

30. The Fourth Launch

In August and September of 2008, Elon Musk, on the brink of personal bankruptcy and amidst Tesla's financial turmoil, prepared for the fourth launch of Falcon 1. The previous three attempts had failed, placing SpaceX's future in jeopardy. Musk's former PayPal colleagues, despite ousting him years earlier, became unlikely saviors by investing \$20 million through the Founders Fund, spearheaded by Peter Thiel and pushed by Luke Nosek. This investment, driven partially by a desire to mend past tensions and inspired by Musk's ambitious vision, provided the crucial funds needed for the fourth launch attempt.

Facing intense time and financial pressures, Musk challenged his team to ready a new rocket for launch within an astonishing six weeks. This expedited timeline, significantly faster than previous efforts and compounded by challenges including transporting the rocket to Kwajalein Atoll via a chartered C-17 plane, encapsulated Musk's high-stakes gamble on SpaceX's viability. A tense incident during the flight, where the rocket's tank began to crumple due to pressure changes, showcased the team's resilience and innovative spirit. They managed to save the rocket mid-flight, ultimately arriving at Kwaj to perform necessary repairs.

In a dramatic reversal of SpaceX's prior cautiousness, Musk decided to expedite the repair process by dropping newly installed quality controls, a move that reflected his adaptability and tolerance for risk. This decision paid off when, against the backdrop of tense anticipation and the looming potential of SpaceX's and Musk's personal failure, Falcon 1 successfully reached orbit. This achievement marked a historic milestone as the first privately built rocket to do so, defying widespread skepticism and positioning SpaceX as a trailblazer in private space exploration.

Musk's reaction to the successful launch was a mix of subdued excitement and overwhelming stress, reflective of the immense pressure he had been under. Despite the personal toll, the launch not only salvaged SpaceX and Musk's entrepreneurial reputation but also significantly altered perceptions of the feasibility of private space travel. This success laid the groundwork for future missions, emphasizing Musk's broader ambitions for SpaceX, including missions to Mars and taking over from the Space Shuttle, thus heralding a new era in space exploration led by private enterprise.