Compromise is Missing Ingredient in Shutdown Drama

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By Richard A. Cherwitz

Last week President Trump spoke in the Rose Garden, declaring that, after 35 days of nearly 1 million people out of work and not being paid, he temporarily was ending the government shutdown. His speech and the chosen setting – including cabinet members applauding his every word – seemed more like a victory lap than a resolution of a debilitating national crisis.

What concerns me is that now is precisely the wrong time to gloat and celebrate political victors and losers. The focus must be exclusively on all the federal workers and their families who suffered economic and emotional hardship for over a month, not to mention the negative ripple effect this had on all Americans. More importantly, we should focus on how to avoid repeating this paralyzing predicament in the future.

Sadly, yet not surprisingly, the responses to President Trump’s decision and speech were also predictable, echoing the narrative that public policy decisions are more about political gains and losses rather than what is in the best interest of the country.

For example, it was tactically inappropriate and rhetorically counterproductive to proclaim the president is “backing down,” “caving,” “got rolled” by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, “walled in,” “blinks,” replacing George H.W. Bush as the “biggest wimp,” descriptions used by a frog chorus of both conservative and liberal politicians, media outlets and political pundits.

As someone who has spent more than 40 years studying political communication and argumentation, I contend instead we must embrace the notion of compromise. One of the lessons of our nation’s history is that compromise requires both sides to find ways to help the opposition extricate themselves from blame and save face. Without that, stalemate is inevitable.
Yes, it is true that what transpired last week and the 35 days prior cost President Trump politically. His approval ratings, public support for the wall, and who Americans assign blame for the shutdown document this convincingly. And, yes, it can be argued persuasively that the president’s decision to reopen the government merely resolved a crisis he created and one that could have been avoided weeks prior.

However, these partisan claims miss the point. The question is, and always has been, how does our country move forward in a productive manner? The obvious answer is that our political officials must engage in genuine compromise. But as long as politicians and the media continue to seek capitulation, declaring winners and losers, the present impasse will remain. What this will mean is at the end of the 21-day temporary opening of government we again will be plunged into a crisis – and all Americans will suffer.

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