

Trump's "national emergency" threat and the danger of presidential dictatorship

Patrick Martin
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In the wake of President Trump's nationally televised address Tuesday night, the political axis of the conflict over the border wall, which has led to the partial shutdown of the federal government, has clearly shifted. White House officials, including Trump himself, are openly threatening to declare a national emergency, under which Trump would assume quasi-dictatorial powers and use the US military to carry out his political objectives, including building the wall.

In any other country, such an assumption of unchecked power by the chief executive would be described as rule by decree or an outright *coup d'état*. But in the United States, the complacent media and the compliant "opposition" party make no warnings and offer no resistance. In their official response to Trump Tuesday night, neither House Speaker Nancy Pelosi nor Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer said anything about the declaration of a national emergency, although Trump began hinting at it last week.

Setting the tone for the American media as a whole was the *New York Times*, the semi-official voice of the Democratic Party, whose lead editorial Wednesday on the federal shutdown actually presents the possible declaration of a state of emergency as a positive good, a way for Trump to back down on the building of a border wall without offending his fascistic base, for whom the wall has become an all-or-nothing symbol of Trump's determination to wage war on immigrants and override political opposition.

The *Times* argued: "Mr. Trump has also been floating the possibility of stiff-arming Congress altogether. With his advisers increasingly anxious that Republican lawmakers are poised to abandon them on the shutdown, the president has raised the threat of declaring a state of national emergency, which he thinks would allow him to command the Pentagon to build his wall. Such a move would prompt a swift and furious legal challenge, if not a full-blown constitutional crisis, that could drag on indefinitely. It would, however, also give Mr. Trump a way to reach a wall-free funding deal with Congress without losing face, thus weaseling out of the shutdown box into which he has nailed himself."

This complacent perspective has since been echoed in the

news coverage of the major newspapers and television networks, which treated Trump's public comments throughout Wednesday about declaring a national emergency as though they were simply one more maneuver in a political drama in Washington, with no significant impact on constitutional norms or democratic rights in America.

Before a scheduled meeting at the White House with Pelosi, Schumer and congressional Republican leaders, Trump was asked under what circumstances he might declare a national emergency. He reiterated the view that he had the "absolute right" to declare one, adding that his "threshold" for doing so was failure to work out a deal with congressional Democrats to provide funding for the wall.

After Trump stormed out of the meeting, having failed to win assurances on the border wall, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "As a possible way out of the shutdown, White House officials are discussing a scenario in which the president could declare a national emergency to fund the border wall and agree to sign a spending bill without such a provision. While the declaration would likely be tied up in litigation, Mr. Trump would be able to tell supporters he did everything he could to build the wall, one of his top campaign pledges in 2016."

Again, like the *Times*, the *Journal* presents the declaration of a national emergency not as an attack on the Constitution, establishing an executive dictatorship, but as a political maneuver through which Trump could pull the wool over the eyes of his ultra-right supporters. In reality, it is the corporate media and the Democrats who are seeking to hoodwink the American people, concealing the growing threat of dictatorial action by the White House.

This underscores what the *World Socialist Web Site* has long pointed out, going back to the stolen presidential election of 2000: the complete absence within the US ruling elite and its two parties of any significant constituency for democratic rights.

Under the US Constitution, Article I, Congress has sole power to appropriate funds. The president has no

constitutional power to spend money without congressional authorization, and very limited authority to use money already appropriated by Congress for other purposes, and then only in genuine emergencies like Hurricane Katrina, for example, or the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in the 9/11 attacks.

No such emergency exists on the US-Mexico border, where the number of detentions has plunged from more than a million a year in the 2000s to less than 400,000 in 2017, and where the only increase in border crossings involves family groups of refugees, including women and children, fleeing violence and poverty in Central America. Trump has been president for two years and never saw fit to declare an emergency on the US-Mexico border, despite a Republican-controlled Congress repeatedly refusing to meet his demands to spend billions on a border wall.

It is clear from this record that the fundamental issue in the current crisis in Washington is not the wall, or even immigration policy as a whole, but rather the drive by the US ruling elite to establish a completely unconstrained executive power. The crisis over the border wall has been manufactured to provide the pretext for Trump carrying out a long-prepared assertion of virtually unlimited presidential authority.

What is unfolding in Washington is a breakdown in the constitutional principles that have been the basis of American government for more than two centuries. This is not merely the result of Trump's presidency, but has been foreshadowed in previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic, which waged wars without congressional authorization and conducted massive surveillance, preventive detentions and outright assassinations of American citizens in defiance of constitutional norms.

At the root of this erosion of American democracy is the deepening class chasm in the United States. This country is divided, irrevocably, between a tiny elite of multi-millionaires and billionaires at the top, who control virtually all wealth and power, and the vast majority of the population, the working class, who produce that wealth through their labor, but do not benefit from it.

The rise of the billionaire real estate swindler and casino con man Donald Trump to the presidency is one byproduct of this social polarization. The impotence of the Democrats is another: Charles Schumer, the senator from Wall Street, and Nancy Pelosi, the congresswoman with a \$100 million real estate fortune, speak for the same social interests as Trump.

Following Trump's speech Tuesday night, which went far beyond any previous Oval Office address in terms of sheer lying and fascist hysteria, Pelosi and Schumer made remarks that evaded all of the political issues and the

dangers to democratic rights. In the raging conflict in Washington, both sides have lost political legitimacy and popular support, and both are using reactionary and anti-democratic methods.

While Trump openly considers establishing authoritarian rule by the White House, the Democrats give voice to the complaints of the military-intelligence apparatus over Trump's proposed pullback in Syria and his shift from Russia to China as the main target of US politico-military aggression. In the midst of the federal shutdown, leading Democrats await the imminent delivery of the report of the Mueller investigation into bogus allegations of Russian intervention in the 2016 election, expecting the former FBI director to give them another weapon in their factional struggle against Trump.

A declaration of emergency rule would mean the exercise of dictatorial powers against the working class. It would inevitably be employed for the suppression of core democratic rights, including the right to protest and strike, in the name of "national security." The prospect of a state of emergency is being raised within the context of a government shutdown that has involved the furlough or suspension of wages for 800,000 federal workers and the denial of one of the most fundamental rights—the right to be paid for labor.

This is only a foretaste of what is to come. The Democrats are far more concerned about the growth of social opposition in the working class than they are about anything the Trump administration is doing. Hence the drive toward internet censorship and the promotion of the military and intelligence apparatus as the arbiters of political power.

Real opposition to the Trump administration must come from below, through an ever-wider movement of the working class. The initial stirrings of opposition among federal workers—sickouts and the first protests—must be escalated and broadened into a movement for a general strike against the Trump administration and big business.

Democracy in the United States cannot be preserved outside of the fight for socialism—that is, through the expropriation of the wealth of the corporate and financial elite and the establishment of democratic control over economic life.



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