



Method to the Madness: Shutdown Had More Than One Aim

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Ever since President Trump first came under scrutiny by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, his supporters lamented “Why won’t they let the president just do his job.”

So it’s only natural that the question now be asked, “Why won’t the president allow other people to do theirs?”

I’m referring, of course, to the 800,000 air traffic controllers, Transportation Security Administration workers, food inspectors, Coast Guard members and numerous other essential federal workers whose livelihoods and ability to perform the duties they’ve been assigned were curtailed for five weeks by Trump’s partial government shutdown – and could be again in a couple weeks.

Why, indeed? There may, in fact, be an answer to that question, which I’ll talk about in a moment.

But it’s definitely not because of any “emergency” on our southern border that has suddenly become so dire that it justified creating a very real economic crisis for hundreds of thousands of hard-working Americans who actually help protect our safety and provide us with vital services. That rationale is so utterly ridiculous. So is the idea that the only way the emergency could be mitigated was by immediately appropriating \$5.7 billion to build a wall that the president assured his supporters many times that Mexico would pay for.

So just why would Trump and his team deliberately try to sabotage not just the government, but the one “achievement” he constantly tries to take credit for, the economy, based on such a harebrained hypothesis?

Actually, there are two explanations, both having to do with the president’s need to pander to those who helped put him in power. The first goes back to the reason so many Americans, although by no means a majority, voted for him in the first place: the brazen way he offered them a scapegoat on which they could take out their frustrations.

For his aptly named base, the building of that wall, an idea originally devised by Trump’s aides to give him a talking point, quickly became a way of channeling their xenophobia and rejection of diversity.

Whether a physical barrier along the border – be it of concrete, steel or kryptonite – would actually succeed in discouraging badly needed migrant workers and those fleeing desperate and dangerous situations from trying to come here is beside the point. The hysteria ginned up by

Trump over Hispanic immigrants, first as a candidate and then as president, is simply the latest political exploitation of people's long-standing fear and loathing of foreigners.

So pernicious is the current incarnation of this phenomenon that it even extends to the children of undocumented workers, the so-called "Dreamers," who were brought to this country at early ages and have spent nearly their entire lives here, many excelling in both their scholarship and work ethic. Not only has Trump deliberately removed the protection from deportation provided by the previous administration under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, but many of his followers have demanded that they be accorded no "amnesty," as if they had committed some offense simply by living among us.

But there's another target group involved as well: the federal workforce itself.

While it's usually assumed that the hundred of thousands of government workers whose lives have been upended by this shutdown are collateral damage in a political dispute, I believe there's a more insidious explanation for the seeming indifference shown by members of the Trump administration toward the ordeal they've been put through. I'm convinced it was deliberately intended to put them out of work long enough to make them rethink their career choices.

"I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub," anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist famously stated back in 2001.

And guess who's been one of the leading proponents of getting that reduction process underway?

Two years ago when Donald Trump was about to take the oath of office, *CNN Business* reported that one of his primary objectives was to shrink the size of the federal workforce. In fact, according to the network, he listed it as the No. 2 priority in his "Contract with the American Voter."

Trump's plan, it said, called for "a hiring freeze on all federal employees to reduce the federal work force through attrition (exempting military, public safety, and public health)."

Cutting the size of government, of course, has always been a dream of right-wing plutocrats, including some who helped put Trump in office. And so far he's been doing his best to accommodate them, for example, by decimating the diplomatic corps, eviscerating the Environmental Protection Agency and simply failing to fill various bureaucratic posts.

But the shutdown has afforded him an opportunity to aggressively shrink the ranks of the rank-and-file staffers at a lot of those bureaucracies. It has made working for the government so unreliable that many of them were forced to seek employment elsewhere to pay their monthly bills.

That's why when the president said the shutdown might go on for months and cavalierly suggested that government workers try to keep a roof over their heads by doing odd jobs for landlords and bargaining with banks and bill collectors, it made me strongly suspect that something other than an imaginary wall was the motivating factor here.

And the even more outrageous fact that federal contract workers can expect to not be paid at all, even when they've continued to do their jobs, makes me wonder if some of Trump's marching orders come from yet another of the far right's ideologues, Chris Edwards, the director of tax

policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute, who has referred to those workers as “beltway bandits.”

In other words, maybe the shutdown was meant to cater to two constituencies at once – his so-called base with the idea that walling out yet another ethnic group will somehow protect them from being marginalized and the oligarchs who sponsored his candidacy.

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