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OTHER VIEWS

Trump brings his specialty — chaos

New York Times Editorial Observer

‘T

was the week before Christmas, and all through the House, not a creature was stirring — even though a chunk of the federal government will shut down at week’s end unless Congress and President Donald Trump reconcile his demand for \$5 billion in border-wall funding with Democratic lawmakers’ position that they’d rather eat their own toenails than approve a penny for his folly.

Lest anyone have any doubts, if a shut-down does come to pass at midnight Friday, when parts of the government are set to run out of funding, this president will own it 110 percent. Lawmakers, in a rare display of bipartisan, bicameral unity, have made this abundantly clear — in large part because Trump has given them no other choice.

Ordinarily, the strategy in such a situation is for each team to try to hang a shut-down around the neck of the other. Trump made that impossible for Republicans last Tuesday when, during a televised sit-down with Democratic congressional leaders, he said he’d be “proud” to “take the mantle” for grinding government operations to a halt. “I’m not going to blame you for it,” he promised Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer.

At that moment, you could almost see Schumer and House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi begin to quiver with glee.

Republicans, by contrast, promptly began lamenting that no one had any clue how to avert the looming crisis. “There is no discernible plan — none that’s been disclosed,” Sen. John Cornyn, the party’s No. 2 man in the Senate, told reporters last week.

“No one has any idea what the play call is — we don’t know what’s going on,”

Rep. Ryan Costello, who is retiring within weeks, told The New York Times.

Trump’s embrace of a shutdown has given lawmakers on both sides the freedom to throw up their hands and claim this whole mess is beyond their control. The mood around the Capitol is less one of urgency and activity than of fatalism. Last week, Sen. Richard Shelby, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said Congress looked to be “headed down the road to nowhere.”

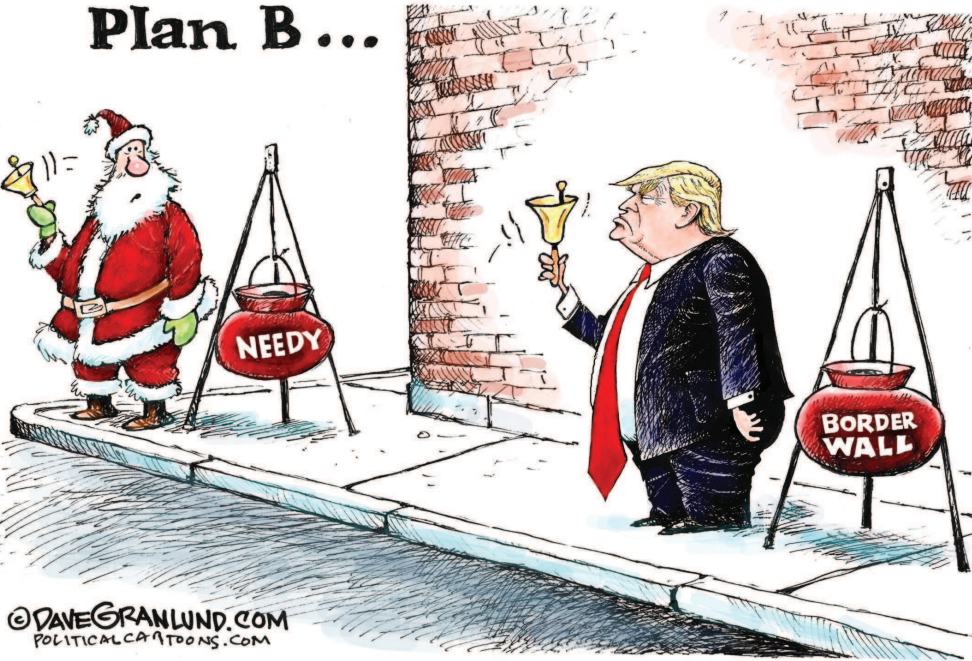
In the House, both teams have proclaimed impotence, claiming it’s all up to the president and the Senate. Not only did Speaker Paul Ryan fail to mobilize lawmakers for a vote on Trump’s \$5 billion, but many lame-duck members couldn’t be bothered to show up for work at all. (Nothing like an electoral rout to take the starch out of a conference.) Counting, much less whipping, the vote became all but impossible. By Thursday, House leaders gave up and sent members home for a six-day weekend.

On the Senate side, Schumer’s office is insisting that everything depends on whether the Republican leader, Sen. Mitch McConnell, can persuade the president to embrace a deal that Democrats can live with. The latest offer on the table is for a one-year “continuing resolution,” or CR, that would delay the fight by temporarily funding parts of the government at current levels.

Some Hill Republicans think the smart move is for Trump to push for a much shorter, two-week CR that would kick the battle into early January, allowing Republicans to try to shift some of the blame onto the incoming Democratic House majority. But as of Monday, the president reportedly wasn’t keen on this option.

There have been rumblings that Trump

Plan B ...



might come around to the bipartisan compromise passed by the Senate earlier this year, which included \$1.6 billion for fortifying existing border barriers. But no one has any sense of when, or even if, that might happen, and the signals emanating from the White House suggest the president isn’t yet in an accommodating mood. Even as Sen. John Barrasso, an incoming member of leadership, went on “Face the Nation” Sunday to stress the need to keep the government open, the administration dispatched hard-liner Stephen Miller to declare that, absent wall funding, a shutdown was “absolutely” on the table. During his executive time Monday, Trump tweeted that a wall is vital for “good Boarder Security.”

Whatever his ultimate plan — assuming he has one — the president is clearly looking to wring every ounce of drama he can from this game of chicken. These stand-offs jibe neatly with his belief that negotiations, and life in general, are a never-ending battle of nerve. He lives to make the other side blink and is eager to signal that he’ll do whatever it takes to win.

Shutdowns are especially fertile ground for Trump because they pit him against a political establishment that, as he sees it, obstinately refuses to pay proper deference

to his genius. He has repeatedly voiced frustration at Congress’ unwillingness to lie back and let him run things as he sees fit. Threatening to throw the government into chaos — to furlough, or in the case of personnel deemed “essential,” withhold paychecks from hundreds of thousands of workers, including Food and Drug Administration inspectors, Transportation Security Administration inspectors and, paradoxically, Border Patrol agents — lets him exact a bit of cathartic payback, reminding lawmakers just how uncomfortable he can make their lives.

Chest thumping and trash talking remain central to Trump’s brand as a disrupter. His followers thrill to him precisely because of his pugilistic, vaguely unhinged personality. The more he rails against politics as usual, the more his base swoons.

As for those who see Trump as behaving like a petulant toddler, he doesn’t have to face their electoral judgment for another two years — an eternity in politics.

For now, the president can relish playing the tough guy. Even if he winds up folding, he’ll doubtless toss out some alternative facts and declare victory. As usual, he has ensured that this holiday season’s drama is all about him.



OTHER VIEWS

How much is \$5 billion?

I can’t imagine all those people talking about 5 billion dollars for a border wall have any concept what that amount of money really is. I was given a concrete example and I still can’t comprehend it.

In 1955 my economics class went to the Federal Reserve Bank in Portland. At that time the government was taking the \$1,000 bill out of circulation to try to thwart organized crime.

We descended downstairs to the vault where they stored the money. Our guide pulled a bundle of bills off the shelf and handed it to me. I could see this 4.5 inch stack of bills had \$1,000 bills on the top and the bottom, which I figured to be a lot of money. It was a million dollars. He then informed us that one billion dollars would be a stack longer than a football field.

For those who have forgotten how many million are in a billion, the answer is 1,000. When I returned home I used my slide rule to multiply 4.5 inches by 1,000 to get 4,500 inches. That figures to be 375 feet. A football field is 340 feet. If you were to stack five of those football fields end to end I am sure you would be unable to recognize the end of the bundle.

Maybe that is what they are counting on.

Carlisle Harrison

Hermiston

Don’t forget the women of Umatilla

In the Nov. 17 edition, the *East Oregonian* printed a letter from Rodney Thompson of Pendleton, who stated that Yoncalla was the first city in America to have all city council members as women, as a result of the Nov. 2, 1920 election.

Not true. Here in the Museum in Umatilla, one of the first displays you will see when you visit is the story of our election of Dec. 5, 1916, in which all women were voted into council positions as well as mayor. There was even a book written about it called “Operation Clean Sweep,” by Darleen Bailey Beard, and is available at the local library.

We also have displayed a picture of Abigail Scott Duniway outside Portland Precinct 10, where she cast the first vote by a woman in Oregon on May 15, 1914. The nation passed the 19th Amendment in 1920, giving women in all states the right to vote.

Just correcting local historical information — sorry, Mr. Thompson!

Judy Simmons

Umatilla Museum and Historical Foundation Board member

OTHER VIEWS

Low Drug Prices Act keeps U.S. citizens on equal footing

A

t town hall after town hall, Oregonians tell me that they are being forced to choose between purchasing life-saving medicines or basic necessities.

They’re not exaggerating: At my Umatilla County town hall in Pendleton, a man named Gary told me his daughter has a \$500 co-pay for medication to treat chronic lung disease.

She has insurance through her job as a lab tech at a university, but can barely afford the medication that allows her to breathe.

The treatment is a lot cheaper in other countries, so why is his hard-working daughter being saddled with this impossible price, Gary asked.

That is outrageous. If a lower price is a sufficient price to pay in other countries, then that price is sufficient in America.

And this is not just an Oregon problem. Not only do 6 in 10 Americans report taking at least one prescription medicine, but 80 percent of them say that the cost of their prescription drugs is unreasonable.

Nearly a quarter of Americans taking prescription medications say the high cost of refills has stopped them or a family member from filling a prescription, or has led them to cut pills in half or skip doses altogether.

And prices keep increasing: From January to July of 2018, there were price increases on 4,412 drugs. The price decreased on just 46 medicines. That means for every one decrease in price, 96 others became more expensive.

This price-gouging is occurring even as people in other major developed countries are paying a fraction of the cost for the same prescriptions.

Perhaps the most outrageous part of this disparity is that many of these prescriptions were developed or improved

with research that was funded by our American tax dollars.

The only people in this country who think drug prices aren’t way too high are the ones getting rich from drug company profits. Virtually all of us will need prescription medication at some point in our lives to deal with illness or injury. It is far past time to stand up to big pharmaceutical companies’ lobbyists, and declare that Americans must get a fair deal when they purchase drugs they need for their health.

That’s why I recently introduced a bill to put into law this simple proposition: Drug companies must sell to Americans at or below the price they sell to other



JEFF MERKLEY

COMMENT

developed countries.

My Low Drug Prices Act would require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish a reference price—the median price of every drug in 11 the world’s largest developed countries, including Canada, major European countries, and Japan.

Prescription drugs would have to be sold at that reference price to all individuals in the U.S. market, regardless of what kind of insurance they have or whether they’re paying themselves.

Gary’s daughter shouldn’t have to choose between paying her living expenses and paying for medication. No Oregonian should have to. No American should have to.

My Low Drug Prices Act would finally end the drug company rip-offs and give Oregonians and all Americans the same fair deal on drug prices enjoyed in every other developed country.

Jeff Merkley was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 2008.

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