

Before budget deadline Thursday, Senate Democrats and Republicans prepare reactionary “border security” bill

Patrick Martin
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Congressional Democrats and Republicans and the Trump White House appeared deadlocked Monday on a range of fiscal and policy issues, above all immigration, only three days before another budget deadline that threatens another partial shutdown of the federal government.

The continuing resolution that put an end to a three-day partial shutdown of federal operations in January expires at midnight, Thursday, February 8, with little to no prospect that either the House or Senate will pass a budget for the remainder of the current fiscal year, which runs until September 30.

Congressional Republican leaders have already indicated they will seek another short-term continuing resolution, the fifth this year, extending authorization for federal agencies to spend money until March 23.

This would mean three major legislative deadlines during the month of March:

- March 5—the expiration of protection against deportation for 700,000 young immigrants under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which Trump rescinded last September

- Mid-March—the US Treasury will hit the debt ceiling of \$20.5 trillion, the current limit on federal borrowing, about a month earlier than previously expected, because of lower tax collections due to the corporate tax cut enacted in December

- March 23—the next continuing resolution, if passed by Congress this week, would expire, meaning that the federal government will be halfway through the fiscal

year without a full-year authorization to spend money

On Monday, Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona and Democratic Senator Christopher Coons of Delaware announced plans to introduce a bill that would grant permanent legal status to DACA recipients and another 1.1 million undocumented immigrants in the same age bracket, who have not applied for DACA protection, but who can prove they have lived in the US continuously since 2013.

The bipartisan bill would provide an array of new spending and legal authorities to build up “border security,” but would not immediately authorize funds for a wall along the US-Mexico border, which led President Trump to denounce it immediately as a “waste of time.”

The bill would also not meet Trump’s demand for an end to the visa lottery system and for preferences for family reunification, both efforts by the White House to slash legal immigration, particularly from non-European countries.

Virtually the same legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives by Republican Will Hurd of Texas and Democrat Pete Gallego of California, with 54 co-sponsors, 27 Republicans and 27 Democrats.

While it does not include the wall, there are numerous reactionary and repressive provisions in the bipartisan bill, including approving the use of drones and other advanced technology to establish better “situational awareness and operational control of the border.”

The wall would be deferred for a year, while the Department of Homeland Security was given that time to develop a plan to include “a list of known physical barriers, levees, technologies, tools, and other devices that can be used to achieve and maintain situational

awareness and operational control along the southern border,” including a projected cost per mile.

This underscores that the objections to the wall by Democrats, and even many Republicans, do not revolve around its reactionary and repressive character, but the practical and budgetary issues of building a structure through two thousand miles of desert, mountain wilderness, and along the Rio Grande.

The bill calls for hiring dozens of new judges and prosecutors to beef up the immigration court system and eliminate delays in carrying out deportations, and it directs the State Department to develop a strategy for halting immigration from Central America—in plain language, to develop plans to bolster the police and military in those countries so they can prevent their own people from fleeing poverty and oppression.

Senator Coons said, “This narrower bill addresses the two things that every member agrees we have to address to move forward,” DACA and border “security,” and would allow further debate on Trump’s other demands on immigration policy.

McCain’s motivation in co-sponsoring the bill in the Senate was to uncouple the immigration issue from the passage of the budget, so that Congress can enact the massive increase in military spending that both Trump and McCain himself are pushing. He said in a statement, “It’s time we end the gridlock so we can quickly move on to completing a long-term budget agreement that provides our men and women in uniform the support they deserve.”

Pentagon officials have repeatedly complained that the series of continuing resolutions has disrupted long-term planning by the military, particularly in relation to purchasing weapon systems that are to be part of the Trump administration’s proposed buildup, including 65 more Navy ships, 100 additional warplanes for the Air Force, and an accelerated modernization of the US nuclear weapons stockpile and delivery systems.

The Democratic Party has offered no opposition to the military buildup, part of the preparation for war against North Korea, which threatens nuclear war with China and Russia. The Democrats have only suggested that domestic spending, as well as military spending, should be freed from the sequester “caps” dating back to a bipartisan budget deal in 2011.

On immigration, Senate Democrats agreed to separate the issue from the budget talks as part of their

capitulation to the Republicans that ended that federal shutdown last month. They have been clinging to a promise by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to take up an immigration bill by February 8 if it is not part of the next continuing resolution.

Another proposal now being circulated is to pass a temporary extension of DACA protection, for as long as a year, combined with some additional funding for border security, in order to avoid the spectacle of mass deportation of young immigrants, who have grown up in the United States and know no other country, in the middle of an election year.

The last continuing resolution contained one long-term provision, reauthorizing the Children’s Health Insurance Program for another six years, to gain some needed votes. A similar tactic could be employed to gain passage of another continuing resolution before Thursday midnight, this time involving disaster aid for Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas and California, perhaps combined with a longer-term extension of military spending.

In the midst of the legislative wrangling, the Treasury Department revealed a sudden worsening of the fiscal crisis of the federal government, with projected net borrowing of nearly \$1 trillion this year. The exact figure, \$955 billion, released January 31, was the highest in six years, and nearly double the \$519 billion the federal government borrowed in fiscal year 2017.

The Trump administration has forecast borrowing just over \$1 trillion in 2019 and more than \$1.1 trillion in 2020, due to the combination of greatly increased projected spending on the military—up 13 percent this coming year alone—and the slashing of federal taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

The greatly increased deficits will be cited by politicians of both capitalist parties and by their media apologists as making necessary severe cuts in domestic social spending, particularly in the so-called entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, where spending increases automatically because of universal eligibility.



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