

Trump escalates conflict with congressional Republicans on border wall, debt ceiling

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President Donald Trump stepped up his public conflict with Republican congressional leaders Thursday with a series of tweets in which he vilified them for failing to pass legislation raising the federal debt ceiling and repealing the Obama-era Affordable Care Act.

These declarations follow comments made at his Tuesday night rally in Phoenix, Arizona, further amplified on Wednesday, in which he demanded that Congress fund the construction of a huge wall along the US-Mexico border and vowed to shut down the federal government rather than sign budget legislation that did not pay for the wall.

The White House and Congress are facing several deadlines at the end of September. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has warned that the federal debt ceiling must be lifted by September 29 to permit the Treasury to issue more debt to cover Social Security and other payments due October 1.

Total federal government debt is approaching \$20 trillion, and the Treasury has been drawing down cash reserves because the anemic growth rate in the US economy has kept tax collections substantially below the overall level of federal spending. Trump inherited \$350 billion in cash reserves when he took office, and despite the huge inflow of tax payments in April, reserves had fallen to only \$82 billion last week.

Legislation to raise the debt ceiling is traditionally opposed by the right wing of the Republican Party and passes only on the basis of bipartisan deal making between the Republicans and Democrats, regardless of the size of the Republican majority in either house of Congress.

In one of his tweets Thursday, Trump attacked Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan for not attaching a measure to raise the debt

ceiling to unrelated legislation giving veterans more rights to appeal adverse decisions by the Department of Veterans Affairs on their disability claims, which passed Congress by overwhelming majorities earlier this month.

“I requested that Mitch M & Paul R tie the Debt Ceiling legislation into the popular V.A. Bill (which just passed) for easy approval,” Trump tweeted. “They didn’t do it so now we have a big deal with Dems holding them up (as usual) on Debt Ceiling approval. Could have been so easy—now a mess!”

There is no evidence that Trump ever made such a request, or that such a stratagem would have been successful. The statement by Trump seems a gratuitous attempt to further inflame relations between the White House and congressional Republicans, allowing Trump to present himself as opposed to both of the major parties.

Trump’s threats to force a government shutdown are related to the other major deadline facing Congress, the September 30 end to the current fiscal year. If a new budget is not adopted by then, or a continuing resolution extending funding for federal agencies, portions of the federal government deemed “nonessential” will begin to shut down and federal workers, except in the military, will go unpaid.

Trump initially sought to use budget legislation last April, which funded the federal government for the rest of fiscal year 2017, as the vehicle for authorizing \$1.6 billion in spending to begin construction of his much-vaunted border wall. With Democrats opposed, and congressional Republicans unwilling to provoke a shutdown, the White House gave in, although Trump made noises about using a “good shutdown” to force action.

Congress will be in session for only 12 legislative

days in September because of recesses for the Labor Day weekend and Jewish high holidays. In that period of time, it must approve a budget or continuing resolution, raise the debt ceiling, approve continuation of the Children's Health Insurance Program, which will otherwise expire, and begin action on Trump's proposed tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations.

Fitch Ratings, one of the three main debt-rating services, announced Wednesday that it would review the US government's credit rating for a possible downgrade if the debt limit was not raised in a "timely manner." There are widespread concerns on Wall Street that either a federal default on debt or a government shutdown could trigger worldwide financial instability or even a global market crash.

Both McConnell and Ryan have downplayed the prospect of a government shutdown or federal debt default. McConnell, speaking side by side with Treasury Secretary Mnuchin on Monday, said there was "zero chance" that Congress would refuse to raise the debt ceiling.

"I don't think anyone is interested in having a shutdown," Ryan said, speaking in Oregon. "I don't think it's in our interest to do so." The House speaker said that even if there were no agreement on a budget by September 30, Congress would pass a continuing resolution of several months to provide the time needed to work out the necessary deal.

Both the White House and McConnell issued statements Wednesday disavowing the substance of a front-page *New York Times* report about the breakdown of relations between the Senate Republican leader and Trump. But neither side denied the basic fact reported by the Times: that Trump and McConnell have not spoken since an August 9 phone call which apparently erupted in an exchange of profanity, provoked by the failure of the Senate to repeal Obamacare.

Trump has also pressed McConnell to break with two centuries of Senate tradition and override the filibuster, which allows the minority of Democrats to block action on most legislation, by requiring 60 votes to end debate and bring legislation to a vote. He repeated this demand in several tweets during the week.

Both McConnell and Ryan have sought to minimize the conflict with the White House. Ryan has publicly supported the border wall. House Republicans pushed through the \$1.6 billion in initial funding last month as

part of a broader spending bill, but it has been blocked in the Senate, where it lacks 60 votes, and perhaps even a simple majority.

Senate Republicans have also criticized Trump for his public defense of neo-Nazi demonstrators who rioted in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one anti-fascist protester. Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and previously close to the White House, said last Thursday, "The president has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful."

Trump's escalating attacks on the congressional leaders of his own party have begun to draw worried attention from the corporate media. The pro-Democratic Party editors of the *New York Times* lamented, in an editorial headlined "The President Turns on His Own," that "this president seems to have alienated everybody. And whether one hopes to see the president's agenda enacted or stymied, his failure to perceive this essential political dynamic is evidence of how little he understands what it takes to convert campaign positions into reality."

What the *Times* seeks to conceal, however, is that Trump is pursuing a definite political goal, along lines outlined by his former chief political strategist Stephen Bannon, of cultivating an audience outside of and hostile to the two major parties. While Bannon was ousted last week from his White House post, at the insistence of the new chief of staff, former General John F. Kelly, the ultra-right orientation remains.

Trump is seeking to develop a fascistic, authoritarian movement outside the existing two-party system, which would combine economic nationalism, racism and militarism.



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