



# Shutdown victims public servants, not saints: Column

By Windsor Mann  
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Benjamin Franklin once said of George Washington that he "commanded the sun and the moon to stand still and they obeyed him." America's first president, just to be clear, was never in command of the solar system, though the city of his namesake thinks it is.

Interestingly, George Washington accepted no pay as commander in chief and only reluctantly as president. The same cannot be said for the District of Columbia, which adopted his name but not his asceticism. This fact is obvious thanks to the partial government shutdown, which, according to seemingly everyone in Washington, will ruin the city. Not only will thousands of jobs and millions of dollars be lost, but the city will start to stink, too.

"In a shutdown," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., said, "the garbage does not get picked up, no matter what, for a week. Then you can declare a health emergency." Get that? Shutting down the government, like being Charlie Sheen, is bad for your health. At least that is the consensus in the nation's capital.

There are few people more solipsistic than Washingtonians. Most of them believe that the law of gravity was an act of Congress and that a government shutdown is among the apocalyptic scenarios mentioned in the Book of Revelations. Their jobs are to them what the polar icecaps are to Al Gore: sacred and inviolable.

Aside from Anne Hathaway, nothing is more unpopular in this country than unemployment. An obvious way to reduce unemployment is to give a lot of money to a lot of people for the sole purpose of employing them. Most employers don't do this. Uncle Sam is not most employers.

He is, however, the largest. The federal government employs 2.1 million civilian workers, whose jobs will cost taxpayers about \$248 billion this year, according to the Cato Institute. Their wages and benefits are, on average, more than double those in the private sector.

Federal workers, despite their handsome incomes, see themselves as victims. "We just can't get a break," said electrician Stephen Gripper to *The Washington Post*. To be sure, our public servants have faced their unfair share of burdens lately. As the *paper* reported this week, they have been "battered by a three-year wage freeze, months of furloughs forced by the budget cuts known as sequestration and a dimmed perception of government work among many Americans." There are reasons for this dimmed perception — the use of the word "battered," for instance.

The Washington area is home to the two highest-income counties in America, and six of the top 10. It is the land of milk and money, the capital of capital. Its economy has grown three times as much as the country's since 2007. Nearly half of Washington households make \$100,000 or more a year.

These guys can't get a break — unless Uncle Sam gives them one.

"A lot of them, I would venture to guess, are living paycheck to paycheck," said Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., many of whose constituents work for the government. "We, as a Congress, need to be more sensitive to their needs."

We, as a nation, need not be so inclined. One must differentiate between needs and preferences, and between saints and sinners. Public servants, despite their claims, are not virtuous purely on account of their job status.

"If men were angels," James Madison observed, "no government would be necessary." It is the view of many people, both inside and outside Washington, that government is necessary because its functionaries are angelic. This view is erroneous.

Angels are celestial agents of God who perform supernatural blessings for people, often for free. Bureaucrats are agents of government who do no such things. If they merit our pity, it should be because they are people, not because they are people whose jobs we fund.