“The Rhetorical Lesson Trump Could Learn from Teddy Roosevelt”

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This photo provided by Brown Brothers shows Teddy Roosevelt at his Oyster Bay, N.Y., home in 1912. A Pennsylvania-based stock photography company founded in Manhattan 110 years ago is looking to sell its collection of more than 1 million photographs and negatives, including tens of thousands of black-and-white images of New York City before World War II. (AP Photo/Brown Brothers)

Photo: Associated Press

Will President Trump really use disaster relief funds to build the border wall? He might, and if he does he’ll be following a path traveled by another Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt.
When Roosevelt wanted to send the U.S. Navy on a goodwill world tour in 1907, in what would become known as the voyage of the Great White Fleet, he couldn’t convince Congress to appropriate the required funds. So Roosevelt used what available presidential discretionary money he had to send them half-way around the world; he then told Congress that, in order for the Navy to return home safely, it would have to appropriate the needed funds — a clear example of what’s known as a fait accompli, that is a situation in which the end result has already been determined and everyone else simply has to accept it.

It’s a rhetorical tool that President Trump is likely to use in his current predicament. He might notify Congress that, since “disaster relief” funds were diverted to build the wall, Congress would have to appropriate the necessary money to replace the funds intended to help the states — which likely they would.

I make this observation as someone who has studied and taught political communication and argument for more than 40 years. It is clear to me 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 by definition one winner and one loser, and where his primary goal is to be the victor.

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

That’s likely why President Trump has contemplated declaring a “national emergency” as a way of extricating himself from his current political predicament. Doing so would give him 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.

That it might also mean taking money Congress has appropriated for relief to states like California and Texas, where post-Harvey relief projects are sorely needed, is especially troubling.

Doing that could risk alienating voters in these states and elsewhere who might see Trump’s actions as callous. But that’s where the use of the rhetoric to create a fait accompli would come in handy.

Like Roosevelt before him, Trump could essentially dare Congress to call his bluff — counting on members’ sensitivities to storm-ravaged communities to lead them to appropriate more funding to cover what he has funneled to the wall project.

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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