

Trump's Wall and Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON – The fight about “The Mexican Border Wall” is indicative of the collapse of serious policy debates in Washington. It is abundantly clear that Democrats and Republicans are not engaged in a debate. At best it is an ideological fight, at worst just posturing, theatrics aimed at impressing core supporters. Both sides state unreasonable positions articulated in this way only because the opinion polls indicate that their “base” likes them.

Trump's Wall

In retrospect, there should be no surprise about President Trump's rediscovered determination to get funding from Congress for a complete wall at the US Mexico border that would theoretically stop illegal immigrants from crossing into the United States. During the 2016 presidential campaign Trump promised that the wall would be built, and that (somehow) he would manage to “force” Mexico to pay for it.

For Trump and his core supporters, the Mexico border wall project was and is a symbol of a rejuvenated ***America First*** in action, a self-confident, no-nonsense America getting tough –at last– with a hostile world. According to their narrative, this is a new America capable and willing to protect its core interests, beginning with its border security –with serious measures. A “Big Wall” separating the US from Mexico will send Trump's powerful message: *“New Sheriff in town. End of the party for all would-be illegal immigrants. Don't even try. Now*

we are back in charge of our borders. We decide who will be admitted. And there will be fewer admissions. From now on, forget about sneaking in. Now we have built a real Wall”.

A national priority

Indeed, while parts of a wall, or physical barrier, at the border with Mexico have already been built under other presidents, (with bipartisan support, we should add), Trump is the first US President who made “The Wall” into a national security priority, in fact the symbol of a resurgent America that wants to regain control of its territory, beginning with secure borders.

A real wall

Well, now the President, two years into his term, decided that this is the time to get the wall done, or at least started. But here is the thing. Trump’s Wall is a powerful symbol; but it is not a component of a real border security plan. strategy.

From any reasonable public policy analysis perspective, (if anyone cared to have any on this highly politicized issue), the problem with this “Mexico Border Wall” demanded by President Trump is that it is not and never was part of a well thought, comprehensive, organic immigration reform and border security strategic plan aimed at preventing or at least containing illegal immigration, while at the same time elaborating reasonable policies regarding legal immigration and the status of many millions of illegal immigrants currently living (precariously) in the United States.

Does it take care of the problem?

This "Wall" is an appeal to emotions, not a real solution to a concocted national security emergency. In fairness to President Trump, a wall at the US Mexico border will certainly help in preventing some illegal immigration into the US. However, a wall will do absolutely nothing to prevent foreigners who come legally to US –say by air– to become illegals by staying beyond the terms of their visas, a very common form of illegal immigration.

That said, for many Americans who support President Trump the Wall seems to be a practical solution to a practical problem. All these would-be illegal immigrants accustomed to crossing a non secure border, all of a sudden will get a surprise: a physical a barrier that will prevent them to cross into the United States.

Democrats say "No"

Still, whatever the merits of a wall, given the hyper partisan climate in Washington, it is no surprise that the Democrats look at the very same "Wall Project" not as a policy issue to be discussed with the goal of reaching some agreement on a problem –border security–that should concern all elected leaders. None of that. If Trump wants "The Wall" –and he really does– then it seems to be the duty of all good Democrats to oppose it.

Hence the current political impasse that morphed into the larger and shameful government shutdown crisis. Since the Democrats say "no" to the wall –and their votes are needed to

secure funding for its construction— in retaliation Trump refused to sign urgent spending bills that keep parts of the US Government going.

And so we have had the sorry spectacle of a partial shutdown of the US Government, simply because the Democrats refused to include into spending bills \$ 5.7 billion requested by Trump for the wall. Trump, in retaliation, refused to sign the bills. Without spending bills duly signed by the President, some government agencies had to close down, sending all employees home. hence the grotesque and shameful shutdown. Think of this. The United States Government had to shut down for a public disagreement on whether or not to appropriate \$ 5.7 billion, an amount of money that the US Federal Government spend in about 12 hours.

Democrats are winning, so far

At this point the wall issue —always political in its essence— has become super political. Now it is basically all about brinkmanship. Who will blink first? Based on his own calculations, Trump had decided that it was politically advantageous for him to cause a major national disruption —the shutdown— by insisting that he would not sign any spending bills unless his demand for at least \$ 5.7 billion for the wall was met in full.

But he miscalculated the determination of his opponents. Right now, it seems that the Democrats are winning the political contest. Trump had to agree on a 3 weeks “truce”. The Government will reopen, with no additional funding for the Wall, while the two sides supposedly will negotiate some sort of compromise on the Wall. Trump gets the blame for the

shutdown, while he had to agree on reopening the government without obtaining concessions from the other side.

Be that as it may, quite clearly we are no longer talking about the wall anymore, (if we ever did), or seriously discussing comprehensive border security plans. On both sides, we are talking about political symbolism, appeals to emotions, posturing, rallying the base.

Bitter partisan fights will continue

US border security and, more broadly, the fashioning of a comprehensive immigration policy, are serious and important matters. But a totally divided US political leadership cannot even begin to have a constructive debate on realistic, workable policy options.

Maybe in the end of the three weeks truce, after all the name calling and political bleeding, a compromise will be fashioned. May be Trump will get some money for a segment of the "Wall" he promised in 2016. But this will not be the end of the deep divisions in Washington.

In fact, with the Democrats now firmly in control of the House of Representatives, we can expect more partisanship and more fights and uncompromising positions on the wall, and many more issues.