmanuelli Perez, the general counsel of the Government Accountability Office, disagreed, saying in an interview: “In order to not spend the money, the laws would have to be changed. And the president does not have the unilateral power to change the laws.”

Rob Fairweather, who spent 42 years at the Office of Management and Budget and wrote a [book](#) about how it operates, said there is reason for Mr. Vought to have confidence in a legal victory.

“What he’s doing is radical, but it’s well thought out,” Mr. Fairweather said. “He’s had all these years to plan. He’s looked clearly at the authorities and boundaries that are there, and is pushing past them on the assumption that at least some of it will hold up in the courts.”

Mr. Vought is already looking forward to that outcome, [declaring on Glenn Beck’s show](#) this spring: “We will have a much smaller bureaucracy as a result of it.”

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