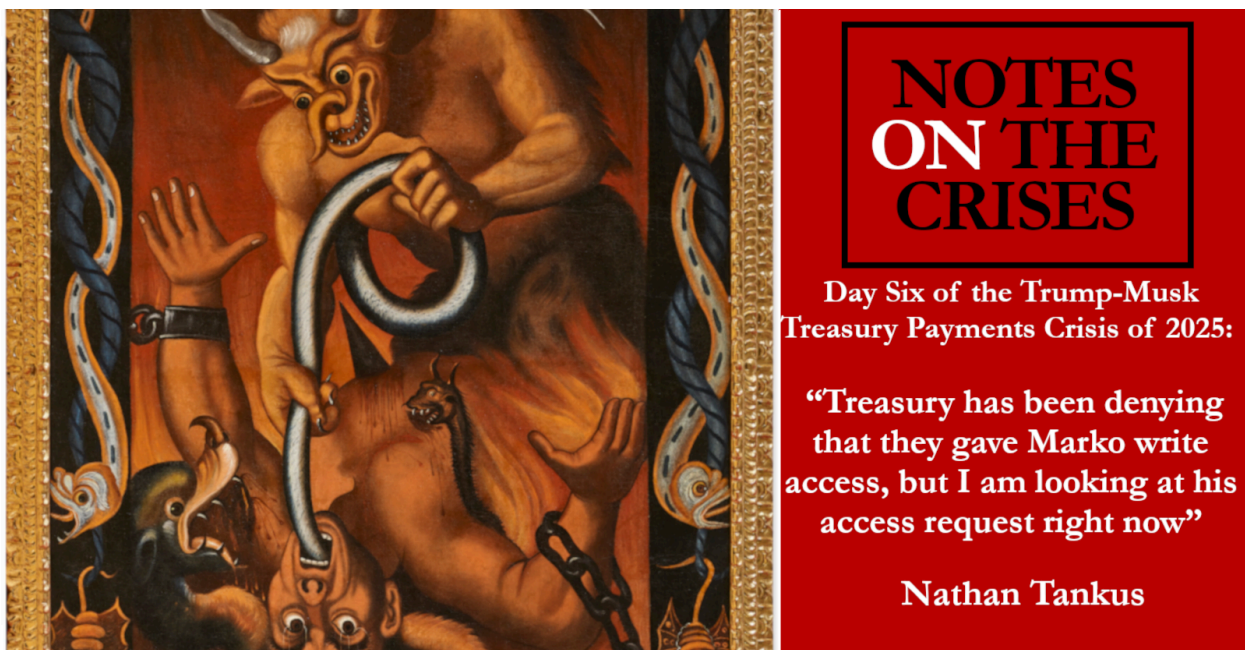**Day Six of the Trump-Musk Treasury Payments Crisis of 2025: "Treasury has been denying that they gave Marko write access, but I am looking at his access request right now"**

Notes on the Crises

www.crisesnotes.com/day-six-of-the-trump-musk-treasury-payments-crisis-of-2025/

February 5th 2025

By Nathan Tankus

*If you are a **current or former career Bureau of the Fiscal Service Employee**, especially if you're a legacy IT programmer with years of experience **and especially if you are a COBOL programmer currently working on the PAM, SPS or any other adjacent team,** contact me [over email](#) or over signal — [linked here](#). My Signal username is "NathanTankus.01". Legal counsel sources and payments level sources at the Federal Reserve are also helpful. I am also looking for [sources at FINCEN](#)*

*This is a free piece of Notes on the Crises. I will not be paywalling any coverage of this crisis for as long as it persists, so please [take out a paid subscription](#) to facilitate performing that public service. If you're rich, take out the [**Trump-Musk Treasury Payments Crisis of 2025 Platinum Tier**](#) subscription. The additional thing you get is me trying to stop the Treasury's internal payment system from melting down or Musk taking your confidential information, along with everyone else's. So far, nowhere near enough rich people are paying their fair share.*

Note to Readers: *I have not mentioned this in the past, but I am on [bluesky, an alternative to twitter.](#) It's been hard to let go of twitter since that is where I built my following, but clearly it's becoming less usable and there are obvious concerns about getting traction [about a Musk story on the Everything Musk app](#). I have also started an instagram for Notes on the Crises [which will be populated soon](#).*

Day Five of the Trump-Musk
Treasury Payments Crisis of 2025:

Not "Read Only"
access anymore

Nathan Tankus

Nathan FOIA Tankus
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Specifically Marko Elez, 25 year old former SpaceX employee, has read & write access for The Payment Automation Manager (PAM) & Secure Payment System (SPS) at the Bureau of the Fiscal Service (BFS). PAM processed 4.7 trillion dollars of payments in 2024.

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First some media, then some new reporting:

Economist Paul Krugman, who left the New York Times recently [because of its increasingly hostile and hamfisted constraints on his editorial independence](#), has a very generous citation to my work in his [newsletter yesterday](#):

> For the moment they probably can't. The federal payments system is immensely complex, and like most government infrastructure has been financially squeezed for decades. So it's cobbled together, much of it running on old hardware and even older software, kept functioning thanks to old hands and institutional memory. The 20-somethings Musk is deploying to take over, locking out those old hands and pushing aside the people who know how the system works, almost surely don't understand enough to politicize payments right away.
>
> **As Nathan Tankus, the go-to expert on these matters, says**,
>
>> I 100% believe that the primary barrier to Elon Musk gaining control of the Treasury payments system is COBOL.
>
> For readers mystified by the reference, COBOL is a very old programming language that was once pervasive in the business world but in which hardly anyone under 60 knows how to program — yet is still widely used in government. (During Covid, the state of New Jersey put out a frantic call for people who knew COBOL to implement expanded unemployment benefits.)
>
> But this observation raises another concern. What if the Musk people — Muskovites? — try to muck with systems they don't understand, believing that they're super smart and can master everything with the help of a little AI? It's not hard to imagine the whole federal payments system — including, by the way, servicing of federal debt — crashing.
>
> So much damage — to U.S. credibility, to the Constitution and the rule of law, and possibly even to the very functioning of the government. And Trump only took power 2 weeks ago.

So thanks Paul. As I clarified [in my newsletter yesterday](#), it's largely the complicated and layered business logic and system architecture wrapped in COBOL, rather than COBOL in the abstract, which is the barrier. On to the latest.

Yesterday, the Acting Assistant Treasury Secretary Jonathan Blum sent a letter on behalf of the United States Treasury responding to Senator Wyden (with [identical letters as well](#) to other members of congress) regarding the Treasury Payments crisis. Among other claims and meaningless assurances, [it states](#):

> Currently, Treasury staff members working with Tom Krause, a Treasury employee, **will have read-only access** to the coded data of the Fiscal Service's payment systems in order to continue this operational efficiency assessment. [Emphasis added]

I stand by my reporting and thus this is either a lie or a carefully worded evasion. Specifically, the statement could be worded to avoid confirming or denying that they also have write access. To explain what I mean, we must jump to the facts.

One source is aware of this letter and explicitly denied it late yesterday:

> Treasury has been denying that they gave Marko write access, **but I am looking at his access request right now** and it has the Deputy Assistant Commissioner for IT Operations instructing the team to **disregard all previous instructions and assign Marko read/write privileges for the database**.

Thus, one way that this letter could be technically true in a bizarre and wildly dishonest sense is that by first having "read-only" access and then having "read and write" access, they could be said to have "read-only" and "read and write" access simultaneously.

But probably the United States Treasury is just lying.

Importantly, according to a source familiar with the situation, Krause does not have a Bureau of the Fiscal Service laptop or email yet. This source says, regarding the fact that the letter does does not mention Marko Erez, states "That's definitely a purposeful evasion"

In any case, the **situation remains extraordinarily, incomprehensibly dire** as they continue to have "read and write" access. According to a source familiar with the situation a senior IT employee shared a schedule of blackouts (system outages, typically for maintenance which can include system code changes) for the Payment Automation Manager (PAM), International Treasury Services (ITS) & the Standard Application for Payments (ASAP) to Marko Elez. Recall that PAM is the primary way for the Treasury to send payments, having sent 4.7 trillion dollars last year.

As I reported in my piece on Monday, ASAP is the crucial mechanism that sends payments to "state and local governments, educational and financial institutions, vendors and contractors, profit and non-profit entities and Indian tribal organizations." If you want to selectively impound spending, and particularly if you want to target specific non-profits or other disfavored entities (or agencies), this is a crucial system to get control of. Whether they can and how quickly is an extremely open question. Nor do we know that those blackouts were or will be for system changes. A source familiar with the situation has seen Marko involved with conversations about ASAP.

The other system, International Treasury Payments, [is for all international payments](). So if you want to target people or entities (crucially foreign non-profits and foreign countries, among many others) that the U.S. government disburses funds to, this is a system you would need to get a handle on. The desire to cut off foreign aid has been repeatedly stated by Trump on down, and if they can get

operational control this system would be critical to doing that. Between PAM and ITS this is most of the payments the United States Treasury processes. This is an extraordinary amount of access which, as I said yesterday, is not held by senior IT employees at BFS.

According to a source familiar with the situation, that same senior IT employee shared "technical documentation and guides" with Marko Erez which explain how to connect and operate a mainframe. It appears to be, though my source can't confirm, the same one running PAM. According to a source familiar with the situation that makes it

> plausible that "DOGE" **could obtain sufficient technical knowledge to implement some of its horrible ideas**. That would **likely be worse than outright breaking things**, but it remains to be seen what they're actually doing.

It's important to understand that this source works in the IT operations department and thus is not one of the COBOL programmers working on these systems. I do not have insight into that, which is the main blindspot I've had in my current reporting. If you are a current BFS employee working directly on PAM, ITS, ASAP or any of the other COBOL systems I would **urge you to get into contact**. If you are a **relative or friend of someone who works on these systems**, I would encourage you to have them contact me (signal & email information above). This could not possibly be more important.

A source familiar with the situation also states that Mark has been receiving lots of "technical contact lists", including for the [Secure Payment System (SPS)](). This source speculates that this means that the teams working on systems like PAM are "mostly intact". Why seek out contact lists if it's not actually going to help you if a bunch of the people on the list have been fired or pushed to resign?

When asked about the general mood at the Bureau of the Fiscal Service my source states:

> Everyone else just wants to keep their heads down. They're all miserable and I think they're just trying not to get targeted or fired. Senior leadership seems to be complying with them. No one is really talking openly about it, but it just seems like people are miserable and stressed out. Morale seems very low. We enjoyed our jobs, we did good work, and now we're being targeted by political powers beyond our control.

A source familiar with the situation stated that there is a general norm forming, which is sometimes explicitly stated, to not discuss the Trump executive orders openly. The obvious issue of surveillance comes to mind in such a situation.

I want to end on a few words stepping back and explaining why this is such a big deal. So they have "read and write" access, or even "read only" access, why do we care? What are the possible consequences?

1) **Musk, Trump and their respective cronies have unrestricted access to your social security numbers, your confidential bank information, your confidential medical information and so much more.**

This is true with **just "read only"** access. This is why the burgeoning media war (that currently "read only" is winning unfortunately) is something of a red-herring. It matters, don't get me wrong. As a source yesterday said, Apocalyptic. But that source also said that "read only" was "catastrophic". If the smash and grab operation commences just as stupidly, quickly and dangerously as it has so far, this could easily become identity theft by an untold number of people using their personally identifiable information within weeks.

This kind of information can also be used to target enemies and, if they get operational control elsewhere, the capability of using the Anti-Money Laundering (AML), Know Your Customer (KYC), & the Combating the Finance of Terror (CFT) laws to target political enemies. Of course, these laws have already been used to target political dissidents; but we are talking about something of an incomprehensibly larger scale. As one long time payments lawyer wrote to me: "Is DOGE using its own, non-OFAC definition of 'terrorist group' that has no basis in law?" In this sense, the Democratic party has fully and unequivocally participated in building the apparatus that is showing to be extraordinarily easily weaponized against them. In short, they can not just steal money but eliminate the financial existence of anyone they felt like, if operational control gets sufficient. The week Trump won his second term, I told a room full of Democratic party operatives that "if the Democratic Party really believed Trump was a fascist, they would destroy the servers containing all the surveillance data"

2) Creating "backdoors" into the Treasury's multi-trillion dollar payment system

I'm running short on time (it's late at the time of writing) and I have to get up in the morning and be prepared for another round of intensive interviews so this will have to be more carefully detailed in the future. But these are extremely sensitive systems, and complicated systems. All the factors that slow them down in taking over the system are also the factors that would make it hard to find intentionally hidden code to their benefit that could give them ongoing access to the system even if they are removed. I need to do more reporting on this one but it is something many, many sources have mentioned.

3) Subordinate the judicial system to the Trump Administration/DOGE

This one has been hard to get across to readers. As you can imagine, the overwhelming social media response to this reporting has focused on the absurd illegality of the actions. Asking for judicial intervention. But as I covered in my piece Friday, the constitution is not self enforcing and the supreme court is unlikely to step in, or to step in a positive way. In my Friday's piece I unfortunately presciently asked:

> As a famous twentieth century statesman might have said in this situation "...and how many divisions does the Constitution have?"

What happens if they are just embedded so deeply in the heart of government payments that there is no mechanism to dislodge them? Court Injunctions are not self enforcing either My longtime payments lawyer source agrees with this point, which I also tried to articulate Monday:

> Chokehold to stop or delay any and all payments initiated by federal agencies, and potential mechanical method to thwart judicial rulings when a judge/court says "You as the Executive Branch cannot stop federal grants/payments lawfully approved and directed by Congress."

As we've seen, there are no armed law enforcement figures coming in to save the day and if they get deep enough into the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, the only way to enforce the law is through street actions.

4) Elon Musk can use this system against his enemies.

It almost feels quant to say because the timeline of so many of the other possibilities are so immediately and dramatically dire that this one almost feels hopeful in comparison in that it implies "competitive position" being something that is very meaningful. Nevertheless, it should be obvious that this information, which includes information on all businesses the Federal Government does business with, is ripe to be used to kneecap competitors. Specifically my longtime payments lawyer source brought up just outright putting competitors on the "do not pay" list. The "good case scenario" may just be an economy increasingly dominated in all corners by Musk and/or Trump through a sprawling network of business ventures with the greatest possible advantages.

5) The New American Payments System, X the Everything App

For this one I am just going to quote my longtime payments lawyer source at length. They've got it and note this is a "read only" issue. Imagine the worst case of paying your taxes on X payments, or "receiving" your social security payments there.:

> Obtaining access to and potentially exfiltrating data sets from BFS that may be characterized as "anonymized" (in order to evade criticism about potential violation of privacy laws), but could give insight into payment patterns and payment system strengths, weaknesses and behaviors.
>
> - Such information obtained on an inside track by DOGE would be very helpful, for example, if you are an **entity like X Payments LLC and are currently licensed as a money transmitter in 42 states with plans to launch as-yet-to-be specified payments and financial services.**
> - It is unclear **whether there are any limitations on DOGE personnel transferring payment information to X Payments LLC** in order for that company to gain proprietary information regarding federal payments in an anti-competitive manner compared to its fintech competitors currently in the marketplace.
>
> - Such single-sourced information not available to other market competitors would provide an anti-competitive jump for X Payments LLC on ApplePay, Google Pay, Samsung Pay (mobile wallets) and a host of other fintech companies in the marketplace backed by venture capital and private equity funding.

6) Ability to pick and choose who gets public money, regardless of congressional directives

I covered the constitutional aspects of this crisis Friday. The payment aspects I covered Monday. Without Judicial ability or willingness to sanction Trump & Musk, There is very little left of congress. The "power of the purse" is central to the rule and authority of congress. The decentralized (in relative terms) nature of administrative agencies means that there are enormous opportunities for agencies to follow the law. This is a place to skip past all those headaches.

7) Catastrophic failure of the payments system.

Even a disruption for a day would be a disaster. A disruption on longer timescales would have unimaginable knock on effects. The Treasury could involuntarily default because of operational issues. The worst case scenarios, which are **completely and utterly plausible at the time of writing**, would be a catastrophe without precedent. No typical economic calamity like the Great Financial Crisis or even the Great Depression would be comparable.

TLDR, here is what I told Norwegian national daily newspaper Klassekampen, one of the largest newspapers in Norway, when asked for comment:

> The reason this is so incredibly important is that the Bureau of the Fiscal Service's payment system sits at the very heart of the United States Federal Government. 88% of government payments, which amounts to about 5.4 Trillion dollars, flows through this system every year and onto the wider economy. Its social security checks, medicare and medicaid payments to medical providers etc. It's everything, in short. The Bureau of the Fiscal Service is the payments intermediary where all payment orders from the various government agencies get routed to their intended recipients. If anything happened to this system, the payments would not go out and that would lead to catastrophe. It could also lead to an unintentional operational default on United States treasury securities.
>
> It also is an enormous privacy violation where former employees of Musk who have not properly gotten security clearance are able to install insecure technology and steal the most sensitive information possible. They could theoretically use banking information of people they identify as enemies and put them on terror watch lists, or "do not pay" lists if they can get enough operational control at the treasury. Part of why this is, as one current Bureau of the Fiscal Service employee described it, apocalyptic is that all the ways that this can be abused are incalculable and would take years to fully map. To the extent that the sudden collapse of the United States would have a negative effect on the rest of the world, this is as much of a global crisis as it is a national one