



Government Shutdown 2013 Ends: Hey, Washington — The Whole World Was Watching

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The deal that re-opened America's government and averted a national default should evoke little cheer, for the Washington spectacle of recent weeks has hurt America's image and influence around the world.

The impacts to date are serious enough. They include a Chinese call to "de-Americanize" the world's economy to lessen its dependence on the U.S. dollar and more threats from credit rating agencies of a U.S. debt downgrade that, were it to come, would rattle both the U.S. and global economies.

The impacts to come, however, could prove even worse. They will arise from global disbelief that the world's greatest power was willing to shut down a government to which the international community looks for guidance, and to threaten a first-ever default while its leaders engaged in an infantile game of political brinksmanship. That, in turn, will undermine U.S. efforts to maintain its leadership on the world stage.

Why, some nations will ask, should they follow the U.S. model of free-market capitalism when it seems to rest on an increasingly fragile political foundation? Why should other nations view U.S. democracy as a better political model than reliable Chinese authoritarianism? Why should foreign leaders and the foreign public continue to put the United States on an international pedestal when its leaders behave in ways that are more commonly associated with Third World banana republics?

The recent spectacle comes at a particularly perilous time for the United States on the world stage. With America in seeming retreat in the Middle East and elsewhere, Washington's shenanigans will provide further ammunition for America's adversaries in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and elsewhere to convince other nations that the days of American pre-eminence are coming to a close.

After all, consider what people around the world, be they in London or Jakarta, Cairo or Johannesburg, witnessed in recent weeks:

They watched a political system that was willing to accept the reality of a government shutdown and the possibility of a default. That is, they witnessed a political system whose leaders could not guarantee that the government over which they presided would perform the most elementary of tasks — to provide basic services to which Americans were entitled, and to pay its bills.

They witnessed a political system in which, more and more, dogmatic legislative minorities — such as the hard-core House minority that sought to delay, impede, or otherwise unravel "Obamacare" at any cost, no matter the consequences — are granted the power to thwart the will of clear majorities.

They witnessed a political stand-off with as much theater as substance, one that played out every morning, afternoon, and evening in mindless pro-con "debates" on cable networks. They saw endless replays of the same political sitcom, with a Republican and a Democratic lawmaker sitting across from one another, each playing the role of loyal party lieutenant, each mouthing the approved talking points of his or her side rather than engaging in any original, spontaneous, useful thinking.

Then, after they finished their verbal sparring and the microphones went dead — but while the cameras were still rolling — they smiled broadly and shook hands with one another, secure in the knowledge that they had played their parts well in the ongoing, and profoundly unserious, game at hand.

Perhaps most depressing of all, people around the world witnessed a U.S. political elite that seemed oblivious to the very global audience that was watching its every move with both fascination and horror — the very audience that will pass judgment on whether to follow America in the future or look elsewhere for guidance.

"People start to doubt American credit, even the American creed, including the market economy and American democracy," Sun Zhe, who directs Tsinghua University's Centre for U.S.-China Relations in Beijing, told the *Washington Post*, "and question whether the U.S. still has the capacity to manage the world economy."

Similar sentiments were voiced in Europe. The budget deal, Madrid's *El País* newspaper wrote, "only prolongs the time until the next match, has weakened America's international leadership and has given ammunition for those who opt for a multi-polar world in response to the imminent American decline."

Years ago, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) coined the term "defining deviancy down" to capture the tendency of Americans to accept the kind of deviant social behavior that was once beyond the pale.

These days, we have defined our *political* deviancy down, turning what was once beyond the pale into acceptable political behavior and tarnishing the image of American democracy at home and abroad.

It's all so amusing to those who play their roles in this theater of the absurd, but we'll all pay a price down the road.

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