Politicians Must Learn How to Argue

By Richard Cherwitz

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Last week President Donald Trump spoke in the Rose Garden, declaring that, after thirty five days of nearly one 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. Or, as CNN’s Jim Acosta put it, something “right out of ‘Alice in Wonderland.’”

What concerns me is that now is precisely the wrong time to gloat and celebrate political victors and losers. The focus must be on all the federal workers and their families who suffered economic and emotional hardship for over a month, and 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,” that he “got rolled” by Speaker Pelosi, was “walled in,” “blinked,” and replaced 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 over forty years studying political communication and argumentation, I contend instead we must embrace the concepts of “consensus” and “compromise”—something my students learn rests at the core of genuine democratic deliberation. One of the lessons of our nation’s history is that “compromise” and “consensus” require both sides to find ways to help the opposition extricate themselves from blame and save face. Without that, stalemate is inevitable, especially in view of our current heated and divided political climate.

To help explain the source of the problem, consider the three most typical outcomes of an argument. The first is “capitulation,” an all or nothing (zero sum) result where one side wins and by definition the other loses. Interestingly, this tends to be the stereotypical outcome of argument, yet often not the most productive nor most likely to occur. The second is “consensus,” where interlocutors select a new option not contained within the original binary
choice. The third is “compromise,” where both parties to an argument give up something and keep something from their original claims.

Unfortunately, “consensus” and “compromise” are not always understood. In the current political climate, they too frequently are perceived by arguers as a loss, rather than as a win-win. This might explain why politicians in the government shutdown and other debates are so reticent to pursue consensus or compromise.

Consider some of the arguments. Yes, it is true that what transpired last week and the thirty five days prior cost Donald 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—no matter how accurate—underscore the problem we face.

The question is—and always has been: How does our country argue in a productive manner allowing an escape hatch from the all or nothing attitude perpetuating political polarization and stalemate? The obvious answer is that our political officials must strive for “consensus” or “compromise.” That, in turn, can occur only when Democrats and Republicans eschew a zero sum rhetorical mindset and employ discourse giving both sides of the political aisle an exit strategy permitting them to save face and to assure their constituents something was gained from the deliberation. After all, both “compromise” and “consensus” are give and take processes.

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 twenty one day temporary opening of government we again will be plunged into a crisis, as the President’s most recent comments foreshadow.

The rhetorical challenge is conspicuous: Until politicians learn that consensus and compromise do not mean losing, all will suffer.

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