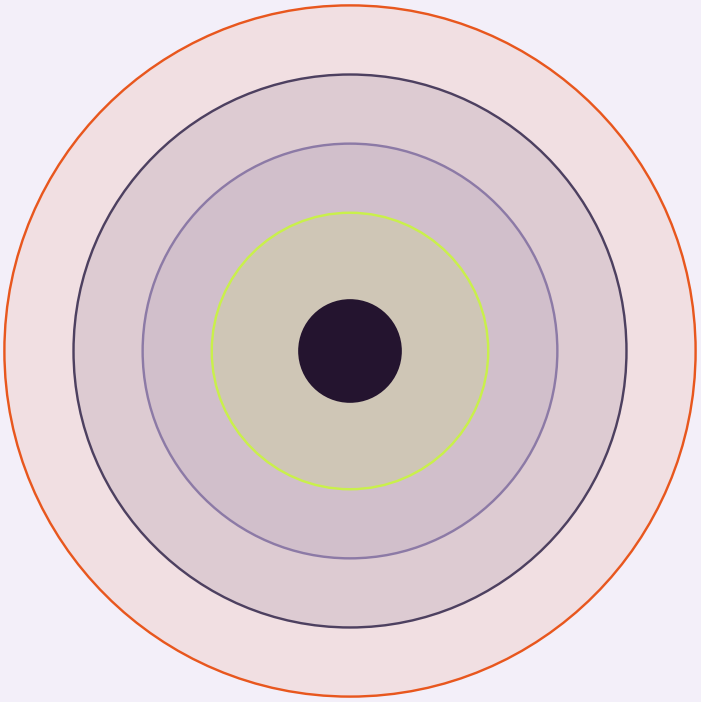


Muskism: A Guide for the Perplexed

A reading of the book by Quinn Slobodian and Ben Tarnoff (2026)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Muskism: A Guide for the Perplexed, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Quinn Slobodian is a historian of capitalism at Boston University and the author of Globalists and Hayek's Bastards. Ben Tarnoff is a technology writer and the author of Internet for the People. Together they argue that Elon Musk is best read not as a lone genius or a lone villain but as the clearest example of a worldview they call Muskism, which they set beside Fordism as a possible operating system for this century. Where Fordism paired mass production with mass consumption and spread its gains widely, they argue that Muskism concentrates wealth and offers sovereignty through technology to a few. They name three touchstones, fortress futurism, state symbiosis and financial fabulism, and follow them from apartheid-era South Africa through 1990s Silicon Valley, war-on-terror defence contracts, the 2022 purchase of Twitter and the Department of Government Efficiency. It is not a biography: the authors read business decisions and public statements as evidence of an ideology.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Read Musk as the avatar of a system, not as a one-off personality.

Slobodian and Tarnoff borrow the logic of Fordism, a word that named far more than Henry Ford. They use Muskism the same way: as a name for a model of running companies, markets and states. The question they ask is less who Musk is than what he is a symptom of.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Fordism promised that the many would share the gains; the authors argue that Muskism promises sovereignty to the few.

The twentieth-century bargain tied mass production to mass consumption, so workers could buy what they made. In the authors' account, the new model concentrates wealth and uses it for political and economic leverage. That contrast is the spine of the book.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Fortress futurism treats technology as a wall: a way to make a group self-sufficient against a hostile world.

The authors trace the idea partly to the apartheid South Africa of Musk's childhood, which they describe as a besieged state that bet on advanced technology and industrial self-reliance. They argue the same instinct shows up later in vertically integrated companies built to depend on no one.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The lone-disruptor story hides how much the business runs on public money.

This is what the authors call state symbiosis. They point to government launch contracts and defence programmes of the war-on-terror years as part of how the space business grew. Their claim is that these firms do not replace the state; they make the state depend on them.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

When a private network carries what public systems used to carry, its owner holds a kind of power no one voted for.

The authors describe firms selling sovereignty as a service: launch, communications and data that governments come to rely on. A contract can be renegotiated, but a dependency is harder to unwind. That is why they treat infrastructure ownership as a political question, not only a business one.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Financial fabulism runs on stories about the future, and each round of money needs a bigger story.

In the authors' reading, a founder whose wealth sits in his own companies has to keep belief in those companies high. They argue this pushes toward ever larger promises, framed as the only way to avoid catastrophe. Valuation becomes partly a matter of narrative.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Attention is capital: spectacle can replace advertising, and owning the platform changes the game.

The authors see a feedback loop between public spectacle, investor belief and media power. With the 2022 purchase of Twitter, later renamed X, the platform where that loop ran came under the same ownership. In their reading, it stopped being a stage and became part of the machine.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Treating government like code to be rewritten leaves little room for argument and consent.

The authors read the Department of Government Efficiency in 2025 as Muskism applied to the state itself. In their account, deliberation gives way to the logic of debugging: find what looks like waste and delete it. They argue that the second Trump presidency gave the model its biggest stage so far.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The deepest question in the book is who will govern a future that runs on privately owned systems.

The authors warn that if automation makes most people's labour unnecessary, their consent may stop seeming necessary too. They present this as a danger to name and resist, not a forecast to accept. Reviewers split on how far the argument holds, which makes it a good book to argue with.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Map your single points of failure
- [ ] Build one fallback
- [ ] Download your archive from one platform
- [ ] Look up who pays for a project you admire
- [ ] Get your news from more than one feed

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask two questions of every big tech promise
- ◯ Keep a promise log
- ◯ Find the source before you share

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

☐ SETUP 1

Map your single points of failure

Use the dependency ledger on this page, or a sheet of paper.

List the services your week runs on and mark which ones go through one company with no backup.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 2

Build one fallback

Pick the riskiest item on your list and set up a second route this week: a second messaging app with your five key contacts, an offline map of your area, or a second way to pay.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 3

Download your archive from one platform

Most large platforms offer a data export in their settings.

Request one for the service that holds the most of your photos, posts or contacts, and store it somewhere you control.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 4

Look up who pays for a project you admire

Choose one technology company or project you follow.

Search public records for its government contracts or subsidies (in the US, USAspending.gov lists federal awards) and note what you find.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 5

Get your news from more than one feed

Subscribe to two sources by email or RSS so your news does not depend on one platform's ranking.

Pick outlets with different owners.

MY VERSION DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask two questions of every big tech promise

When you read a bold claim about the future, ask: by when, and who pays if it is wrong?

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Keep a promise log

Write down dated predictions from founders and companies you follow.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Find the source before you share

Before reposting a viral claim about a public figure or agency, find the original document, filing or full quote.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
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30 ○						

December 2026

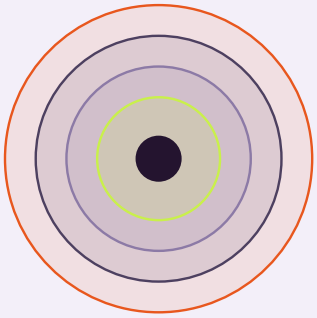
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Look past the man to the arrangement. Then ask who it serves, and who decided.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER SLOBODIAN AND TARNOFF