

Lame Duck Shutdown Theater Time: Pride Goeth Before a Wall?

US president Donald Trump says he'd be "proud" to take the blame or credit for a fake government shutdown. At issue: Whether or not a stopgap federal spending deal forces American taxpayers to fund his border wall fetish (he previously promised us Mexico would pick up the check).

For me, the situation feels like Christmas come early. I'm generally in favor of government shutdowns — even fake ones in which a few "non-essential" bureaucrats get sent home for a few days then get paid anyway — and 100% opposed to making the "constitution-free zone" near US borders even more like East Germany than it's already been for decades.

Unfortunately, the whole thing is also about as real as Santa Claus.

In addition to being fake, any "shutdown" will be short. Congress is in "lame duck" mode right now, just stumbling along until new members (and new majority party in the House) take over in January and undo any December developments they don't like.

As for the wall, it probably won't get funded this month, but I bet we'll see parts of it actually in place before the 2020 presidential election.

For one thing, there's enough wiggle room in congressional appropriations that the chief executive can almost always find a way to pay for the things he wants most.

For another, Trump seems to have finally discovered a weapon that I've been pointing at since the fake government shutdowns of the 1990s. During these fake shutdowns, Republicans try to put the blame on Democrats and vice versa, with the winners being those more successful at shifting blame.

The way to really "win" a fake shutdown isn't to successfully shift blame, it's to successfully seize credit. Trying to shift blame and seeking a compromise looks like weakness. "Proudly" taking credit and refusing to bend looks like strength. And voters, as a rule, seem to value strength more than they value morality or intelligence. In politics, boldness tends to win the day.

If Trump sticks to his guns here, Democrats may find that they've painted themselves (and the next House) into a "try to shift blame" corner from which they will spend the next two years begrudgingly giving Trump everything he demands.

Those concessions may come with pretty "compromise" paint jobs but they'll still amount to capitulations. And that approach, in turn, will leave Democrats with a losing 2020

campaign strategy of whining that they had no choice.