



Photographer: Shawn Brackbill

Luke Farritor could have been an artist, or a builder, or someone dedicated to seeing a great historical mystery through. Instead he wound up at the Department of Government Efficiency, slashing, dismantling, undoing.

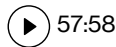
By Susan Berfield, Margi Murphy
and Jason Leopold

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Before he was called a patriot and a traitor for following Elon Musk to Washington to join DOGE; before he was hired by the US government despite a résumé that would have been previously rejected; before he was granted extensive access to sensitive data and invited to brief the country’s vice president; before he met his Twitter heroes in Silicon Valley; before he became a Thiel Fellow, which required him to become a college dropout; before he was celebrated internationally for using AI to help detect passages in a scroll charred by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius; before all of that, Luke Farritor, now 23, was a homeschooled kid in Lincoln, Nebraska, who called himself lukethecoder64.

Back then, he responded to the prompt “You Know You’re a Nerd When...” with “you listen to ‘White ’n nerdy’ by Weird Al and think it’s a biography of you.” *The Martian* was one of his favorite books. He was a bell ringer at church. He played piano and golf, chess and *Kerbal Space Program*. During his high school summers, he helped build an app that could link those in need to local charities. It’s still in use.

Back then, his father introduced him to an artist, Charley Friedman, who wanted to create a musical installation that people could move through, hearing different notes at different times, an experience individual and communal. “I’ve always been interested in how humans are easily manipulated by power, by bright lights,” Friedman says. He needed someone who could code and build and commit to a project that was then a concept. Farritor was around 15 when he began working with Friedman and 19 when they first exhibited *Soundtracks for the Present Future*, composed of 59 hanging, computer-controlled guitars and mandolins, at a contemporary arts center in Omaha. Farritor called it magical. It

was featured on public television in Nebraska and traveled to museums around the country. Friedman always referred to Farritor as the exhibition engineer.

Being around artists allowed Farritor to see “how they approach their careers, how they approach their lives,” he said in a university news story. “It really rubbed off on me, I think.” He considered becoming an artist. He started to create what he called an exploding toaster. “He was devising some things that he thought were kind of art pieces,” Friedman says. But at 21, after seven months as an intern at Musk’s SpaceX Starbase in Texas, he told Friedman he thought of himself differently: *I realized what I love to do is to solve other people’s problems.*



The installation of Charley Friedman's *Soundtracks for the Present Future* at Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha. Friedman called Farritor the exhibition engineer. *Photographer: Colin Conces/Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts*

Farritor was an inquisitive, uncommonly talented and sometimes obsessive young man. He had opportunities. He had people who cared about him, and those people had ideas of what he might achieve. Their ideas had nothing to do with Washington. Maybe Farritor didn't know that his decision to help the man he so admired try to slash government spending would mean disappearing from his own life, working secretly but appearing in court documents. That it would mean disappointing and angering some, thrilling others. That in trying to solve one problem, he would play a part in creating chaos and distress and fear. Those he knew would not always be spared. His community in Lincoln would be cleaved. Maybe, some in his hometown say, he didn't know there would be consequences.

Luke Farritor is the eldest of four children, raised in a modest house with an American flag out front and a workshop in the basement. The family posed there for a photo. It's on his father's Facebook page. Farritor's mother, Tracy Slocum Farritor, is a physician who calls herself a patriot. She wanted to create an animated show, *Renny & Bo*, about America's history.

Michael Medved, the conservative radio host and author, was a special consultant. “I think America is the greatest nation on Earth, and I think it’s OK to teach that,” she said in a Kickstarter video in 2015. “That doesn’t mean we think any less of other people or other countries.” Her campaign fell short. Farritor told friends she was the best person he knew. Second was his father, Shane Farritor, a mechanical engineering professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who, for much of his son’s childhood, was developing a miniature surgical robot with millions of dollars in federal funding. It was launched on SpaceX’s Falcon 9 and tested on the International Space Station last year. In a talk titled “Don’t Measure, Cut Twice,” he said everyone should make something. “Making is a better way of thinking.” At the end, he showed photos of his four kids doing just that.

Lincoln is a university town, the capital of the state, center of the Silicon Prairie. It’s open skies, affordable homes, good schools, liberal-leaning politics, refugee resettlement programs, some 300,000 residents. It’s about five hours by plane from either coast, and, for some, this is an opportunity of geography, a chance to distinguish themselves. Shane Farritor is among them. Jeff Raikes is too. He grew up in rural Nebraska, left for Stanford University, Microsoft, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. He designed, and later helped fund, the Jeffrey S. Raikes School of Computer Science and Management at the university, an honors program with an honor code.

The students—their number hovers close to 40 a year now—are called the best and brightest. The university publishes their names; the Nebraska business community takes notice. Posters of the Raikes School’s six core values hang in the building where the students live and study. Graduates can still recite them. Among the principles: Follow through on your commitments. Understand the impact of your words and actions. Never sacrifice quality or integrity. Commit to empathy. The school maintains a robust diversity, equity and inclusion statement.

Every alum lands a job or a place in a graduate program soon after leaving Raikes, according to the school. For most, being selected for Cohort 2020 was an achievement in and of itself. For Luke Farritor, it was the path of least resistance, he later told a reporter.

It was also close to home. During his first year, he invited friends to campfires there. Farritor’s family would sometimes join the parties. Friedman describes them as open-minded, intelligent, sparkly—the kind that a homeschooled kid might want to stay around.

Members of Cohort 2020 came to realize that, unlike them, Farritor was at Raikes because his parents wanted him to attend. “School was never a priority for Luke, and that was well understood,” one classmate says. Unlike them, Farritor challenged professors about assignments and skipped classes (to work on the music project, to work on the scrolls). “It’s what kind of set him apart, because he would just grind on side projects and learn,” says another classmate. He calls Farritor “cracked.” For coders, that’s a compliment.

Farritor didn’t always invest himself in group projects, some classmates say. Raikes is supposed to be all about collaboration. The program culminates in a project meant to solve a real problem for a company or organization. In November of his senior year, Farritor told his group that he would likely drop out before theirs was complete, according to one of them. They did just fine without him, winning second prize at what’s known as the Design Studio Showcase. It’s held at the Nebraska Innovation Campus, where Farritor’s father helped plan a makerspace for the university and the Lincoln community.

Farritor—no surprise—set up a workshop of his own in his dorm room. “I had a suspicion that if I needed a part for anything, there was a 90% chance he would have it,” says a classmate who asked him for help with her own side project. “His room was full of little wires, computer chip boards, mini embedded system computers, things in boxes.” They mostly talked about coding. “Luke would share ideas for how I could learn on my own,” she says.

Some other students had different recollections of Farritor: that he once redid a female classmate’s work on a project without consulting her; that he questioned the need for an international conference for women in tech that Raikes sent students to attend. When he dropped out, a few women noted with some satisfaction that his departure tilted the gender balance: At graduation it was 19 men and 18 women, as close to equal as it had been since the school’s founding in 2001.

On Politichat, a group chat set up by Raikes students, Farritor identified himself as “hopelessly libright.” That’s “lib” for libertarian. “He would be passionate about being contrary,” says one classmate. “I don’t know the extent that he believed in some of the things. He just wanted to push people.” That wasn’t always welcome. Like a lot of group chats, it became a “pretty rough echo chamber,” wrote one classmate who created a private chat, Calm Politichat, to allow dissenting opinions to be heard more openly. Farritor was invited to join. He was there, he was on Twitter, he was on YouTube and TikTok and Instagram and GitHub. He was almost

“I think college as a whole is overrated... Peter theil [sic] had a good bit about this”

Luke Farritor, Nov. 16, 2020
Calm Politichat

Farritor’s political discussion seemed to mirror his own Twitter feed –among its prominent figures were the Silicon Valley venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who would go all in for Donald Trump in 2024; Peter Thiel, the libertarian who helped fund Trump’s first campaign; and Elon Musk. “He thought that Musk was the closest thing to Iron Man. He loved that Musk was pushing the envelope in all these ways,” says one classmate. “I remember at one point Musk was going on a big series about how everyone needs to have more children,” says another. “Farritor started talking about that in Politichat. I remember thinking: ‘Why is this something we’re talking about?’ What he talked about was based on the whims of his algorithms. We were participating more in university life.”

Farritor’s circle at Raikes telescoped over the years. “I think I could describe him as becoming more narrow,” a classmate once close to him says. By the time he dropped out, some from those campfires weren’t talking with him regularly, or at all. Most of those who had remained in touch didn’t respond to our requests for interviews. One works for Virtual Incision, the robotics company Farritor’s father co-founded; a second recently left. Shane Farritor declined our interview requests. Farritor’s classmates who talked with us asked not to be identified because the political atmosphere is so charged.

Farritor didn’t respond to several requests for an interview or answer our written questions, but in early 2024 he did speak with *Bloomberg Businessweek* for a cover story about the Vesuvius Challenge, a competition to identify letters and words in the ancient scrolls. And right up until the presidential inauguration, he was very much online. We have glimpses of a young man’s life, refracted over time, his confidence and ambitions appearing here and there, his desire to be noticed, be weird, belong, be close to his heroes.

A video from January 2022, when Farritor is a sophomore: He and Friedman are installing *Soundtracks* at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. Dozens of hanging guitars and mandolins play *Satyagraha*, originally an opera by Philip Glass. Farritor is lanky, masked, hair flopped over his forehead, glasses, orange sneakers. He walks through the room as if he's conducting.

**“They don’t know that I’m
learning about C++17”**

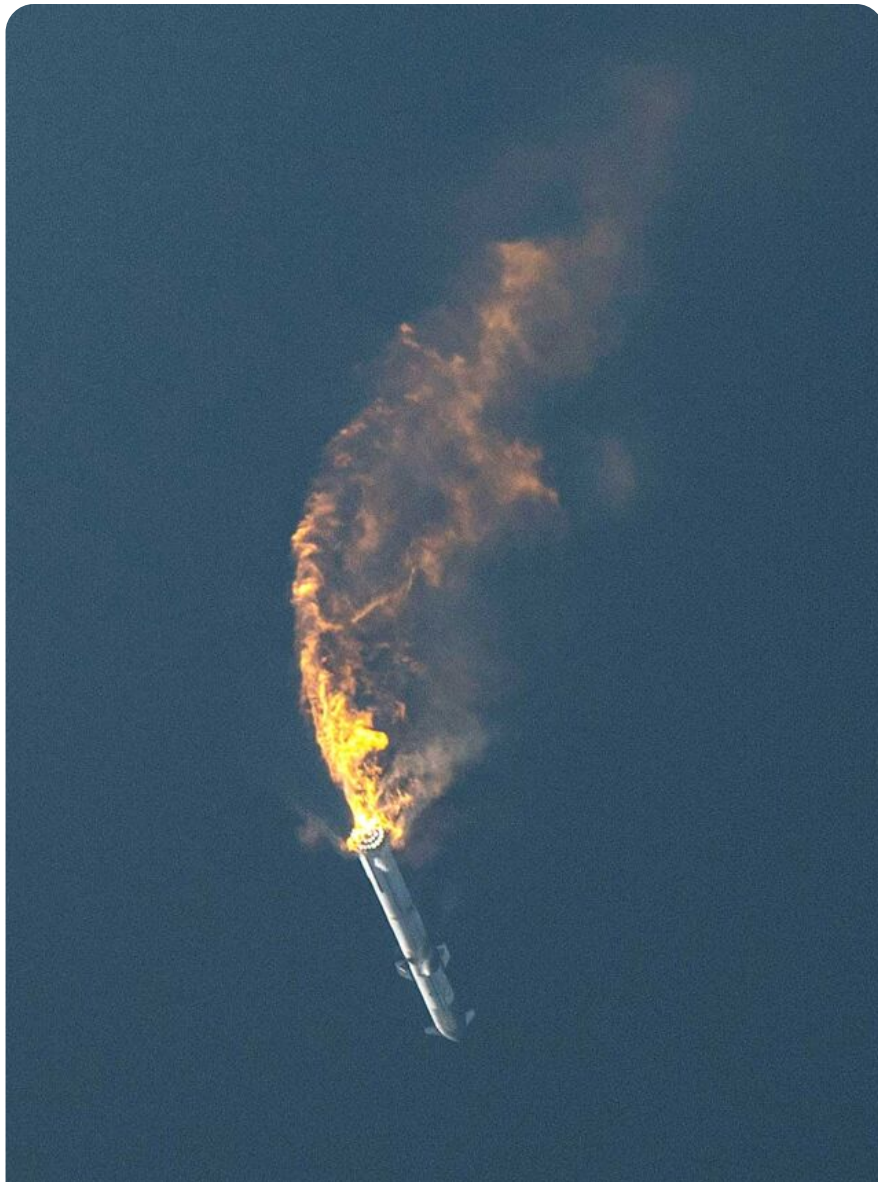
@LukeFarritor, Aug. 8, 2022
Tweet, with photo of Farritor hunched over his laptop
as friends hang out

As Cohort 2020 began their junior year, Farritor interviewed for a semester-long internship at SpaceX—*they asked me all about the guitar project*, he told Friedman. He had to solve a math problem in a matter of days. He barely left his room. Someone visiting Farritor's suitemate saw that Farritor had written calculations all over the mirrors. “It could be that the problem demanded that intensity,” the classmate says. “It’s also true that Luke would hyperfixate on a project.” Later, when asked on X about his process for projects, Farritor replied: “There is no process. I just think about them

nonstop.”

When Farritor arrived at Starbase in Texas in January 2023, everyone was preparing for the first test flight of Starship, the world’s largest rocket, designed to one day carry people to Mars. Farritor was assigned to the launchpad software team. He later described his work to *Businessweek* as chaotic in the best way possible. He said he’d found a fuel leak on the pad a few weeks before the April launch, which was a really big deal. On the day of liftoff, he joined a crowd watching from a spot several miles away. He said he could tell when a routine he programmed went into action: “Oh my goodness, that was cool.”

When the rocket blasted off, concrete chunks of the launchpad flew in all directions, debris spread for miles and shockwaves shattered at least one window in a nearby town. Minutes later, Starship spun out of control and SpaceX had to blow it up.

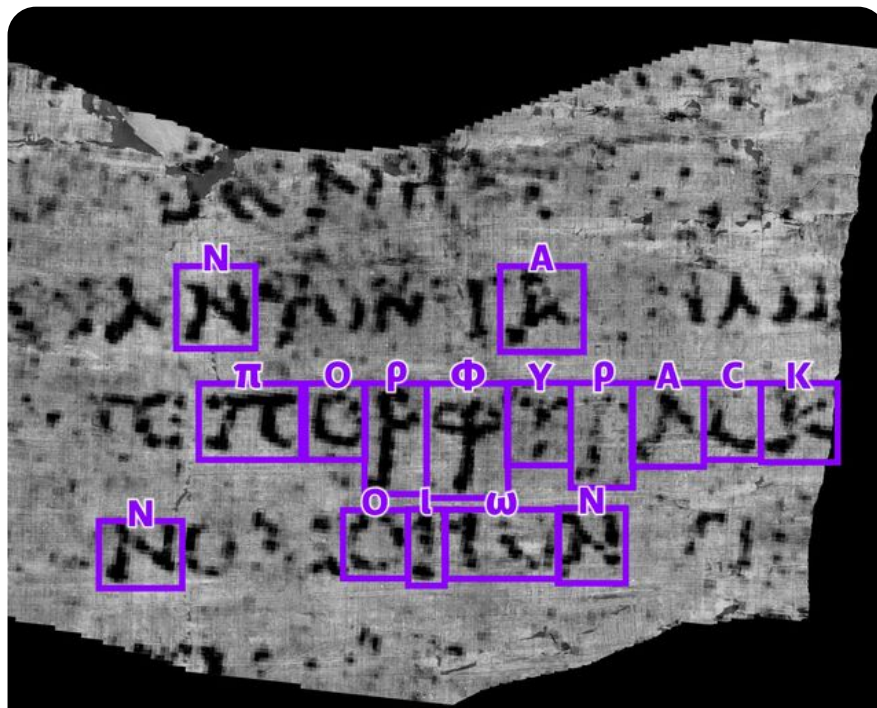


SpaceX's Starship spacecraft went off course shortly after launch and the

One morning in March, while driving to Starbase, Farritor heard Nat Friedman—former chief executive officer of GitHub—describe the Vesuvius Challenge on a podcast. The volcano that destroyed Pompeii in 79 A.D. also preserved a vast library of ancient scrolls, the Herculaneum papyri, but they were so brittle that most have never been opened. A computer scientist at the University of Kentucky, Brent Seales, had figured out how to virtually unwrap 3D scans of the charred scrolls and, with his graduate students, train artificial intelligence algorithms to detect the presence of ink. Now they were making those scans and data available and offering prizes to anyone who could extract the first words and passages. “I think there’s like a 50% chance that someone will encounter this opportunity and get the data and get nerd sniped by it, and we’ll solve it this year,” Friedman said. And Farritor was like, “Oh my goodness, that could be me.” He thought to himself, “You can win money, you can meet Nat Friedman, you can make an impact on history.”

Farritor began working with the scans during evenings and weekends, posting his progress on the group’s Discord, GitHub and sometimes Twitter. So did some 1,500 other people. *Businessweek* called them a volunteer army of nerds.

In mid-October, Farritor accepted the First Letters Prize, and a \$40,000 check, at a press conference at the University of Kentucky. He’d found the word “porphyras,” or purple. “It’s a funny story,” he said. Late one August evening, he was at a friend’s birthday party, sitting in a corner. He got a text alerting him to a new piece of a scroll to work with and ran his detection algorithm on it. When he checked his phone later, he could make out three letters. His reaction: “Oh my goodness.” “Holy cow.” “I just completely freaked out, I almost fell over, I almost cried.” He sent a screenshot to JP Posma, who was managing the contest, and to his family.



Farritor's work on the Herculaneum papyri. Source: *Vesuvius Challenge*

Onstage, Farritor said the next challenge—to identify four passages by the end of the year for the Grand Prize—was absolutely doable. Before Farritor left Kentucky, a filmmaker in Naples, Italy, interviewed him over Zoom for a documentary about Seales' yearslong effort, *The Library of Darkness*. Posma told him: *You need to drop out of school, kid. You've got better things to do.*

Later that month, Farritor traveled to Los Angeles to help Charley Friedman install *Soundtracks* at Azusa Pacific University. Afterward, Farritor told Friedman he wasn't going back to Lincoln right away: "He was going to stay and meet some people, like Nat Friedman. People who are more in line with what he clearly knows is his future."

Farritor attended a Roman dinner at Nat Friedman's home in the Bay Area. They ate dishes seasoned with garum, a Phoenician sauce Farritor had only read about in history books. He met Tyler Cowen, an economist favored in Silicon Valley: "He's another person I've looked up to," Farritor told *Businessweek*. He met Patrick Collison, who co-founded Stripe Inc., and David Holz, who founded Midjourney. "What's cool is I go there, and all these people care about me," he said. They asked about Starbase and the scrolls. He said he received a lot of exciting job offers at a lot of great places. "It was a really, really magical experience."

"Cool people on Twitter are cool people IRL"

When Farritor speaks to *Businessweek* in January 2024, it's winter break at Raikes. He's in his parents' basement, computers in the background, family photos on the wall. He knows that, along with two graduate students in Europe, he's won the Vesuvius Challenge Grand Prize. They had teamed up and will share the \$700,000 prize. The announcement will come early in February and with it more recognition, more invitations, job offers and, Farritor hopes, a place in history: "People are going to write Wikipedia pages about this."

He also knows he's won a grant from Cowen's Emergent Ventures that he'll use to travel to Europe. Farritor says that when they'd met in California, Cowen was like, *Kid, you've got to see the world*. One of Farritor's sisters will join him. "About to fly to Europe. I hope they have Diet Coke," he posts on X.

And he knows that he's leaving school and moving to Palo Alto, California. He can't share what he'll be doing, only what he's not—working for SpaceX. "It's the only big tech company I'd want to ever work for. It's definitely the best company in the world, in my opinion," he says. But he doesn't want to be what he calls "another Level 2 software engineer working on some very specific subset of the locks." Good for those people, though. "I know them and they're great, but I'm not sure that's what I want to do."

"I don't think I saw a single Stanford, Harvard or MIT student work on the scroll prize. You'd think several dozen students from those schools would want to work on this. Why didn't that happen? What failed? Is the prize less cool than I think it is? What are they doing instead?"

"Behind (fr)enemv lines"

@LukeFarritor, Jan. 30, 2024
X post, at Blue Origin

**“I did this while interning
at starbase! @elonmusk”**

@LukeFarritor, Feb. 5, 2024
X post, on day of Grand Prize announcement

**“It’s not every day that
your biggest hero sends 2
million dollars to support
your archaeology passion
project, but today is not
every day. Thanks
@elonmusk!”**

@LukeFarritor, Feb. 16, 2024
X post

Farritor gave an exit interview to the University of Nebraska student paper in early March. By then, he could disclose that he would be working for Nat Friedman and Daniel Gross at their venture fund, NFDG. He said it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

A week later, Farritor was at the Getty Villa Museum in Los Angeles for the Vesuvius Challenge Grand Prize ceremony. The leader of his team, Youssef Nader, hadn’t been able to get a US visa in time. But Julian Schilliger joined Farritor onstage as Friedman presented their \$700,000 check. “The atmosphere was electric,” says Seales. “It really felt like a kind of miracle had occurred.” Contest rules required that the winners share their models and code. Work on the scrolls would continue, and all three were offered positions with the project. Farritor declined. Then he left for Silicon Valley.

Farritor was named one of 20 Thiel Fellows in March 2024—19 men and one woman. Among their qualifications: They had to give up on college and, as one fellow put it, “be great.” They got \$100,000 and access to a Silicon Valley network. Thiel, who started PayPal with Musk and others and is a major shareholder in Palantir Technologies Inc., began the fellowship in 2011 almost as a lark. Even Farritor had trouble describing to a friend exactly what he’d be doing.



Farritor in his parents' basement in Lincoln, Nebraska, in January 2024.
Photographer: Shawn Brackbill

During that spring, Farritor spent many of his days at the NFDG office in Palo Alto researching potential emerging technologies in the space industry. He traveled. “I will be in Boston this week! Reach out if you’re in the area!” he posted on X. He attended his first Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting in Omaha to see Warren Buffett: “I’ve never been to one and should go to one while he’s still around.” He made other trips home: “The Sandhills of Nebraska is one of my favorite places in earth.” “Can anybody help me get a tee time?” During a visit to Lincoln over Easter, he stopped by the Raikes School. One classmate recalls him saying how much he enjoyed being in Silicon Valley, where he was around people with similar attitudes. Silicon Valley seemed to return the welcome.

Farritor was praised, popular, noticed as one of Nat Friedman's crew, a Thiel Fellow, a grand prize winner.

Farritor posted about René Girard, a French philosopher who'd taught at Stanford and influenced Thiel, and apparently JD Vance too. Online, Girard is a potent name, sometimes a meme. Farritor wondered if Girard should be made a saint. He cited Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist and critic of modern liberal culture: "There are cathedrals everywhere for those with the eyes to see." He recommended books about the discovery of Pluto, the Wright brothers, nanosystems and anything by Cowen. He favored deregulation. He wrote that it would be faster and cheaper to build a high-speed passenger railway on the moon than in San Jose. He expressed antipathy toward Stanford and NASA. He asked a lot of questions. He tested his ideas. He was a 22-year-old in Silicon Valley.

"New idea: if the regulations are thick enough to stop a bullet, they are automatically nullified"

@LukeFarritor, June 5, 2024
X post

He wanted to discover the hypothetical Planet Nine. He started an unofficial Discord channel for a Neuralink compression challenge. (Musk co-founded Neuralink Corp.) He continued to work with the scrolls—the Vesuvius Challenge is ongoing, with more prizes in the offing—once posting that he'd be livestreaming his efforts while delayed at an airport.

"Let's do a Diablo x Scrolls colab stream @elonmusk"

@LukeFarritor, June 9, 2024
X post

**"based and scroll pilled.
unbelievably bull signal.
@LukeFarritor is going to
win. mattress, rgb monitor,**

ikea train set, 1070 gpu
(to solve scrolls) is all
you need.”

WillDepue, July 12, 2024
X post, with a photo of Farritor's room

That summer and fall, Farritor got involved with the AI Grant program created by Friedman and Gross. They awarded startup founders not money, but mentorship and cloud computing credits. During what they called founder days, Farritor sat to the side, taking notes as entrepreneurs practiced their pitches. One former classmate says Farritor would rather have been coding. “I think he enjoyed the networking part of it, though, and he met a ton of people.”

**“The world is so shockingly
inefficient! So much low
hanging fruit!”**

@LukeFarritor, Sept. 9, 2024
X post

**“Many in my graduating CS
class couldn't write
JavaScript or Python”**

@LukeFarritor, Sept. 12, 2024
X post

**“you can judge a man's
character by which 3-letter
org hed abolish if given
the choice”**

@LukeFarritor, Oct. 23, 2024
X, reposting @nearcyan

As Musk threw money and energy into Trump's run for president, as other smart coders tried to win the next Vesuvius Challenge prize, as his former Raikes classmates started their first jobs, it's possible that Farritor wanted more, those classmates say. His skills were mostly unused, his promise seemingly untapped. His father had said: Make things. Nat Friedman said: Do things. And soon, it seemed, something came along.

“Working overtime to ensure
your tax dollars will be
spent wisely!”

80086, Nov. 13, 2024
X post

“... We need super high-IQ
small-government
revolutionaries willing to
work 80+ hours per week on
unglamorous cost-cutting ...
Elon & Vivek will review
the top 1% of applicants.”

80086, Nov. 14, 2024
X post

In the days before Thanksgiving, Farritor returned to Lincoln to accept an award from the Heartland Robotics Cluster for “his exceptional contributions to AI and the Nebraska tech community.” Onstage at the Innovation Campus conference center, surrounded by his family, Farritor talked about his work with the scrolls. He hasn’t spoken publicly in his hometown since.

That evening, Farritor joined friends for the Thanksgiving Throwdown, a combat sports event outside Omaha. On the drive back he told them about being at the same house parties as Musk. He hinted that he was working on something new.

**“Happy Thanksgiving to all-
even the haters and
losers!”**

@LukeFarritor, Nov. 28, 2024
X, reposting @willdepue

In early December, Farritor joined that same group on a Discord call. One of them says Farritor told the group: Guys, you can’t talk about this, but I’m actually going to be a part of DOGE. This might actually be a thing I can do. The reaction was muted. Some weren’t sure if this Department of Government Efficiency was a serious effort. But they understood the draw for Farritor. One person on the call says he didn’t think Farritor was that excited about cutting

government waste, just working with Musk. He asked if Farritor would get to meet Musk and recalls Farritor saying: *That's the dream.*

"@DOGE doesn't fear the storm. It is the storm."

galegnusk, Dec. 7, 2024
1 post

One DOGE member, Sahil Lavingia, founder of [Gumroad](#), said the hiring process included “vibe checks” over calls on Signal. Did you vote for Kamala Harris? Are you comfortable working for Donald Trump? Lavingia heard that many other coders had been rejected: They had the wrong vibes.

Once Farritor had been vetted by DOGE, he had to be officially hired into the US Digital Service. The group, part of the Executive Office of the President, had been bringing in tech experts to help modernize the government since 2014. It was the gateway for those joining DOGE. In November, Farritor sent his résumé with a one-line note: “Super passionate about serving my country in the U.S.D.S.!”

“Luke’s résumé didn’t pass muster,” says a former senior government official who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation for discussing the hiring of Farritor and other DOGE members. “It’s not to say he isn’t smart.” But the USDS required applicants to have a college degree and at least five years of industry experience. “You have to bring some expertise. It’s not just like, ‘Oh, I wrote a Python AI thing.’ Yeah, that’s not gonna cut it.” The official says that many of the younger software engineers who’d been approved by DOGE would have been rejected by USDS: “They actually don’t have the wisdom from having burned your fingers a number of times.” And, the official says, they hadn’t developed an essential skill. “It is as important to be able to influence people in power as it is to write code.”

The official also knew that none of that mattered. The USDS wasn’t supposed to conduct its usual screening for Farritor or the others: “We had to make sure we didn’t throw out people we shouldn’t.”

We reached out to the White House about DOGE’s hiring practices. In an email, spokesperson Harrison Fields wrote: “DOGE rigorously evaluated its technical and engineering talent by administering an industry-standard coding exercise, which validated every member of the DOGE team’s capabilities and skill set. Additionally, the recruiting team conducted reference and background checks to confirm each employee’s qualifications. We are proud of the selfless

contributions to the country and the American taxpayer from those committed to the President's mission of ending waste, fraud, and abuse."

On Jan. 2, at 10:49 p.m., Farritor sent a message to the Thiel Fellows' WhatsApp chat: "Hi all, DOGE is urgently looking for operations and software engineers to help cut 2 trillion from the national spend. Please reach out if interested!" Thirteen of the 19 other fellows responded with heart and dog face emojis.

In the weeks ahead of Trump's inauguration, Farritor went dark. He disappeared from GitHub, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. On LinkedIn, his location is Antarctica. He played online chess as lukeb0i on Jan. 7, his last game for months. On Jan. 11 he reposted a comment from Musk: "Incompetence in the limit is indistinguishable from sabotage." He hasn't posted on X since.

On the first Sunday in February, *Wired* magazine identified six of those who had responded to Musk's call. Luke Farritor was among them. They were easy to mock, maybe to fear: They were young and inexperienced, all male, part of another army of nerds. One called himself Big Balls and, Bloomberg News revealed, had been fired from an internship for sharing information

with a competitor. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that another had posted racist comments. None were as tech famous as Farritor. The White House's executive order creating DOGE said it would modernize technology and maximize productivity. "It took a couple of weeks to realize that, despite the stated mission, their main focus would be destruction," says a current government employee who, like others we interviewed, requested anonymity because they're not authorized to speak with the media. "That it was less about evolving and improving than tearing down to the floorboards. I think part of what confused everybody was that you had these foot soldiers you were seeing and you assumed that they were there just to support the generals, but they weren't. The generals had delegated everything to the foot soldiers."

On Friday, Jan. 31, Farritor was invited to an "urgent meeting" about the US Agency for International Development. Over the weekend, Musk called the agency, which provides humanitarian assistance to millions of the world's poorest people, a criminal organization and a viper's nest full of radical-left Marxists who hate America. After midnight on that Sunday, he wrote on X: "We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper. Could gone to some great parties. Did that instead."

The *New York Times* reported that Farritor had sent an email to DOGE colleagues in the days before. He'd conducted a review of USAID payments made after Trump had ordered the agency to pause development spending. "I could be wrong," Farritor wrote. "My numbers could be off."

The great undoing, with its firings, humiliation, lacerating and gloating, received a lot of gleeful encouragement on X. But in the days to come, someone posted "traitor" under Farritor's TikTok videos. Someone on Discord warned him that the internet "hates fascists." Another that he would end up in prison.

In Lincoln, some came out in support of DOGE and Farritor, appreciated what they called his sacrifice, looked forward to what they hoped would be a smaller government with fewer regulations. That Sunday night, Scott Henderson, who mentors young entrepreneurs and knows the Farritors, wrote an email to Farritor's father. He says he asked something like: *Is this true? As a father of a son the same age, you can do something about this. If this is true, what are you going to do about this?* He didn't get a response. Charley Friedman checked in and didn't hear back either. "Fascist" appeared in the comments to a LinkedIn post by Shane Farritor that had nothing to do with his son. A talk he was supposed to give at the Nebraska Innovation Studio a few days later—*Lab to Launch*—was

canceled after online threats to disrupt it.

A fight broke out in the Great Ferriter Family Facebook group, a forum with 900 members, including Luke and Shane. (The group's page notes that "Ferriter is variously spelled as Ferriter, Farritor, Ferreter, or Feirtear or even other spellings.") One view of DOGE: "It's a department within the current US administration that a young family member was appointed to because of his brilliance and achievements." Another: "It's a collection of unqualified cyber criminals led by a South African immigrant who is illegally accessing private information." None of the Lincoln Farritors got involved. Luke's uncle, Pat Farritor, did speak with the *Flatwater Free Press* in February: "Obviously he's a lot smarter than you and I," he said of his nephew, "and I know he's going to make the right decisions." When we called recently, he declined to comment.

The moderators of a Discord server for Raikes alumni and students banned Farritor: "Luke has gone from simply disagreeing with many of us to actively fighting to hurt us in a position of governmental power." Former classmates were surprised he had joined DOGE. Some were disturbed, some angry, some proud. "Luke doesn't represent Raikes, and he isn't a product of it," says one. "It felt cool for someone from the Raikes School to be in the limelight," says another. "Then it very quickly turned to a little bit of concern." A third texted Farritor something like: *Hey man, saw the news and am rooting for you.* Farritor replied something like: *Thank you. Hope you and your family are doing well.* Even some who believed he was doing harm were still concerned enough to inquire about him: *Thanks, I'm OK.*

But when a former friend posted an article critical of Farritor and DOGE on Instagram, Farritor replied with a meme of a crying baby and the caption: "When the corrupt elites can't access USAID anymore." Farritor was blocked by that account too.

The day after the *Wired* story came out, Nat Friedman posted on X: "Luke Farritor is a national treasure." Musk replied: "The quality of the @DOGE Team is epic." When we reached out to Friedman, he didn't respond. Another investor who runs AI Grant asked the recipients not to speak with us either, according to a message we saw. None of the Thiel Fellows would comment about Farritor. Posma and Cowen declined to talk with us.

Casey Handmer, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who contributed to Farritor's work on the Vesuvius Challenge and says they remain in contact, emailed a statement. It says in part: "His salt-of-the-Earth American patriotism has driven him to Washington to work on a

problem that poses an existential risk to the survival of the United States, at considerable risk to himself and his family.”

They were called the DOGE kids, the DOGE bros, Muskovites and Muskrats. They sometimes walked the halls of Washington with Musk, who moved around with his own security guards. They bragged about how hard they were working. At first they slept on the sixth floor of the General Services Administration building; one supporter sent biotracking covers for their mattresses. Some moved into an Airbnb known as DOGE Town, dined out together. “They come as a group,” says the former senior government official. “That’s the whole DOGE thing. It’s all DOGE all the time. Like they’re literally not given the mental space to go have an independent life experience and perhaps reflect on what they’re doing.”

They expected loyalty from government employees: What do you think of Musk? What do you think of his companies? Musk promised transparency, but they operated in secrecy. For the first month no one would confirm who was overseeing their efforts. Media reports named Steve Davis, who’d helped Musk cut costs at X and SpaceX, as being effectively in charge. DOGE members didn’t identify themselves when they came into an agency, government employees told us, and demanded access to sensitive data but wouldn’t explain why. They communicated on Signal, where they could make their messages disappear. They shielded their work from public-records review. No one from DOGE, including Musk and Davis, replied to our emailed questions about their work or Farritor.

They were busy—and Farritor may have been among the busiest. “Good God. You’d see him and think that he must be harmless,” says a current government employee. “And I guess he would be if other people weren’t giving him an obscene amount of power and access and telling him to move fast and break things.”

Farritor helped assess, slash or dismantle at least nine departments and agencies after USAID— the Offices of Personnel Management and of Management and Budget; the Departments of Education, Energy, Labor, and Health and Human Services; the National Science Foundation; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—according to interviews with dozens of current and former government employees, and lawsuits and records seen by *Businessweek*.

On Friday, Feb. 7, Farritor and four other young men from DOGE walked onto the fourth-floor executive suite of the CFPB. Erie Meyer, who’d just resigned as the chief technologist and was

packing up her office, could identify only one: Farritor. “I recognized him, because I have been a follower of artificial intelligence since the ’90s, and he worked on decoding the scroll, and he just looks extremely distinctive,” she says. Meyer noticed Farritor and others jiggling the handles of locked office doors, trying to get in. There may be workplaces where that would be acceptable, but it’s taboo in a law enforcement agency, she says. “We lock our office doors, because there may be extremely sensitive materials about ongoing investigations against publicly traded firms and victims and all sorts of things like that on our desks.”

She approached the five: “Can I help you?” They said they were looking for some sort of document but didn’t elaborate. “I think they were surprised to have been confronted.” Farritor kept quiet. Meyer wanted to think the best of him. “I love historical mysteries. I was kind of like maybe this person cares about learning from our past mistakes or learning from the past to inform our future,” she says. “I was naively hopeful.”

A little while later, in her car, waiting to exit the garage, her phone lit up with notifications. Musk had just posted on X: “CFPB RIP.”

Some of Farritor’s classmates wondered about the power he seemed to have been given. “Like the entirety of DOGE is scary. It’s very much like going into government and dismantling the core foundations. It’s scary from that perspective. And it’s scary that it’s 22- and 23-year-olds doing it. And I’m saying this as a 23-year-old,” one classmate says. “Normally I think experience shouldn’t matter all that much. But for the government I would like people to have experience.”

Farritor had at least eight email addresses. He worked in agency conference rooms, behind closed doors. He worked on “Defend the Spend,” a section of the DOGE website where agencies had to provide the rationale for every expense approval. He was regularly invited to connect, sync and catch up at online meetings with agency officials. He was also invited to a deposition prep meeting; he’s been referenced in at least 23 lawsuits. He was invited to join 17 others in the Vice President’s Ceremonial Office to update Vance on DOGE’s efforts.

“The fundamental weakness
of Western civilization is
empathy ... They’re
exploiting a bug in Western

civilization, which is the empathy response. And I think empathy is good, but you need to think it through and not just be programmed like a robot.”

Elon Musk, Feb. 28, 2025
Joe Rogan's podcast

DOGE, with Farritor on board, has curtailed the HIV/AIDS prevention program that experts say saved millions of lives; withdrawn research, public-health and cultural grants because they included words like “gender,” “trans,” “diversity,” “race,” “women,” “justice,” “equality” and “climate”; gained access to sensitive data; fired thousands of civil servants. “He’s young, he’s early in his career, and he wanted to impress certain people,” says Lavingia, who’s one of the few at DOGE who didn’t go along with it all. He was fired after telling a journalist that he was impressed by the efficiency of the Department of Veterans Affairs. He briefly encountered Farritor there. “You’re not going to get asked by Steve Davis to do this and then in the room be like, ‘I’m not going to do that.’ You’re going to be like, ‘Oh, I can totally pull that off in 15 minutes with some software that gets all these files from their computer so we can see what they’re doing.’”

In a lawsuit filed in February, one former government employee calls the breadth of Farritor’s access to data at Health and Human Services “without precedent.” Another, Jeffrey Grant, who’d overseen consumer and insurance information at Medicare and Medicaid, calls it alarming. Farritor could get into systems used for payment management, grants, health-care accounting, acquisitions and human resources. He could get into the National Institutes of Health’s grant management and contract systems, as well as the Medicare and Medicaid acquisition system and its integrated data repository, which includes information on claims, beneficiaries and providers, according to the lawsuit’s records. He could access grants.gov and two contracting systems for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On Signal chats, employees shared sightings of Farritor and his colleagues walking around Food and Drug Administration and NIH buildings, observing workers and asking what they did. Some employees told us they feared seeing his name on a video call or pop up in their inbox.

Fear changed to loathing. “The DOGE team wasn’t what I expected,” says a current government employee who’s interacted with Farritor

and other core members of DOGE. “Marketed as tech geniuses, yet they could barely keep up with basic tasks. In reality, they were overconfident, drunk on power and utterly clueless. They giggled and asked me how my day was going—right as they hit the keys to obliterate nearly a decade of my work. There wasn’t even a flicker of understanding or care. It wasn’t just the loss that gutted me. It was the audacity of their casual cruelty.”

Late April at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln: trees in bloom, the Bathtub Dogs a capella group singing near the Jackie Gaughan Multicultural Center, students playing cornhole. The door to Shane Farritor’s office is closed. No one answers a knock.

Farritor isn’t available at Virtual Incision either. The lobby displays the many patents he holds and a version of the mini-robot launched into space. The surgical robot’s early development at the university was funded by \$4.2 million in grants from the US Army, about \$400,000 from NIH and \$100,000 from NASA to prepare for that test mission aboard the International Space Station. During the pandemic, Virtual Incision secured a loan of about \$262,000 from the Small Business Administration to pay staff salaries, and Farritor himself received a loan for close to \$21,000. He, along with

engineers at the company, helped design and manufacture face shields for Nebraska's hospitals at the makerspace. Virtual Incision has raised more than \$100 million in venture capital funding, by that measure making it one of Lincoln's most successful companies already. It's won approval by the FDA to begin marketing its robots for use in colon surgery. The company declined to comment for this story.

Farritor does answer a knock on the front door of his home around dinnertime. He steps out, locks the door behind him. He's stern, in jeans, a red UNL sweatshirt and baseball cap. He walks to his pickup truck in the driveway as he says it's too dangerous for his family to talk about his son or DOGE or the threats they've received. Then he heads off.

That evening, the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson gives a talk—"The Cosmic Perspective"—at a performing arts center in Lincoln to mark Earth Day. It seats more than 2,000 people and is sold out. Early in his presentation, Tyson illustrates the power of exponential growth with a picture of Musk and an estimate of his wealth: \$330 billion. The audience boos. At the conclusion of his talk, Tyson remains onstage to share a few thoughts about the government's stance against NASA, against science. "We'll go backward, and the rest of the world will move forward," he says. "We're supposed to make the next generation proud of us."

Shane Farritor—he's Dr. Farritor on campus—briefly appears at the Raikes Design Studio Showcase later that week. It's a big celebration, drawing professors and alumni, families, local business owners and executives, the Raikes board members and Jeff Raikes himself. The school's executive director, Steve Cooper, had been welcoming earlier but said he couldn't talk about Farritor. University rules. Raikes isn't exactly eager to comment but does say: "Luke is a great talent. I wish he was still here."

At that time, DOGE had cut at least \$28 million in federal grants for the university. This came after UNL itself had to cut \$5 million from its budget because of diminished state funding, and the university system was preparing to cut as much as \$20 million more.

What was lost or disrupted this spring: A study of agricultural methods to help the poorest farmers around the world. A project to help Indigenous communities adopt traditional and sustainable farming to mitigate food insecurity. A project to "cultivate a diverse engineering workforce." (The dean of Farritor's department, who was overseeing that effort, didn't respond to requests for comment.) A new program to recruit, pay for and otherwise support students

from rural areas to return as teachers. “It’s a profound undermining of our future when we don’t invest in our young. That’s what our program is designed to do,” says one of its leaders, Amanda Morales.

What was lost beyond the university: opportunity, says one of Shane Farritor’s childhood friends, Kirk Zeller. He runs two medical device companies and helps others get going. Those kinds of early-stage companies rely on funding from NIH and the Department of Defense. “Companies won’t make it when otherwise they might have,” he says. “All I do is raise money now, and it is brutal.” He, like many in Nebraska, believes the government should be more efficient and accountable. “But I think we’re all a little surprised by the execution,” he says of DOGE. “They could come out of this as villains or heroes. It’s a great concept and could be beneficial to every taxpayer, and if they get it on a good course, Luke could have a lot of opportunities afterward. If it continues in the way it is now, it’s going to be hard for him.” That, says Zeller, would be a shame.

In February, Scott Henderson wrote that email to Farritor’s father: Please talk to your son. In April, he says: “We are a small community, we have to work together. Some people are cutting each other out. Whatever comes, there must be people ready to pick up the pieces, repair, build for the future.”

In April, *The Library of Darkness*—the film about Brent Seales’ quest to learn the secrets of the scrolls and his work with the Vesuvius Challenge—lost the last \$50,000 of a \$500,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Work had to halt. Even though most of the grant was restored, the money came too late. The film’s premiere in London this fall, hosted by the Herculaneum Society, had to be canceled. “I don’t even have the words to describe how backwards this is,” says Laura Azevedo, executive director of the Filmmakers Collaborative, which supports the documentary.

“My project is redemptive. It’s fixing something that is broken,” says Seales of the Herculaneum scrolls. “I would love to believe the people working on our government are taking the same approach, that they know what’s there is valuable and important, and rather than destroy it, they redeem it. We’re called to be fixers in this world, that’s what we’re called to do.”

In May, as DOGE entered its fifth month of operation, Fox News aired a meeting that Musk had led at 10 p.m. the night before in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, next to the White House. Twenty men sat around the conference

table, most in suits. The DOGE members were nervous, earnest, cocky. One who dropped out of Harvard University to join DOGE said: “Most of campus hates me now.” The host, Jesse Watters, asked: “Who is Big Balls?” Musk replied: “That should be obvious.” There was laughter around the table. Some noted that they’d encountered government workers who had great ideas and who wanted to make changes. One described how they’re modernizing the antiquated retirement process. “We’d like to give a big thank-you to all the government employees who are helping reduce the waste and fraud,” Musk said. “We really couldn’t do it without you.”



Farritor and the DOGE team on Fox News. Source: Fox News

On Musk’s right was Watters. On his left: Steve Davis, Sam Corcos (soon to be chief information officer at the Department of the Treasury) and Luke Farritor. *That’s the dream.* Farritor wore a tie, sat up straight, didn’t say anything that made it on air.

We got a glimpse at Farritor’s work calendar for the month.

May 1: An OMB “connect” on the National Science Foundation

May 9: A Microsoft Teams meeting to discuss grants to the

Department of Labor with Thomas Shedd, a former Tesla engineer, and Westley Everette, a department official

May 19: A quick sync about the Department of Labor with Everette and a DOGE liaison

May 27: A Microsoft Teams meeting with one person at the Justice Department and another at the FBI

On May 30, Musk joined the president in the Oval Office to formally announce he was leaving DOGE. He'd promised to save the government \$2 trillion, revised that to \$1 trillion and departed as DOGE claimed to have cut \$150 billion in federal spending by its own unverified accounting. He said DOGE was like Buddhism. It didn't need the Buddha.

The next day, as senior staff like Davis followed Musk out of Washington, Farritor became a permanent government employee. He's a senior adviser at the General Services Administration, designated a GS-15, the highest salary rank for civilians, earning \$167,603. He was living in a historic neighborhood in the District of Columbia, being driven around in a black SUV.



Musk on his final day with DOGE. *Photographer: The White House*

Then: Musk blew up. The insults and threats that spewed between the world's richest man and its most powerful brought schadenfreude, foreboding and, for those relying on Musk's status in Washington, anxiety. Then: Musk apologized. Then he promised to start a new political party.

Will the young coders Musk brought to Washington remain? If they leave, what are their prospects? Jan English-Lueck, an anthropologist who's been studying Silicon Valley engineers since the 1990s, says Farritor and others made a wager that will be "intellectually and emotionally celebrated," no matter DOGE's success or failure. "To gamble like that shows you understand the theater of Silicon Valley." On July 23, Trump spoke at an AI summit

in Washington. Afterward, there was a private party at a new members-only club. Farritor was among those invited.

Back at the GSA building, where Farritor is working, the two wings of the sixth floor that were closed to all but DOGE members no longer are, government officials told us. The mattresses have been stacked, the Ping-Pong tables folded up. Signs declaring “Authorized Access Only” have been removed from the elevators. The security checkpoint on the floor is gone, so is the armed guard. Here, DOGE’s ambitions are being curtailed, its leader no longer welcome.

–*With Ellen Huet*