

# THE Nation.

## The Shutdown Is Not a Result of Partisan Bickering

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The public has so far given Donald Trump and Congressional Republicans the lion's share of the blame for the longest government shutdown in US history. That's understandable given that Trump kicked it off by saying on nationwide television that he alone would take responsibility for locking out federal workers if he didn't get \$5.7 billion for a wall that—remember!—he originally said he would strong-arm Mexico into financing within his first three days in office.

We should be grateful for Trump's incapacity for message discipline, because the traditional media are once again failing to convey what's going on in Washington. The instinct to cover a standoff like this one as an example of partisan bickering runs deep, but that framing obscures the utter absurdity of this shutdown. Yet again, we're seeing deeply embedded conventions of neutral political journalism effectively normalizing what are really an incoherent series of moves by an erratic president—abuses of power that are now causing deep and potentially lasting damage to the economy.

If you tune in to cable news, or check the latest at outlets like *Politico* or *The Hill*, you'll learn which party has the upper hand in the polls, which caucus is feeling more restive or more confident and analysis of the latest proposals to bring it to an end. And you will hear, repeatedly, that this is a standoff over \$5.7 billion for Trump's border wall.

That's not what this is about, or not primarily. It is true that the Democratic base is dead-set against funding Trump's wall, but Democratic leaders have made it clear that they think that if Trump gets his way under these circumstances, they'll face two years trying to govern with a president who's learned he can force his way by taking hostages according to the whims of conservative media personalities. "We cannot have the president, every time he has an objection, to say I'll shut down the government until you come to my way of thinking," said Nancy Pelosi this week. "If we hold [federal] employees hostage now, they're hostage forever."

That's really what's at stake with this shutdown. It's a test of whether Trump can wrap his head around the fact that Congress is a co-equal branch of government. Trump doesn't want to fold because it would bruise his ego; Democrats can't fold without undermining the separation of powers for the remainder of Trump's presidency.

And contrary to what you may believe from dozens of headlines and hundreds of cable news segments, Trump did not offer the Democrats a deal to reopen the government last Friday. He wants to build a giant wall on the southern border, which Democrats oppose. He reiterated his demand for \$5.7 billion to pay for it, but he offered nothing that Democrats want and Republicans oppose in return.

Trump said he'd extend protections to the Dreamers for three years and continue to offer temporary legal status to some groups who were forced by conflict or natural disasters to flee

their home countries , but both of those programs have long enjoyed broad bipartisan support. And as Elie Mystal pointed out over the weekend, Trump's assaults on both programs are currently blocked by the courts anyway, and observers don't expect those cases to be resolved anytime soon.

Some short-term protections for people Trump put in peril in the first place, without a single concession to the Democrats' agenda, is not an offer to break a partisan stalemate, and shouldn't be portrayed as such by the press.

That's not all. For the first 30 days of the shutdown, there was no legislative proposal for lawmakers to consider. The White House has repeatedly refused Democrats' requests to specify how those \$5.7 billion would be spent. It's not even clear where that number came from. During the campaign, Trump estimated his wall would cost \$12 billion. Other estimates range between \$15 and \$70 billion, according to a report by the Brookings Institution.

(Keep in mind that the Trump regime has only spent 60 percent of what Congress allocated for border security in the 2017 and 2018 budgets, according to an analysis by PolitiFact. And again, this is all over a stop-gap spending measure.)

On Monday night, day 31 of the shutdown, Republicans finally issued a concrete legislative proposal to consider, and as Greg Sargent reported for *The Washington Post*, it was "so loaded up with poison pills that it looks as if it was deliberately constructed to make it impossible for Democrats to support." In the fine print are provisions that would make it all but impossible for minors from Central America to seek asylum in the United States and would bar people from Africa and Asia from seeking temporary status due to emergencies. David Bier, a conservative immigration expert at the Cato Institute, wrote on Twitter that the provisions were so restrictive that the "media should stop reporting that the bill would extend" the program. It would also double the application fees for Dreamers, and impose new income requirements for them to stay in the only country many of them have known.

Media reports rarely remind readers how we got here. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell has said consistently that he won't bring bills to the floor unless Trump says he would sign them into law. On December 19, with Trump's approval, the Senate unanimously passed a short-term spending measure without wall funding. Senators went home for the holidays, assured that the House would pass their measure and longer-term negotiations would begin in the new year. But Ann Coulter rebelled, and Trump shut down the government to keep his base close. ("Trump can withstand Ann Coulter," an unnamed GOP Senator told *Axios* this week, but "he can't lose Hannity and the rest.")

Trump's entire justification for shutting the government down in December was that he'd have less leverage to negotiate with Democrats after they took control of the House on January 3. The only rationale he's offered for keeping the shutdown going now is that he can't give his political opponents a perceived win. It's an outrageous justification for a shutdown that's not only left 800,000 federal workers in a desperate lurch but is threatening our national security. According to reports, nobody knows what Trump's strategy for getting out of this mess is, including his own aides.

It should go without saying that none of this is normal. And that is really what keeps tripping up reporters. If they flesh out this context in their reporting, it would paint one side of this

“stalemate” as an irrational actor, which would invite accusations of “liberal bias.” The alternative is to adhere to established journalistic conventions, treat an incoherent tantrum-fueled shutdown as a normal partisan standoff, and leave the public with an incomplete picture of what’s going on.