

Is the Shutdown Paying for Trump's Wall?

What Trump and the GOP gain from holding 800,000 government employees hostage

By Ron Verzuh

The longest government shutdown in United States history has a silver lining for Donald Trump and the current crop of conservative Republican Senators. The longer it goes on, the more the government can bank bundles of cash for the wall in lost wages, benefit payments, and associated services to the 800,000 workers who now are off work.

The GOP has long been the party of small government and big business. The shutdown provides three ways it can pursue that agenda, including enhanced attacks on government unions and social programs like Medicare and Medicaid. As we will see, Trump chocks up some personal gains as well.

First, saving 800,000 salaries, ranging from \$25,000 to six digits, is cascading money into government coffers. Now into an unprecedented fourth week, the shutdown is potentially allowing Trump to pocket billions for his border wall.

Whether it's concrete or the cheaper steel option – Trump has wavered on the material he would use for the wall – he could afford to move ahead with his ill-advised plan despite numerous experts claiming it will be largely ineffective. And he won't need Congress to approve it.

Fact checkers have debunked many of Trump's claims. The vast bulk of illegal drugs do not pass through wall locations; they are flown or shipped into the U.S. The families at the southern border, the so-called caravan, are not the criminals, rapists, and human traffickers that Trump has repeatedly claim. They are asylum seekers escaping persecution and possible death.

In fact, most border security experts say the benefits of Trump's wall are negligible in terms of enhancing border security and are based on faulty rationale and false information. As we've come to know, this is nothing new for this president.

In a further clandestine grab for wall funding, his threat to call a national emergency could permit him to divert other funds from other budgets, including part of the trillion-dollar military one and other monies that indirectly support the U.S. war machine.

Could his announcement to bring home troops from Syria also be indirectly connected to the wall? In Trump's Twittered thinking, could he see profit in bringing the returning soldiers to the southern border to enlarge the wall-building workforce?

Second, the shutdown workers lose their benefits, resulting in another massive savings for the Trump Administration. Even with a legal right to receive back pay and have their benefits restored, these employees would be wise not to assume it will happen. Trump

does not play by the rules. He's like a schoolyard bully wagging a big stick, shouting I can do anything I want.

So far, with a Republican-controlled Senate backing his every move, he could simply refuse to reimburse the shutdown workers. He could claim that their salaries went to pay for the wall in the interest of national security. As the shutdown continues, local businesses could also be victims since they rely on government salaries to stay afloat.

Third, the Republican Party is the party of corporations. Citizens United, the misguided Supreme Court ruling that gives them the legal status of personhood, has played havoc with real people's lives.

In response to corporate lobbying, one of the party's flagship goals, and a mainstay of its election propaganda, has been to reduce the size of government. The less government, the more opportunities there will be to privatize or corporatize those services. However, the goal is wrought with Republican contradictions. In the two years that the GOP controlled Congress it wracked up billions in federal debt. So much for smaller government.

But along comes a way to get the goal back on track: force the shutdown workers to look for other jobs and leave the public sector for good. News reports reveal that this is already happening. These workers can't pay their mortgages, other loans, or their daily living costs. Federal workforce reduction, and therefore government size, is happening by imposed attrition.

This is exactly the kind of scorched-earth policy that has come to define the GOP. Departing Republican House Leader Paul Ryan is on record wanting all public services to be reduced to a *tabula rasa*. He would have families look after the sick, churches care for the poor, and private charities help the needy. A return to the almshouses of the 19th century seemed to be his policy.

Guided by right-wing philosopher Ayn Rand, Ryan and others seem ecstatic to slash and burn the 800,000. Most of the workers losing their paychecks are Democrats, according to a Trump Tweet in an apparent attempt to blame and shame Democratic Party. This callous thinking pervades the GOP's higher echelons with Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell at the head of the wolf pack.

This three-pronged strategy is occurring behind the smokescreen that Trump has been creating since before he took office. As the master of mass distraction, he has kept the media dancing to his Pied Piper tune as he merrily leads them away from real stories.

Trump is also personally benefitting from the shutdown. Most if not all of the numerous legal suits against him cannot proceed while it continues. This includes suits regarding his alleged violations of the U.S. Constitution's "emoluments" clause for accepting foreign gifts and payments to his private businesses.

The Mueller investigation will carry on, but suits like the one filed by the 700,000-member American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) will not be processed. The air-traffic controllers union and others will also be shelved for the moment.

Such public sector unions legitimately argue that public safety is increasingly at risk if the shutdown goes on. But this doesn't worry the president. Like Ronald Reagan's firing of 12,000 striking air-traffic controllers in 1981, Trump is capable of firing large swaths of workers without considering the public and personal damage done.

As the days tick by, he imagines himself winning his wall. That's what counts for him. The human cost of the win does not enter his mind. That's his TV reality show mentality at work. He does not respond to arguments against the wall or even compromises that would end the shutdown. For him, compromise is tantamount to capitulation. He won't give in unless forced to do so by powers equal or greater than himself.

Apparently extreme right-wing media commentators such as Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity are behind the president's intractability. They and others like Ryan, but without his electoral vulnerability, know precisely what the shutdown represents. They support it on ideological and philosophical grounds.

For Trump, his Senate supporters, and his base, the wall represents long-sought-after goals. The wall plays into the fears of some of the 40 percent of American voters who continue to support him. Despite much evidence proving that border walls create more problems than they solve, these Americans stand behind their president.

For Democrats, the wall represents beliefs that are generally anathema to them: isolationism, racism, and paranoia about an alien invasion. They are not always true to those beliefs, as the Iraq War and other foreign adventurism has proved, but caving to Trump on the wall would further prove that the party of Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi is not the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

To allow Trump and his GOP supporters to win the wall fight means undermining the credibility of the Democrats' newly won hold on the House. It will also mean the visible sacrifice of commonly shared party values such as decency, caring, and humanity.

It is not a fight that either side thinks it can afford to lose. Meanwhile, 800,000 people and their families continue to pay the price.

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