

Looming shutdown shows the same mistakes again, and nobody wins

ECO

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GUEST COMMENTARY

Like that one friend who repeatedly promises to quit drinking after just one last round, the American government is staggering toward another shutdown. It's starting to seem inevitable — because it looks as though neither side is going to swerve in this game of chicken.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., the Senate minority leader who somehow manages to perpetually look both tired and smug, can't afford another political retreat. He's refusing to give Republicans another blank check, aiming instead to wring out some key concessions in exchange for a few Democratic votes to get a funding bill through the upper chamber.

The problem? President Trump, who runs the show for Republicans, views a shutdown the same way Hans Gruber viewed the FBI in "Die Hard": as a feature, not a bug. Shuttered agencies and mass firings of federal workers aren't obstacles; they're leverage (and sometimes the goal itself).

Schumer can't back down, and Trump doesn't want to back down. That's why the shutdown feels more imminent than the last time we flirted with one, back in March, when Schumer and Democrats folded.

In fairness, their reasoning wasn't crazy. Trump and Elon Musk were running roughshod with their Department of Government Efficiency, and a shutdown would have given Republicans more discretion to decide which services (Space Force, a new White House ballroom and, I don't know, a National Strategic Spray Tan Reserve) were "essential."

Democrats also had a plausible reason to believe that Trump's steep "reciprocal" tariffs would wreck the economy. They reasoned that if they just kept their heads down, the president would take all the blame for the crash — a reasonable idea that fell apart when Trump pumped the brakes before careening the economy off a cliff.

Since then, Trump has engaged in a campaign of authoritarian-tinged vengeance at such an impressive pace that the Democrats' strategy of "playing possum" seems laughably passive and utterly naive — like assuming a hurricane will just get tired and stop.

Still, you can't blame Dems for drawing a line in the sand, consequences be damned. Blocking government funding is one of the only mechanisms at the disposal of a minority party to demonstrate their opposition. Moral outrage and pride practically demand it.

Why help bankroll a government led by a man who doesn't negotiate in good faith and seems intent on bulldozing democracy itself?

Why be complicit in normalizing — and funding! — Trump's abnormal behavior?

Unfortunately most voters don't care about democracy in the abstract, and even fewer care about the inner workings of Congress. They care about kitchen-table issues. *Note*

So Democrats are trying to marry their righteous fury with something more practical and concrete — casting the shutdown as a battle to extend Obamacare subsidies and undo GOP Medicaid cuts. *Note*

Dare I say "doomed"? If you can't stay on one message, your opponent will control the narrative — meaning Republicans will blame the fallout on obstructionist Democrats.

Republicans have a simpler pitch that could almost fit on a bumper sticker: "We just want to keep things funded at the current level, plus toss in a little extra security for lawmakers."

Which message will prevail? Who will take the blame if the government shuts down and Americans are suffering in myriad ways? Democrats say that Republicans control everything, so the buck stops with them. Republicans will say the Senate requires 60 votes, and Democrats are withholding support to score political points. It's not a slam dunk for either party. The American people just want the government to function, and neither side is making that easy.

You really have to squint to imagine a scenario where Dems could honestly declare "mission accomplished" when this is all over. Still, there is a growing sense that it's better to go down fighting, even if you're destined to lose (which they might be).

But make no mistake, a shutdown is likely. Meanwhile, Trump abruptly canceled negotiations with Democratic leaders, citing "the unserious and ridiculous demands being made by the Minority Radical Left Democrats."

The good news: We're not talking about the debt ceiling or a government default; it's just a government shutdown. Social Security checks will still arrive. Federal workers eventually will get paid. Parks will close. Life will stagger on.

And so, barring some deus ex machina, we slouch toward another shutdown: a bureaucratic farce that everyone can see coming a mile away. It accomplishes nothing yet feels destined to happen — like the "Austin Powers" slow-motion steamroller gag, except stretched out over weeks, costing billions of dollars and hurting millions of lives.

We've seen this movie before. We're the ones being flattened.

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