

Trump at the Rubicon

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US President Donald Trump visited the southern border of the United States on Thursday, where he continued to peddle his lying claims that the country is in the jaws of a crisis caused by criminals and drugs flowing in from Mexico.

As he left for Texas, Trump reiterated his threats to end the ongoing government shutdown by declaring a national emergency to bypass Congress and appropriate funds to build a border wall.

“I have the absolute right to declare a national emergency,” Trump said. “Probably I will do it... I would almost say definitely. This is a national emergency.”

In threatening to override Congress with a “state of emergency,” Trump is making clear that he is prepared to use the presidency to effectively obliterate the separation of powers, marking a milestone in the destruction of American democracy.

This threat is the consummation of systematic efforts under the Bush and Obama administrations to expand the powers of the presidency to undermine bedrock principles of democratic rule and fundamental rights protected under the Constitution.

Following the stolen election of 2000, the Bush administration used the 9/11 terrorist attacks to rush through the passage of the Patriot Act and implement a series of unconstitutional policies, including indefinite detention, torture and warrantless domestic surveillance. The pseudo-legal rationale was that the president, as commander-in-chief of the military, has virtually unlimited powers.

The Obama administration used this precedent to claim the right to assassinate American citizens, including within the borders of the United States, without due process, and to impose martial law in Boston in 2013.

Trump, in his unvarnished criminality, is bringing this process to a culmination by using a “state of

emergency” to oppose Congress in a domestic political crisis.

Such an action would concentrate in his hands, and in those of his successors, a new mechanism for the exercise of unrestrained presidential power. In this fundamentally new political system, the vast resources that are regularly allocated by Congress to the military could be marshalled by the president to carry out actions not just internationally, but within the United States itself.

If there is anything that constitutes “high crimes and misdemeanors,” justifying the immediate initiation of impeachment procedures, it is such a threat to override Congress through executive fiat.

What is striking, however, is the extraordinarily restrained response, including outright support, from Trump’s critics in Washington and in the media.

The *New York Times*, which speaks for the Democratic Party and a substantial section of the financial elite, published an article Thursday calling the declaration of a national emergency “the only politically realistic way out of the shutdown crisis in the nation’s capital.”

While acknowledging that the move would “be an extraordinary violation of constitutional norms,” the newspapers all but endorsed the action: “Trump’s threatened move offers both sides a face-saving solution in the budget standoff between the president and congressional Democrats.”

Notably, it was Trump’s Republican allies who raised more serious concerns. Senator Marco Rubio, who opposed the action, said, “If today the national emergency is border security, tomorrow the national emergency might be climate change.”

It does not take a great deal of imagination to recognize that states of emergency will be invoked, one after another, to carry through the most draconian measures.

A move by the White House to declare an emergency would clear the way for Trump or his successors to bypass congressional and popular opposition and implement whatever policies the president wants—whether a massive escalation of military operations or sweeping attacks on the social and democratic rights of the population.

The conclusion must be drawn that powerful sections of the ruling elite view the granting of such powers to the president as a means of overcoming what has been called “political gridlock” in Congress.

A supposed “emergency” caused by the national debt and the supposed imminent threat of national bankruptcy could be invoked to slash Social Security and Medicare. Strikes by teachers, transportation workers or any other section of the working class could be crushed through the use of a “national emergency” to justify mass arrests and the banning of strikes.

Once Trump assumes such sweeping powers, there is little reason to believe that the state of emergency will ever end. One or another pretext will be found to continue and expand it. The precedent, once set, will be applied again and again.

A political Rubicon is being crossed.

The term “crossing the Rubicon” originates with the decision of Julius Caesar to violate Roman law by crossing into Italy with an army in 49 BC. That action set the stage for civil war, the collapse of the Roman republic and the establishment of empire—effectively an absolute dictatorship.

Trump’s threat to defy Congress through a state of emergency constitutes just such a historical turning point: one which, once undertaken, cannot be reversed.

The same drive to authoritarian methods of rule characterizes country after country around the world. As Trump declared his “absolute right” to declare a national emergency, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Egypt praising the rule of President al-Sisi, the military dictator who has killed hundreds of people and jailed thousands under a state of emergency imposed to suppress a popular revolution.

Trump’s threats come as fundamental democratic rights are under attack with the support of the entire US political establishment. At the instigation of the US intelligence agencies and with the full support of the Democratic Party, Google, Facebook and Twitter are carrying out mass censorship and domestic

surveillance.

In the background to these sweeping attacks on democracy lies the malignant growth of social inequality.

It is notable that every day since Trump threatened to resolve the crisis by means of a “state of emergency,” stock market prices have risen. There is within ruling circles an unstated understanding that the turn to dictatorial forms of rule will have one ultimate aim: the protection and expansion of the social interests of a financial oligarchy of which Trump is himself a representative.

The past year has seen growing expressions of social discontent that are continuing into 2019, with the opposition of government workers who are being either involuntarily furloughed or forced to work without pay as a result of Trump’s government shutdown. In their growing opposition, they join thousands of GM auto workers set to imminently lose their jobs and tens of thousands of teachers in Los Angeles preparing to strike in opposition to the dismantling of public education.

The defense of democratic rights is bound up with the expansion of the class struggle within the United States and internationally. Opposition to Trump will not come from within the corrupt and decadent political establishment, but from a mass movement by the working class against the entire capitalist system.



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