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# Elon Musk's massive collection of personal data is a threat to all Americans

Guest Editorial by Jim Jones

MAY 7



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A bipartisan group of state attorneys general should be commended for calling public attention to the need for Americans to protect the privacy of their genetic data. **The AGs warn** that about 15 million customers of DNA testing company 23andMe are in danger of having their personal genetic information fall into unsafe hands because of the company's bankruptcy. The AGs advise customers on how to protect their data.

Unfortunately, an infinitely more dangerous threat to the intimate personal data of most Americans has been developing at the hands of Elon Musk since January of this year. While the frequently-advertised objective of Musk's DOGE gang has been to ferret out governmental waste, it has become increasingly clear that an underlying purpose is to develop a massive federal database of most Americans. **As one informed observer has put it**, "DOGE teams have grabbed personal data about U.S. residents from dozens of federal databases and are reportedly merging it into a master database at the Department of Homeland Security."

There have been numerous reports of DOGE unlawfully **breaking into secure federal databases** and exfiltrating information in violation of the Federal Privacy Act of 1974. Those agencies include the Social Security Administration, which holds massive amounts of sensitive financial and medical data for about 70 million Americans. Another major data source for the master database is the Internal Revenue Service, which contains bank account numbers, investments and a trove of other confidential information in roughly 270 million tax returns that individuals, businesses and nonprofits file each year. **Veterans have a well-founded fear** that their benefit information is at risk.

Several courts have ordered Musk to stop these lawless actions, but there has been such an onslaught against so many agencies, large and small, that it has been a difficult task to restrain him. Even when a federal district judge ordered Musk to stop his quest for personally-identifiable Social Security information and purge any such information already obtained, it does not appear that any was purged. Instead, federal lawyers **appealed to a federal appeals court**, where they lost again, and they are now **appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court**, where they will likely lose. But that will not likely stop them.

And, it isn't as if the DOGE crew is being transparent about the data theft from the various agencies. **DOGE staffers are reportedly** using their "excessive and unprecedented system access to intentionally cover their tracks and avoid oversight so that they can creep on Americans' data from the shadows."

Whenever Musk's foraging through private government data is publicly reported, **Trump officials write it off** as just trying to ensure that undocumented immigrants are not receiving improper government benefits. There is no credible evidence to support the contention that there is significant fraud in benefit systems. The White House has also admitted that federal databases are being merged in order to track down and deport immigrants. Indeed, in early April **a story broke** that data collected on some 6,300 migrants had resulted in their being placed in Social Security's "death master file" in hopes of forcing them to "self-deport." Those in the death file are cut off from using bank accounts, credit cards and all other financial

services. It is literally a financial death and was intended to include only those who were actually deceased.

There is great concern that the targeting of migrants with the powerful master database could be a test run for using that system against U.S. citizens who oppose Trump policies. Trump has issued dozens of so-called executive orders unlawfully targeting a wide array of individuals, businesses and nonprofits that he regards as having slighted or opposed him over the years. Having a powerful database containing private personal information to intimidate and extort those who he dislikes would greatly enhance his ability to get even or bend them to his will. The **database would allow** the swift location of "compromising information about his political opponents."

Almost everyone has information in one federal database or another that could be embarrassing, at minimum, if released publicly—questionable tax deductions, mental health expenses, military discipline, habitual gambling, marital difficulties, whatever. If a defense attorney or federal judge has an important case affecting a Trump action, a quick journey through the comprehensive database might solve the problem.

We do know that dictators and dictator wannabes deem it essential to have all of the information possible about potential adversaries. Communist China has massive amounts of information at hand about every resident within its borders. The Trump database is not as comprehensive, but it is the best start in the United States since 1776. The potential for misuse is frightening and we must take corrective action to stop it before it devours our democratic republic.

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### **About the Author**

Jim Jones is a Vietnam combat veteran who served 8 years as Idaho Attorney General (1983-1991) and 12 years as a Justice on the Idaho Supreme Court (2005-2017). His columns are collected at JJCommonTater.com.

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