**Headline:** How Musk Sold Out America’s Veterans

By David McCall

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**[Article Body:]**

Bob Kaldahl recalled how the fighter jets revved their engines to a high-pitched shriek before catapulting off the USS Shangri-La, producing vibrations so intense that he felt like he had “ants crawling around” in his ears.

Kaldahl performed his duties as a fire control technician without any assigned personal protective equipment and sustained permanent hearing loss while serving aboard the aircraft carrier in the 1950s.

The 93-year-old always bore his hardships proudly, never expecting to see the day when the government turned on patriots like him.

But that’s exactly what happened. Billionaire-run-amok Elon Musk declared war on America’s heroes, pushing to [slash tens of thousands of crucial jobs](https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/03/05/va-plans-fire-83000-employees-musks-help-eliminating-pact-act-staffing-increase.html) at the Department of Veterans Affairs and imperiling programs keeping many alive.

Musk, an unelected and unaccountable appendage to the Trump administration, [launched a scorched-earth campaign](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/10/politics/doge-federal-government-cuts) that continues to reduce huge swaths of the federal government to rubble. The VA is just one of Musk’s targets, and his attacks on the department come at a time when [more and more veterans](https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2024/02/4900319/) require care because of ailments contracted in Vietnam, Iraq, and other combat zones.

“He has no business being in there whatsoever,” Kaldahl said of Musk, who never donned a uniform but became the world’s richest person by leveraging the opportunities and freedoms afforded him by those who did.

“I served four years to protect our democracy, and then they let somebody like him come in and take over and do the things he’s done. It’s unconstitutional and unacceptable and disgusting,” added Kaldahl, a former member of the United Steelworkers (USW) who worked for [Erie Mining Company](https://www.mesabitribune.com/opinion/columnists/bob-kaldahl-found-his-calling-at-erie/article_18fb2572-09ed-11ed-9fab-8b5793570cf3.html) in Hoyt Lakes, Minnesota, after his discharge from the Navy.

In all, the VA intends to [fire more than 80,000](https://www.commondreams.org/news/veterans-affairs-department) workers—many of them veterans themselves—in coming months.

Former [service members](https://wtop.com/dc/2025/03/vets-protest-trump-doge-and-musk-on-national-mall/) around the country [already feel the repercussions](https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_secva_re_mass_termination.pdf), which include cuts to transportation programs for disabled veterans, reduced telephone support for caregivers, and the postponement or cancellation of suicide prevention trainings.

Other veterans [report](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/03/musk-doge-va-trump-veterans-affairs-cuts/) the cancellation of therapy groups and longer wait times for appointments as well as [disruptions](https://democrats.org/news/%F0%9F%9A%A8-trump-and-musks-mass-firings-and-funding-cuts-threaten-veterans-hard-earned-benefits/) to medical studies, including a clinical trial on a new medication with the potential to treat cancers of the mouth and throat. Some facilities eliminated staff members especially trained or certified to perform certain roles, [delaying](https://www.king5.com/article/news/politics/national-politics/stress-devastation-at-seattle-veterans-affairs-federal-firings/281-a635cb56-2ed1-44f8-a6c5-2b09224886e5) the requisition and delivery of medical supplies.

As always happens amid Musk’s ham-handed raids, the cuts at the VA commenced without the slightest foresight or sense. Among many other examples, officials summarily canceled hundreds of contracts with outside providers, only to immediately scale back the reckless decision after realizing they needed the help performing [essential work](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/02/26/veterans-affairs-contracts-canceled-reversal/) like physician recruitment and burial services.

Kaldahl, who receives hearing aids, eye care, and other services from the VA, has to travel to larger cities, such as Superior, Wisconsin, or Minneapolis, to receive care unavailable at a clinic near his home.

While he doesn’t yet know how the cuts to VA might affect him, he said he wants the agency to build service, not roll it back.

“I would like to see more programs locally,” he said, noting the risks involved in traveling to VA facilities hundreds of miles away during Minnesota winters.

Three years ago, the Democrats in Congress passed the PACT Act, which [dramatically expanded VA care for veterans](https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/#whats-the-pact-act-and-how-wil) who contracted a wide range of cancers and other diseases because of exposure to Agent Orange, burn pits, depleted uranium, and other hazards.

Veterans [hailed the law](https://news.va.gov/press-room/in-two-years-of-the-pact-act-va-has-delivered-benefits-and-health-care-to-millions-of-toxic-exposed-veterans-and-their-survivor/) for filling a long-neglected gap. But Musk’s cuts now threaten this care just as a growing number of veterans attempt to avail themselves of it.

“If you were exposed, you should get it,” declared Frank Bystrzak, a longtime activist with USW Local 135L in Tonawanda, New York, whose father was one of the first Marines to hit the ground in Vietnam.

Bystrzak praises the Buffalo VA’s care for his dad, who has cancer and other ailments. But the facility already seems short-staffed, Bystrzak said, and he worries that cuts in any department there will result in longer wait times for appointments, medication, and other services.

“Doctors are great, but without support staff, they can only do so much,” Bystrzak said. “You can’t fly the plane without the mechanics.”

The USW in recent years ramped up support for workers with military backgrounds, establishing Vets of Steel committees in all local unions and advocating for bills at the state and local levels to support military families.

It’s frustrating for Bystrzak, who advocated for this legislation and volunteered for service projects involving veterans, to see the government abandon former service members while others step up to help them.

“They deserve everything they get and more,” Bystrzak said.

Just as galling is the audacity with which Musk, indifferent to the sacrifices and struggles of veterans, wields his chainsaw. He wormed his way into the federal government, mounting his attack from a city that’s the headquarters of the armed forces and home to numerous monuments commemorating their selfless service.

Kaldahl recalled the cheers that he and other veterans received while touring the war memorials in Washington several years ago as guests of an organization called the Honor Flight Network. Among other highlights, a welcoming committee greeted the veterans when they landed at the National Airport.

Those people treated him and the other vets like “royalty,” Kaldahl said.

Musk acts like they’re cannon fodder.

“I can’t understand why the Republicans are willing to let that happen,” Kaldahl said.