The Shutdown Debate Isn't about a Wall--It’s about Winning a Rhetorical War

Richard Cherwitz, Guest columnist

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It was a remarkable display: President Trump’s prime-time address to the nation on the alleged border crisis, followed by the very personal admonishments by both congressional Democrat and Republican leaders after another unsuccessful meeting with the president. The spectacle made one thing clear: The issue of the proposed wall and the debate over how to end the government shutdown are not genuine public policy disputes.

They are best characterized as two competing public relations campaigns — a rhetorical war, if you will. Regardless of one’s political stands on these issues, this seems to boil down to a concern for winning and losing where controlling the narrative supersedes finding a solution.

As someone who has studied and taught political communication and argument for more than 40 years, it is clear that Trump is not an ideological president. Nor is he a public policy wonk with a vested interest in specific policies. He is someone who has spent his life operating from the assumption that all disputes are zero sum games where there is one winner and by definition one loser, and where his primary goal is to be the victor.

Nowhere is this more evident than Trump’s current remarks about and planning for how to win the battle over the wall and the government shutdown.

He seems closer to declaring a “national emergency” as a way of extricating himself from his current political predicament. Doing so would give Trump the ability rhetorically to fulfill his campaign promise to the base to build a wall, while simultaneously ending the government shutdown.
Admittedly, such an option is not without legal challenges. It would also create a troublesome precedent, one increasing the likelihood that future presidents — Democrats and Republicans — will use the “national emergency” strategy as a way to circumvent Congress, thus undermining our nation’s checks and balances.

What is especially troubling, however, is where Trump might get the money to build the wall once a state of national emergency is declared and he has the authority to redistribute federal money. As some have speculated, Trump might very well take funds from, among other places, “disaster recovery” coffers. Some of that unspent money has already been promised to states like California (a Democrat-dominated state) to help with vital relief projects.

But, it might be argued, that could reinforce Trump's image of being insensitive. So how would he preempt such an accusation, avoiding the appearance of not caring about those hurt by disasters? One possible answer: By using rhetoric to create a fait accompli.

Consider an historical example. President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to send the U.S. Navy on a goodwill world tour, but couldn’t convince Congress to appropriate the required funds. So Roosevelt used what available presidential discretionary money he had to send ships halfway around the world. He then told members of Congress that, in order for the Navy to return home safely, they would have to appropriate the needed funds. That was a clear example of a fait accompli.

It is likely that Trump would use this same rhetorical tool. He might notify Congress that, since “disaster relief” funds were diverted to build the wall, they would have to appropriate the necessary money to help the states — which likely they would.

Not a pretty picture to say the least, but sadly one indicative of the unfortunate polarized political climate in which we live.
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Richard Cherwitz (Photo: Special to the Register)