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Lessons to be learned from the government shutdown

Pat Perriello | Oct. 14, 2013 NCR Today

The government is still shut down, and the debt ceiling has not been officially raised. Yet there is movement that suggests a deal may be close at hand. It is not too soon to be thinking about lessons to be learned from this experience and steps that could be taken to prevent such crises from continuing to occur over and over.

The first important lesson to be learned from the government shutdown is that government is performing vital functions that Americans want, need and expect. Even Republicans have discovered that the federal government actually does a few good things. The House of Representatives has proposed and passed [1] several bills that would fund approximately one-third of the government that has been shut down.

Apparently Republicans have learned that government is a more important part of our lives and our economy than they may have originally thought. Each of us is involved with our government in some way. It is only when these services are threatened that we recognize just how significant a role they play.

The new NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll [2] actually shows that Americans expect the government to do more for people than it is currently doing. Fifty-two percent of poll respondents said they feel the government needs to do more to solve problems.

This poll goes on to show the damage that has been done to the Republican Party because of its role in keeping the government shut down. The lesson here seems to be that shutdowns do not represent a healthy political strategy. It was not effective in 1995, and it has failed once again. It is time to take this kind of brinksmanship off the table.

Another lesson to be learned is the degree of damage that can be done to individuals and families. A number of visible problems came to the fore, such as the shutdown of the World War II memorial and the fact that families of soldiers killed in action could not receive benefits they were entitled to. Yet the countless stories of families harmed and services not provided clearly demonstrate the important nature of the work of government. It provides a vital cog in the overall economic functioning of the country.

A few of these government functions deserve to be mentioned since we too frequently fail to remember them unless they impinge upon our consciousness as they have during this shutdown. The list includes national zoos, the Library of Congress, museums, national parks and monuments, the National Institutes of Health, veterans benefits and medical care, disaster relief, food safety inspections, air travel safety, Social Security, and Medicare programs.

There is also a lesson to be learned about the cry for smaller government. The desire may be legitimate and deserving of serious discussion, but it also requires honesty about how critical government has become to the quality of our lives. Maybe government has spread its wings too far, but if it is to be reined in, it better be done carefully with surgical precision rather than a sledgehammer. Government is trying to fulfill the promise of the preamble to the Constitution of creating a "more perfect union." Efforts to dismantle government need to avoid creating a less perfect union.

The American people have made clear that this is not any way to run a government. Extreme positions need to give way to cooperation and getting things done. The operation of government has been seen as shameful and a disgrace in this process. Rebuilding trust and discovering the ability to work together again are at the heart of what needs to be done at this time.

Finally, partisanship needs to take a back seat to the overall welfare of the country. Republicans need to stop allowing a small segment of their party to control the conversation. They need to make clear that the so-called Hastert Rule is no longer to be used. Government moves forward with a majority of all legislators, not just a majority of one party. The fact that the votes of 200 members of the House of Representatives have been discounted on every significant issue can no longer be acceptable. Every member of Congress needs to be able to cast a meaningful vote on issues as important as shutting down the government or refusing to raise the debt ceiling. The inarguable fact is, if Congress had been operating in this fashion earlier, none of these impasses would have occurred.

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