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Federal air traffic controller union members protest the partial U.S. federal government shutdown Jan. 10 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Pat Perriello

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A bank robber enters a bank in a large city. He takes hostages as the bank is surrounded by police officers and SWAT teams. The police department begins negotiations with the robber by phone. The release of hostages is demanded.

A slow process begins whereby some hostages are released, as the robber realizes the precariousness of his situation. First, we see the children come out. Then come the dangerously ill or handicapped. Perhaps we see the women released next alongside the elderly.

As the number of hostages is reduced, the discussion turns to the major issues remaining: Surrender, assurances and logistics for a safe getaway, safety of the remaining hostages.

Currently 800,000 American workers are being held hostage by their government. Millions more are deeply impacted by the shutdown. We can't even begin to illustrate the pain and suffering that is being experienced by our fellow citizens because of this shameful government failure.

Government shutdowns have almost become a routine way of conducting government business or legislating. Thus, working Americans are being held as hostages in political battles. This is unconscionable. Including the present one, modern history has recorded a total of 18 government shutdowns since 1976.

Two things need to happen. First, the government needs to reopen. Second, legislation needs to be passed to make it impossible for another shutdown of this type to ever occur again. Politicians can argue issues as much as they want, but not on the backs of American workers. No one: president, Republicans, Democrats, should be able to use this tool as leverage in a legislative argument. Enough is enough.

One possibility the president has been considering is declaring a national emergency. He seems to be backing away from that course of action as opposition builds to such an idea.

That brings us back to our bank robber. The way to reopen the government at this time is to release the hostages, one by one. Government agencies that are closed or

partially closed include Agriculture, Housing, National Park Service, FDA, IRS, NASA, Department of Commerce, Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security.

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The House of Representatives is passing individual bills for each of the government agencies to be reopened. It is time for the Senate to bring these individual bills up for a vote. They can establish priorities for the hostages that are being held. If airport security is at the top of the list, then start paying the TSA agents again. Maybe IRS agents would be next.

Eventually everyone would be back to work except for the critical Homeland Security agency. Either pass a continuing resolution so the politicians can fight over this issue to their hearts' content or resolve the issue and get everyone back to work.

The American people are surrounding the capitol and the White House. They are demanding to be put back to work. They will give free passage to politicians to continue their bickering for as long as they want. But first, stop the hostage taking. Free the hostages. End the government shutdown.

[Pat Perriello is an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University who retired from the Baltimore City Public Schools where he served as the coordinator of Guidance and Counseling Services.]