

Martin Schram: McConnell's leadership laryngitis

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“I am proud to shut down the government for border security... I'm not going to blame you for it.”

— President Donald Trump, to presumptive-Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Dec. 11, 2018

It seems like mind-boggling ancient history to remember way back to those dimming days of December. But that's when Republicans controlled all governance at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue – the House, Senate and the presidency.

Indeed, it was back when Republicans controlled everything, on Dec. 22, when today's now record long federal government shutdown began. It happened because President Donald Trump reneged on his agreement to sign a short-term spending bill containing \$1.3 billion for new Mexican border wall construction. The Senate had approved unanimously. But then conservative talk show hosts attacked and Trump buckled and refused to sign the bill. Trump returned to his old demand of \$5.7 billion in wall money, which he knew had no chance in the Senate.

So, for the third time in Trump's first two years as president, the all-GOP government failed to compromise – and it shut down.

That just wasn't the way it was supposed to be. After all, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had promised us that things would be smoother – certainly not scarier! – if only we elected a Republican president in 2016.

“I don't want the American people to think that if they add a Republican president to a Republican Congress, that's going to be a scary outcome,” McConnell told The Washington Post, in the run-up to Campaign 2016.

But instead of smooth, grand governance, the Republican sweep just managed to make America grate again. Speaker Nancy Pelosi began 2019 by getting her new Democratic-controlled House to give Republicans a second chance – passing the same spending bills, including \$1.3 billion in border wall money – that the Senate passed unanimously in December.

But this time, McConnell refused pleas of fellow Republicans who wanted him to allow a vote and send the same compromise to the president – to show Trump he's the only one standing in the way of good governance.

McConnell's passivity left us trapped in this scary, longest-ever government shutdown. Trump's arrogance, miscalculation and soulless disdain has made hostages of families of 800,000 federal workers – depriving them of paychecks they need to pay for housing, food, necessities and even medicines that some require to stay alive.

Meanwhile we finally have proof that America's alleged border crisis was never the criminal catastrophe Trump conned many Americans into fearing on the day he began running for president. And building a sea-to-sea border wall isn't the solution Trump conned his crowds into clamoring for at every rally.

Surprisingly, McConnell has developed political laryngitis just when patriotic governance requires his vocal leadership. Even when Trump's propagandists make appalling assertions, such as Trump's Council of Economic Advisers Chairman Kevin Hassett's blithe comment to PBS "Newshour" that unpaid federal workers could enjoy a "vacation" because they'll eventually get their back pay.

But what if they are living paycheck-to-paycheck? Mallory Lorge, a furloughed Interior Department employee in River Falls, Wis., made clear on NBC that she's not thinking about vacationing – just surviving. She has Type 1 Diabetes and was rationing her insulin because she had just two vials left and couldn't afford \$300 to buy more. The other night, her blood sugar level soared dangerously – that can lead to a diabetic coma. "I just went to bed and hoped I'd wake up," she said. On Tuesday, Trump's Council of Economic Advisers revised its original rosy calculations. The shutdown's economic impact could be twice as severe as predicted.

That same day, The New York Times devoted the center of its front page, from top to bottom, to a huge colorful graphic analysis headlined: "What's Really Happening at the Border?"

The graphs, based on government and Cato Institute data, showed that at the Mexico border: Illegal crossings are near a 50-year low; arrests for illegal crossings are the lowest since 1971 – but families are immigrating at record highs. Contrary to Trump's claims, U.S.-born individuals commit twice as many crimes (per 100,000 residents) as undocumented immigrants. And most drugs enter the U.S. in vehicles driven through legal ports of entry, not by crossing un-walled borders.

As Independent Counsel Robert Mueller's Trump-Russia probe nears completion, an increasingly panicky Trump threatens to keep government closed indefinitely. Unless he gets that \$5.7 billion for a border wall which may be far more than we need.

McConnell surely knows his party's president is coming unglued. But, seeming to fear his revengeful president, the majority leader won't lead. Meanwhile, Trump clearly doesn't care about misery his shutdown is inflicting on millions. And he wants to be sure you are blaming the Democrats for his shutdown.