

19. Mr. Musk Goes to Washington

In Chapter 19 titled "Mr. Musk Goes to Washington," the narrative focuses on Elon Musk's relationship with Gwynne Shotwell, the eventual President of SpaceX, and their efforts to establish SpaceX as a leading space exploration company. Shotwell, known for her directness and confidence, had been with SpaceX since 2002, standing out as one of Musk's few successful professional partnerships due to her ability to communicate effectively with him without causing offense. Her background is highlighted, from her inspiration to pursue engineering after attending a panel of the Society of Women Engineers, through her roles at IBM, Chrysler, and Microcosm Inc., leading to her meeting with Musk and subsequently joining SpaceX.

Shotwell's success in managing Musk's unique personality, partly attributed to her personal experience with her husband's Asperger's syndrome, allowed her to navigate Musk's blunt communication style and focus on the company's mission without discouraging team dynamics. Her engineering background facilitated a mutual understanding and respect between her and Musk, enabling effective collaboration.

Their efforts to promote SpaceX included a significant trip to Washington in 2003 to secure a contract from the Defense Department for the launch of tactical communications satellites (TacSat). Despite an unexpected mishap where Musk broke his tooth before their Pentagon meeting, their mission proved successful, marking SpaceX's first major contract at \$3.5 million. Furthermore, their initiative to boost public awareness of SpaceX culminated in December 2003 with a public display of the Falcon 1 rocket in Washington, impressing NASA's officials and contributing to a pivotal meeting with the agency. Despite initial frustration with NASA's contracting practices, Musk's bold decision to sue the agency over a contract awarded to Kistler Aerospace ultimately resulted in SpaceX winning a significant portion of the contract after competitive bidding was mandated.

Shotwell's influence and strategic handling of Musk's personality, combined with a strategic approach to navigating the space industry's political and competitive landscape, laid the foundation for SpaceX's success. The chapter concludes by highlighting the shift towards fixed-price contracts in the space industry, a significant departure from the traditional cost-plus contracts, underscoring the impact of SpaceX's legal victory and its broader implications for the American space program.