

Shutting Down in Trumpland

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It is a political idiosyncrasy that most political systems avoid: the state, as if suffering a stroke, operating at only partial capacity, incapable of paying certain employees and incapable of fronting certain services. And so it is in the United States, which is facing the longest shut down in its history after the record set under the Clinton Presidency - 21 days in 1995 - was passed.

Prior to the 1970s, the administration of the day could generally expend moneys without prior congressional approval. Then came a shifting of power from the executive to Congress in a 1974 law, reorganising the budget process. Scrapping duly followed between the arms of government, and the [legal opinion](#) of United States attorney general Benjamin R. Civiletti provided the kiss of dysfunction to politics in Washington. Agencies could not, he surmised with high priest severity, continue to operate in the absence of congressional appropriations, bar those engaged in certain vital tasks, such as protecting life and property.

The reasons for the current squabble remain less significant than the process and consequences. President Donald Trump wants his wall on the Mexico border; the Democrats remain cool to aspects of the idea. The result has been a standoff and the drying up of pay checks to certain federal employees.

The term “shutdown” is deceptive. The state itself, for the most part, is still functioning, hence that qualifying word “partial”. The imperial mechanisms of waging war, procuring weapons of death and lining the pockets of the military industrial complex are exempt activities, the purview of the Department of Defence. Many agencies have also been funded through the current fiscal year.

But services out of the news, and on the margins, are the first to go into the world of pro-bono delivery, food pantries and food banks. An estimate in terms of how many are going without pay runs into 800,000.

Then come those flexing arms of Homeland Security: the Coast Guard and the Transportation Security Administration. Political decisions can have stinging irony, and for a president keen to press home his interest in border security and impervious walls, not paying members of these parts of the security apparatus seems a jarring, and risible, oversight. TSA employees have found small ways to [inflict](#) vengeance: employees are calling in sick in large numbers; checkpoints have been closing.

The Coast Guard has had to be comforted by words rather than cash. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson [described](#) members as “brave” in their task of keeping “America’s waters safe” even as they assisted the navy in various “maritime theatres of war” in maintaining security and countering piracy.

The issue with shutdowns is problematic in several ways. Trump's loyal base may remain unmoved by his obstinate childishness, but the issue remains depleting to the entire practice of governance. When the money stops trickling into services, the political figures of the day will be noted and marked. But Trump retains a padding that resists corrosion and wearing. The same cannot be said either about members of the GOP, or the Democrats. As the Republic rusts before the fantasy of a wall and a self-engineered, partial paralysis, the man who remains standing, whatever the polls say, is Trump.

The danger for the Democrats is how to stay mighty and distant, instead of close and small. This has been all but impossible for them. Trump is ramping it up with delinquent enthusiasm, as he always does, playing the trivial politics of small gains and considerable bellows, and also making it hard for his opponents to escape falling for much the same.

He has, for instance, delighted in preventing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from using a plane that would have taken her on a trip to Afghanistan. Trump's administration, in the [words](#) of a White House official, "worked with the Air Force and (the Defence Department) and basically took away the rights to the plane from the speaker." The note from Trump to Pelosi explaining the decision suggests an emperor keen to prevent an out of favour official from seeing the sights of the imperium. "Due to the Shutdown, I am sorry to inform you that your trip to Brussels, Egypt and Afghanistan has been postponed." The "seven-day excursion" (how true) would be rescheduled "when the Shutdown is over".

Pelosi, not wanting to be left out of the barnyard romp of low expectations, [retaliated](#) by insisting that the House of Representatives "will not consider a concurrent resolution authorizing the president's State of the Union address in the House chamber until the government has opened."

Trump, in a previous note to Pelosi, dared and cajoled the House Speaker into seeking to prevent the speech from going ahead. "It would be so very sad for our country if the State of the Union were not delivered on time, on schedule, and very importantly, on location." Trump, inadvertently, is accurate in one respect: if Congress be that great cinema, and theatre, of dissimulation and intrigue, a studio production line insulated from the electors, it is only appropriate for the chief to address its members there and then.

Trump's dark pull, Washington's scolding id, is total and consuming to opponents and followers alike, barrel scraping, and ultimate circus. Others, as they have done before, will have to busy themselves running matters while those on the Hill and in the White House pursue matters of non-governance.

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