

## **How the shutdown ends**

*di Robert Reich*

I don't have a crystal ball, but I have a good idea how this shutdown ends. Trump and Republicans will cave (he won't admit he's caving, of course, but he will cave).

Here's why: Air traffic controllers.

Like other federal workers, the controllers aren't being paid now (they'll get back-pay when the shutdown ends). But unlike most other federal workers, their workloads and stress loads have been soaring.

Recall the last big shutdown that started in late 2018 and went on for 35 days — a record. What ended it? Air traffic controllers.

In January 2019, several controllers at a facility near Washington, D.C., that handles air traffic for most of the region, called in sick.

As a result, flight delays along the East Coast began to stack up. The delays quickly cascaded to Atlanta and beyond.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association issued a statement saying essentially, “We told you so.”

“In the past few weeks, we have warned about what could happen as a result of the prolonged shutdown. Many controllers have reached the breaking point of exhaustion, stress, and worry caused by this shutdown. Each hour that goes by that the shutdown continues makes the situation worse.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi tweeted: “The #TrumpShutdown has already pushed hundreds of thousands of Americans to the breaking point. Now it's pushing our airspace to the breaking point too.”

Angry travelers began phoning their members of Congress. Private jets carrying CEOs and Wall Street mavens couldn't take off or land. The CEOs and mavens also began phoning.

Hours later, Trump announced that the government would reopen and employees would be given back pay. Trump didn't even get funding for his border wall — the issue that had sparked the shutdown.

This time it won't take 35 days.

We're approaching the busiest time of the year for air travel. Tens of millions of Americans expect to fly in the coming months.

Even before Wednesday's shutdown, the nation's approximately 14,000 air traffic controllers were under increasing stress — higher than in January 2019.

More crowded skies and worsening staffing shortages have forced many controllers to put in 60 hours a week on the job.

A hearing into the causes of the midair collision in Washington earlier this year that claimed 67 lives revealed a decline in aviation safety due to increasingly busy skies and overworked controllers.

On March 11, the National Transportation Safety Board released a preliminary report and urgent safety recommendations. The NTSB's chair was angry that the Federal Aviation Administration had not acted on data showing the number of near-miss alerts over the last decade.

Oh, and the pay of air-traffic controllers has stagnated — when they were getting paid. In the wake of the previous 35-day shutdown, the then-chair of the House Transportation Committee suggested a bill to allow the FAA to continue operating normally during a lapse in funding — which would continue the pay of air traffic controllers. Congress never enacted such legislation.

My prediction: This shutdown will end sooner than the last one. Air traffic controllers will ensure it does. Within the next few weeks, a few will call in sick. Then the flight delays will cascade.

At that point, pressure will suddenly mount on the White House and Republicans in Congress to end it.

Why on the White House and congressional Republicans and not on congressional Democrats? Because Republicans now control the government — the presidency, both chambers of Congress, and, effectively, the Supreme Court. They *own* it.

They and Trump will be blamed for the shutdown, and they'll have to get the nation out of it — even at the cost of giving in to congressional Democrats.