

Opinion

Trump and the GOP have boxed themselves into a corner

A government shutdown deadline looms, but Democrats don't have any reason to play nice with House Speaker Mike Johnson and his caucus.

By Michael A. Cohen, MSNBC Columnist

"Beware the Ides of March."

Those words were true for Julius Caesar more than 2,000 years ago, and while the outcome today is less dire, they are particularly relevant for President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans today.

The Ides of March falls on March 15, and barring a congressional deal, it's also the day a partial government shutdown could begin. Yet, Republicans are seemingly doing everything they can to ensure that happens.

In December, Congress narrowly averted a shutdown by passing a stopgap funding measure that kept the government open until March 14. That deal was achieved with overwhelming bipartisan support, but there's little reason to believe the same thing will happen again next month.

For starters, the potential of a government shutdown is the only leverage Democrats have to stop Trump and Elon Musk's assault on the federal government. While Democrats might have been inclined to work with Republicans a few weeks ago, things have changed.

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One of Trump's first moves as president was an attempt to freeze federal spending that had been authorized and appropriated by Congress. This was illegal and quickly blocked by a federal judge. Soon after, Musk and his DOGE workers began traversing the federal bureaucracy, canceling spending and trying (illegally) to scrap federal agencies, most dramatically the U.S. Agency for International Development. All this is happening without congressional approval and runs contrary to Congress' power of the purse, a privilege enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

Why should Democrats support another funding measure if they can't be sure Trump will spend the money they give to the executive branch?

Moreover, Trump and Musk have lit a fire under rank-and-file Democrats. In the two months since Kamala Harris' loss, the spirit of Democratic resistance that defined Trump's first term in office was in short supply.

In January, Senate Democrats helped break a filibuster over a harsh immigration measure. The bill quickly passed shortly after Trump's inauguration, giving Trump an early political victory — and on his signature issue. A CBS/YouGov poll in January found that a majority of Democrats (54%-46%) preferred that congressional Democrats "try to find common ground with Trump" rather than "oppose Trump as much as possible."

That was then.

The same question was asked this week, and now 65% of Democrats want their party leaders to oppose Trump rather than work with him. That's a 38-point shift from cooperation to conflict in just a month.

Perhaps this shift was inevitable, but Trump's actions have unquestionably weakened the incentives for Democrats to cooperate with Republicans.

Theoretically, none of this should matter. Republicans control the White House and both houses of Congress. They should be able to pass a bill to fund the government without Democratic help.

Trump and Musk are running roughshod over Congress' institutional power.


But with an extraordinarily narrow two-seat majority in the House — and a track record of GOP iconoclasm regarding government funding measures — there's a real question as to whether House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., can cobble together enough Republican votes. Though with Trump in the White House, it might be easier for Johnson to herd political cats. If Johnson can get something through the House with only GOP support, whatever passes is likely to be so extreme that it will be dead on arrival in the Senate, where Democrats can use the 60-vote filibuster to block it.

There's genuine political danger in such a move, because it'll be easier for Republicans to blame Democrats for the resulting government shutdown. But at this point, what choice do Democrats have?

Trump and Musk are running roughshod over Congress' institutional power. Every day, it seems, the Trump administration breaks a law or shatters a long-standing democratic norm — and with zero pushback from congressional Republicans. Without the federal judiciary to hold them in check, they'd almost certainly be getting away with it. But federal judges can hold the line for only so long, and the further cases go up the judicial chain of command, the likelier it is that Trump's anti-democratic efforts will start getting upheld.

At this point, the potential for a government shutdown is pretty much the only arrow in the Democratic quiver to stop the damage that Trump and Musk have wrought in just three weeks.

Moreover, Trump's extremism has given Democrats little choice. If Republicans need Democratic votes to keep the government open, how could Democrats explain to their supporters giving them away without getting a king's ransom in return — especially after the White House's blithe dismissal of congressional prerogatives?

Republicans have given Democrats every reason to hold the line in March. The question now is whether congressional Democrats are up to the task. 

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