Foreword by Sönke Iwersen

Sönke Iwersen is an award-winning journalist who has led the investigative team at Germany's top business newspaper, *Handelsblatt*, since 2012. Known for uncovering complex stories with precision, he has received numerous accolades, including four Watchdog Awards, the Kurt Tucholsky Prize for Literary Journalism, and the German Reporter Prize. Named Business Journalist of the Year, Iwersen also teaches at the Georg von Holtzbrinck School for Business Journalists and hosts the acclaimed podcast Handelsblatt Crime, where he merges investigative rigor with compelling storytelling. In 2025, he co-authored *The Tesla Files: The Inside Story of Musk's Empire*, with Michael Verfürden.

It started on a Friday afternoon in November 2022. A stranger had contacted my paper, Handelsblatt, claiming to work for Tesla in Norway and warning of serious problems inside the company. Would I speak to him? Of course. That did not mean I believed him - people regularly approach us with what they describe as enormous scandals, and the scandal often turns out to be a dispute with a former employer or a lost court case. Still, there is one rule I have learned: listen.

The stranger insisted on communicating through Threema, an encrypted messaging service. Twelve minutes after I sent him my ID, my phone vibrated: „Hello Sönke." Ten minutes later, the first files arrived. One spreadsheet listed thousands of people Tesla had fired. Another, more than thirty megabytes large, contained names, addresses, dates of birth, email addresses and social security numbers. I held down Page Down. Nothing much happened. I held it again. Still no end. Finally, I pressed Ctrl+End and landed on row 72,999.

That got my attention, though there was little time to enjoy it: more documents followed – salary information, medical data, internal financial material. By then it was after 4:30 p.m., and my daughter was waiting for me at daycare. So I did what investigative journalists sometimes have to do at decisive moments: I shut down

my computer and picked her up. Over the weekend I stayed in touch with the stranger; on Monday I called Michael Verfürden into my office, a colleague with a talent for data and irritatingly good questions. He scrolled through the files, stopped, and leaned back. „Can this be real?“

That became the question. Eventually, our source gave us almost one hundred gigabytes of internal Tesla material, more than 23,000 files - spreadsheets, emails, presentations, reports, videos, customer complaints, personnel records, engineering documents. Much of it was badly organized: files that would not open, screenshots of spreadsheets, folder structures built on a Mac that made Windows choke - we eventually bought a Mac just for the investigation. In short, the data was a mess. We started checking.

We contacted employees and former employees, compared documents, consulted experts, and had specialists at the Fraunhofer Institute for Secure Information Technology examine the material. We sent Tesla 65 questions before publication. Tesla's lawyers told us to delete the files and warned of legal consequences. We did not delete them. On May 25, 2023, we published the first Tesla Files. For months we had struggled to get anyone inside the company to talk; after publication, that changed. One source led to another, and new documents kept arriving.

What had begun as an investigation into a data leak became an investigation into Tesla itself and, inevitably, into Elon Musk. At first we asked the obvious questions: what was true, what had gone wrong. Later, another question became more interesting: why did so many unrelated problems – Autopilot, personnel policy, the treatment of critics – look strangely similar? Again and again we found the same preference for speed over caution, loyalty over dissent – a pattern I would later recognize in Musk Modus.

Then we came across an internal Tesla training presentation with a title hard to forget: „The DNA of Elon and Applying it to Daily Work.“ Employees were supposed to learn not merely what Musk wanted, but how he thought. Tesla, we realized, is less a traditional corporation than a command center with Musk at its core –

employees call him N1, Number One. Managers can be bypassed, rules rewritten when they get in the way. Musk does not merely lead; he overrides.

This is one reason he has achieved things that seemed impossible. It is easy, after years of critical reporting on Tesla, to forget how extraordinary some of those achievements are. Musk helped turn the electric car from an ecological compromise into an object people wanted to own, and forced an entire industry to actually transform after years of merely talking about it. He has an unusual ability to make people attempt things sensible people would reject as unrealistic. The trouble is that sensible people are not always wrong.

At Tesla, we encountered employees who had joined because they wanted to change the world. Some accepted lower pay; many worked extraordinary hours. They spoke of a mission, not just a job. We also found what that mission could cost: pressure, safety problems, surveillance, fear of dissent, and an employee turnover so implausible we calculated it again and again. The figures did not improve. Musk has his own term for the required intensity: „ultra hardcore."

There is another expression that captures his method just as well: trial and error. Try something; if it fails, change it; if it still fails, throw it away and start again. For an engineer, that is real power: failure produces information, iteration produces progress. Musk has understood that better than most. But while writing The Tesla Files, Michael and I kept returning to another image: a video game.

Musk has played them obsessively for much of his life, and at times seems to approach reality the same way: a mission, obstacles, the next level. Reality, though, is less forgiving. There is no autosave after a fatal accident. An injured employee does not respawn. Personal data cannot be made private again once it has escaped, and a destroyed reputation does not return because the next attempt worked better. Some mistakes remain.

For years, one could argue this was mainly a question for employees, customers and investors in Musk's companies. That argument has become harder to make. Musk carried his methods far beyond Tesla: he bought Twitter and rebuilt it

according to his own rules, entered electoral politics, and became a political actor in his own right – the same man who spent years fighting regulators gained influence over the system that appoints them. The scale changed; the method did not.

This is what interested me about Musk Modus. Hans van der Loo and Patrick Davidson do not try to solve Elon Musk as a psychological mystery - there are enough books attempting that. Instead, they look for patterns: nine recurring modes of behavior, among them the Superhero, the Superstar and the Super-Demolisher. That felt familiar, because we too had started with incidents – a whistleblower, a data leak, an Autopilot complaint, a broken promise – and only later understood that the individual stories were not the most interesting part. The connections were.

What looks chaotic from the outside can follow a remarkably consistent logic from the inside. That does not make Musk easier to judge – it makes him more interesting to understand. Anyone looking only for the genius will miss the damage; anyone looking only for the villain will fail to understand the achievements, and why so many talented people continue to follow him. The contradiction is not a side issue. It is the story.

Elon Musk has shown that rules can hold back progress – and why some of them exist. He has shown the power of moving faster than everyone else, and who ends up paying for that speed. After several years inside the Musk universe, I no longer think the most useful question is whether he is a hero or a villain; there are enough people arguing about that. The more interesting question is how his system works – and this book takes that question seriously.

Sönke Iwersen
Düsseldorf, August 2026

Introduction: The Modes of a Controversial World Conqueror

"Some people don't like change, but if the alternative is a disaster, you should embrace change." – Elon Musk

Technoking of Tesla. Caesar of Silicon Valley. Visionary. Disruptor.

The superlatives surrounding Elon Musk are so grand that they almost lose their meaning. And yet they say something essential: we are not dealing with an ordinary leader here. Everything about him seems out of proportion – his successes, his ambitions, but also the admiration and aversion he evokes.

Consider these three images. A rocket that, after launch, neatly returns to Earth and lands upright – something that was considered impossible for decades.

A sports car floating through space, with Earth as its backdrop – a technological feat packaged as a global spectacle.

And a man walking across a stage carrying a chainsaw – a symbol of his fight against bureaucracy and institutions.

Three scenes. Three faces. One person.

Anyone who follows his appearances sees a leader who constantly seems to change shape. The visionary builder who opens up new worlds. The public figure who attracts attention and mobilizes people. But also the disruptor who challenges existing structures and does not shy away from tearing them down. This raises a fundamental question: how can one and the same person be both a source of innovation and destruction?

Erratic genius … or great danger?

If you look for the answer to this question in the person himself, behavior is quickly reduced to supposedly fixed traits: talent, temperament, personality structure. In the case of Elon Musk, this invariably leads to two mirror images: the erratic genius who pulls the future toward him, or the great danger who knows no boundaries and poses a threat to society.

The strength of this approach lies in its simplicity. It reduces complexity to a recognizable story. But analytically, it falls short. This approach explains behavior after the fact, not beforehand. And one crucial question remains unanswered: why does the same behavior lead to breakthroughs in one context, but to friction, derailment or damage in another?

An alternative perspective looks for the explanation not in the person, but in the context. In social structures, technological developments, economic opportunities and cultural values. From this perspective, Musk is above all a product of his time: the rise of Silicon Valley, the liberalization of spaceflight, the energy transition, the digital network economy. This perspective makes visible why certain leaders emerge and why some ideas gain traction. But something still nags at us. Context opens up the playing field, but it does not determine who moves, how the game is played or with what intensity. Under the same circumstances, people choose fundamentally different strategies. One builds, another breaks. One accelerates, another slows down.

We are therefore left with two explanations: personality or context. Musk as genius or as a product of his environment. Both provide a sense of clarity, but they miss the core. They explain either behavior or circumstances – but not why the same behavior in similar situations can lead to different outcomes.

Musk Modus takes a third route. What matters is neither who Musk is nor simply the world in which he operates, but the way behavior develops. Leadership then

appears neither as a fixed trait nor as a simple derivative of context, but as a dynamic pattern. What is innovative and productive today can turn into polarization or destruction tomorrow. What works at first can later work against you. No stable profiles, no static contexts, but shifting patterns that determine when leaders like Elon Musk flourish. Or derail.

From person to pattern

In this book, we therefore choose a different point of departure. Not the classic biography, in which the person is central. Nor the sweeping critique of society, which can quickly descend into tunnel vision. Instead, we take a curious, open-minded look at what Musk actually does: his ways of thinking and acting.

That is what Musk Modus stands for. A modus is neither a trait nor a strategy, but a recurring behavioral state: a recognizable way of looking, thinking and acting that emerges under certain circumstances. A pattern that forms again and again. Sometimes reinforcing, sometimes derailing.

This Musk Modus is based on extensive research: dozens of books, hundreds of articles and a large body of interviews and video material featuring employees, contemporaries and experts. From this wealth of sources, we distilled two underlying dimensions. The first concerns the phases in his development. The second concerns the archetypes – or sources of energy – that drive his behavior.

We will briefly explain both.

Musk Modus: three phases in his development

The development of Elon Musk can broadly be understood as a succession of three phases:

1. THE SUPERHERO
   The builder of a new world. Driven by a mission greater than himself, he focuses on achieving seemingly impossible breakthroughs.
2. THE SUPERSTAR
   The public figure who attracts admiration. Success makes him visible and influential. His persona becomes part of the story and a carrier of meaning.
3. THE SUPER DEMOLISHER
   The disruptor who challenges existing systems and sometimes tears them down. Power and influence are used not only to build, but also to reshape and fight.

These phases overlap, collide and reinforce one another. Together, they form a recurring pattern of construction, visibility and disruption.

Figure 1. Three phases in the development of Elon Musk: Superhero, Superstar, Super Demolisher.

Figure 1 **Three phases in the development of Elon Musk: Superhero, Superstar, Super Demolisher.**



Musk Modus: three motivating archetypes

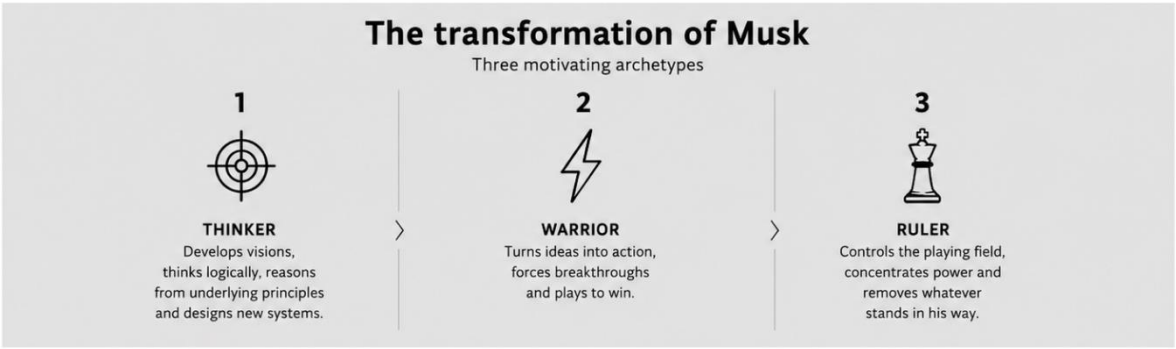
Underlying these phases are three motivating forces: archetypes that set Musk in motion and give direction to his behavior:

1. THE THINKER: develops visions, thinks logically, reasons from underlying principles and designs new systems.
2. THE WARRIOR: turns ideas into action, forces breakthroughs and plays to win.
3. THE RULER: controls the playing field, concentrates power and removes whatever stands in his way.

The interplay of these three determines how behavior manifests itself in each phase. What in one combination leads to innovation and successful acceleration can, in another, turn into friction, dominance or destruction.

Figure 2. Three motivating archetypes that drive Elon Musk.

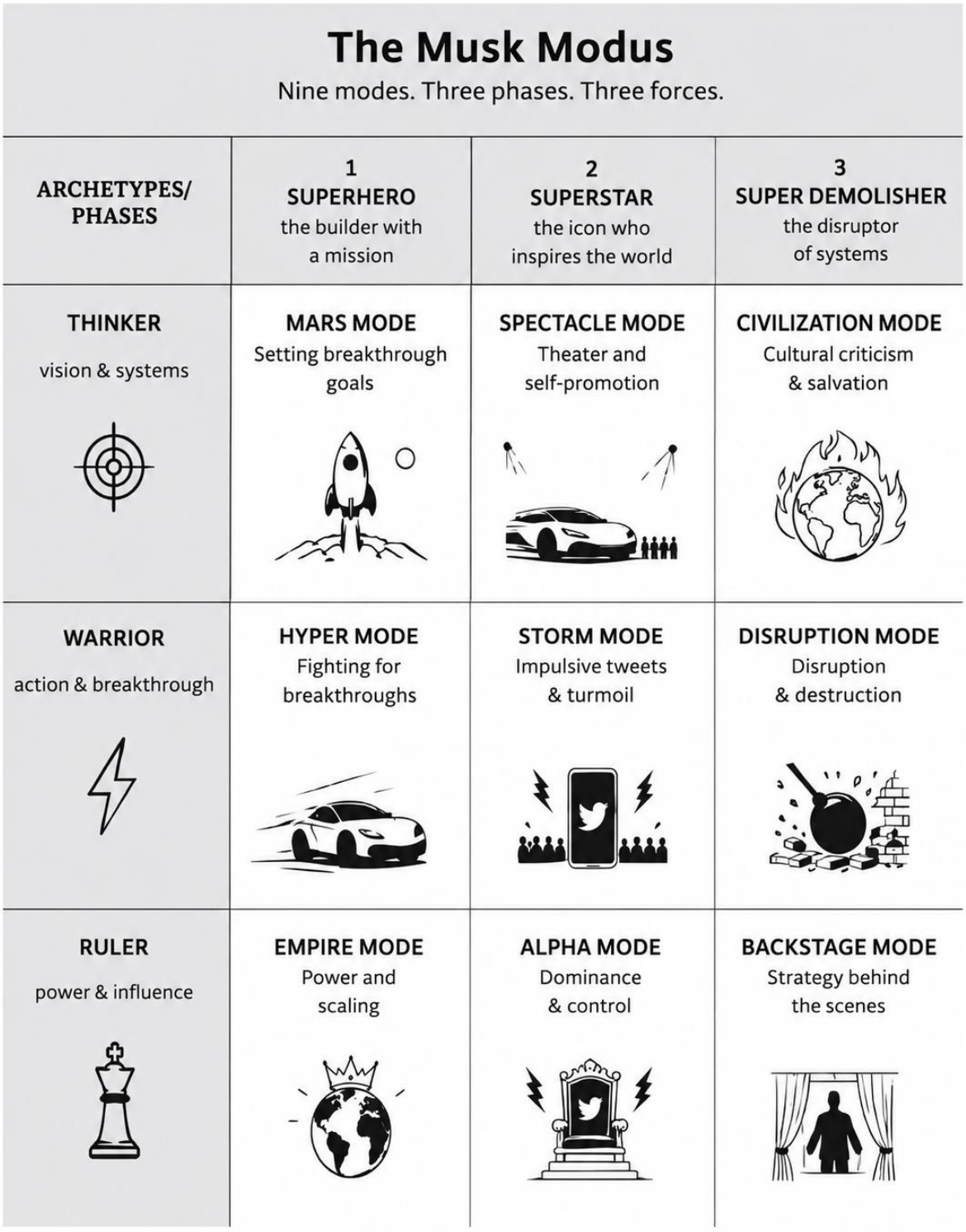
Figure 2 **Three motivating archetypes that drive Elon Musk.**



When we combine the phases and archetypes, nine modes emerge: ways of acting. In the figure on the next page, we give you a brief sneak preview of them.

Figure 3. Musk Modus: three phases, three forces, nine modes.

Figure 3 **Musk Modus: three phases, three forces, nine modes.**



We start in the top left and then work from top to bottom and from left to right.

1. Mars Mode

A visionary mode in which Musk formulates seemingly impossible goals based on a grand vision of the future, such as a multiplanetary civilization.

2. Hyper Mode

A breakthrough mode in which he operates under extreme pressure, stacks risks and puts everything on the line to win and achieve the impossible.

3. Empire Mode

A mode in which he expands and bends markets to his will, controls playing fields and concentrates systemic power in one integrated empire.

4. Spectacle Mode

An attention mode in which technology, storytelling and a taste for stunts come together in attention-grabbing iconic events and personal brand-building.

5. Storm Mode

An escalation mode in which impulsiveness and friction dominate, becoming visible in confrontations, tweet storms and increasing turbulence, both professionally and privately.

6. Alpha Mode

A dominance mode in which Musk manifests himself as Technoking, drawing platforms, narratives and audiences toward himself and strengthening his position as a mega-influencer, celebrity and central player.

7. Civilization Mode

An ideological mode in which he positions himself as both critic and savior of a threatened Western civilization.

8. Disruption Mode

The ultimate disruption mode, in which he actively attacks systems, challenges institutions and tears down existing structures.

9. Backstage Mode

A regrouping mode in which his visibility decreases and the focus shifts toward strategic positioning and power behind the scenes.

For the sake of clarity, we emphasize once again that these modes are not intended to pin the protagonist down in a psychological profile. They are not suggestive diagnoses of his state of mind. Nor are they boxes into which we can neatly place him. They are descriptions of his different ways of acting. As we will see later in the book, he often uses them in a logical sequence. But he also regularly switches between the nine modes at will. Or, even more frequently, combines different modes in particular situations. Not surprisingly, because the nine modes form the building blocks of an overarching Musk Modus.

The power of this model lies not only in explanation, but also in application. By reading leadership as a combination of phases and energies, we gain a practical compass that allows us to determine which phase someone is in, which forces dominate, what is missing and where derailment threatens. Leadership thus becomes not a matter of style, but of conscious alignment.

Content and purpose of this book

Musk Modus builds on our earlier book Musk Mania, but takes things a step further. It is less a biography and psychological portrait and more an analysis of behavioral patterns. Patterns that become visible when visionary power, public attention and concentrated power come together. These patterns are not unique to Elon Musk;

they occur more frequently. Especially in times of technological acceleration and social uncertainty. That is why this book is ultimately not only about him. Understanding Musk is not about understanding a man, but about understanding a pattern that is shaping our times.

This book is structured around the three phases:

- Part 1 describes the emergence of Musk as Superhero: a young outsider and Thinker who first rises to become a combative entrepreneur and later a builder of an industrial empire.
- Part 2 follows his transformation into Superstar: from attention-grabbing and visionary icon to an influential and often controversial player on social media platforms, ultimately growing into an undisputed Technoking who seeks to shape public opinion around the world.
- Part 3 once again shows a transformation, this time in the direction of Super Demolisher: it begins with a verbal ideological crusade against perceived injustices in Western civilization and ultimately leads to a frontal attack on government. When he loses that titanic battle, the Super Demolisher retreats into the wings. To regroup and, hopefully, emerge differently.

We wrote this book out of open-minded curiosity. In practice, that mainly meant moving from one astonishment to the next. We discovered how remarkably easy it is to disrupt organizations and government institutions. No years-long strategy. No grand master plan. Sometimes all it takes is a small group of smart programmers, a big mouth and the backing of a powerful boss. We also see that, as of 2026, it is possible to build a kind of state within the state. After Musk has moved most of his business activities from California to Texas, a completely new infrastructure is emerging there. Texas is not simply a new business location, but a system under construction governed according to its own rules.

What is your mode?

With these insights, you see things differently. Less quickly reaching for big labels such as fascism, populism and anti-woke, which suggest a great deal but explain little. And more toward what is actually happening – and toward yourself. For example: what is our mode?

How do we behave within the systems of which we are part?

And more importantly: what kind of world do we want our children to live in? Because that is what is really at stake. Not whether Musk is right or a morally reprehensible person. But whether we ourselves take responsibility for shaping the direction.

Do not expect simple answers from this book. But do expect a sharp look at what Elon Musk does and, equally importantly, what he sets in motion and leaves behind. With an invitation to consider how you relate to it. Because the world does not belong to Musk. It belongs to everyone.

This brings us to the final question: who is this book for?

For everyone who understands that innovation and disruption are not neutral forces, but forces that build and break, that accelerate and destabilize.

For executives, regulators, entrepreneurs and leaders who see that countervailing power is not a luxury, but a prerequisite. That power which grows faster than the mechanisms designed to correct it will sooner or later derail. We live in a time when technology is developing faster than the institutions that are supposed to constrain it. Where platforms are replacing public space. Where key technologies are shifting from public to private hands.

A pattern that causes discomfort. When does renewal turn into destruction? Who organizes the countervailing power? What happens when power becomes concentrated without limits?

With this book, we therefore explicitly pass no judgment on the man, but expose a mechanism. And mechanisms have a tendency to repeat themselves. Unless someone breaks them.

Afterword by David H. Freedman

Understanding Musk means understanding our times

(Journalist for *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, author of several books on science, technology and innovation)

When I wrote about Elon Musk in 2018, what struck me most was how he was simultaneously operating in technology, manufacturing, finance, media, infrastructure and politics. At the time, that seemed extraordinary. Today, it looks like a preview of a much larger development.

Musk is often portrayed as either a genius or a threat. Both images contain some truth, but they miss the essence. His significance lies not only in who he is, but in what he makes visible: a new concentration of power in which technology, capital, infrastructure, media and politics converge.

Musk combines genuine innovation with an exceptional ability to mobilize belief. Silicon Valley thrives on promises about a future that does not yet exist. Musk distinguishes himself by making enough of that future eventually become reality. What initially seems unbelievable becomes operational.

Behind this lies a consistent logic. His obsession with "the machine that builds the machine" shows that he is not only interested in products, but in redesigning entire systems. Efficiency, scalability and automation are the guiding principles.

History has seen figures like this before: Edison, Ford and Disney. People with extraordinary visionary power, but also with obvious shortcomings. Musk may ultimately belong in the same category: contradictory, disruptive and historically consequential.

The strength of Musk Modus is that it looks beyond the person. It examines the patterns behind his actions: systems thinking, acceleration, conflict, attention and concentration of power. In doing so, Musk becomes more than an entrepreneur or celebrity; he becomes a signal of broader forces reshaping leadership, technology and institutions.

When Patrick Davidson and Hans van der Loo asked me how I thought Musk would be remembered a century from now, my first reaction was only half meant as a joke: perhaps he will have achieved immortality by then, after consciously having his brain implanted in a robot. Given the direction of technology, and Musk's own ambitions, that idea no longer sounds entirely absurd.

Ultimately, this book is not just about Elon Musk. It is about the world taking shape around him — and the world in which all of us will have to find our way.

David H. Freedman

Boston, June 2026