

## Deterrence on Layaway: A Shutdown's Quiet Assault on American Security

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A nation does not need to lose a battle to look weak. Sometimes it only needs to miss a paycheck.

Washington often treats budget shutdowns as partisan spectacle, but America's adversaries see something far more useful: a live demonstration of self-inflicted fragility. When the federal government allows frontline security personnel to work unpaid it interrupts critical security and health functions and publicly advertises institutional dysfunction. It weakens more than morale, it weakens deterrence. That is the real national security cost of a prolonged budget lapse.

Deterrence rests on more than missiles, submarines, and strategic doctrine. It also depends on the visible reliability of state capacity. Allies and adversaries alike measure whether the U.S. can sustain operations under pressure, protect its population, and maintain continuity during disruption. A shutdown tells them the opposite. It signals that even absent enemy action; the U.S. is willing to degrade its own readiness through political dysfunction. [Even short lapses in appropriations](#) disrupt defense planning, contract execution, and the broader machinery that underwrites operational readiness.

The most immediate damage appears in aviation security. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is not simply a travel inconvenience buffer. It is part of the nation's daily homeland defense posture. Every checkpoint, screening lane, and visible officer contributes to deterrence by signaling that attacks or probes are likely to be detected and disrupted. That visible consistency matters because deterrence at the tactical level often begins with routine friction imposed on hostile actors.

Friction weakens when the workforce begins to crack. [More than 460 TSA officers](#) have already quit during the current standoff, while absentee rates have climbed to 10 to 11 percent nationally. [Repeated funding disruptions](#) are damaging morale, retention, and long-term staffing stability across the Department of Homeland Security. That is not merely a workforce problem. It is a deterrence problem.

[Fatigue](#) measurably degrades visual search performance, which is directly relevant to screening-intensive environments such as aviation security. TSA screening is not just procedural. It is cognitive work performed under repetitive, high-stakes conditions. When officers are exhausted, financially strained, or distracted by uncertainty, the quality of that work can decline even if the checkpoint remains technically operational.

Equally important, deterrence at the checkpoint depends not only on actual performance but on what potential attackers believe about the system. Airport security screening is [perceived as a stronger deterrent](#) when it appears visible, universal, and credible. That matters because

deterrence is partly psychological. A security system that appears chaotic, understaffed, and politically neglected may still function, but it no longer projects the same confidence.

This erosion has consequences beyond the checkpoint itself. Long lines spilling into terminal lobbies and pre-screening corridors create soft-target conditions that sophisticated attackers have historically exploited overseas. [U.S. airports have warned](#) Congress that the current operational strain is serious, worsening, and potentially long-lasting. In practical terms, a shutdown does not just reduce security throughput. It redistributes risk into large, dense, unsecured public spaces and creates opportunity.

More troubling still is that recurring shutdowns create patterns. Adversaries watch for patterns. If hostile actors can reliably anticipate periods when U.S. aviation security is underpaid, understaffed, and politically distracted, then Washington has unintentionally handed them a calendar of vulnerability. Strategic competitors, transnational terrorist networks, and opportunistic lone actors all benefit when a defender repeatedly broadcasts when its systems are under stress.

The same logic applies beyond airports. Health security is often treated separately from deterrence, but that is a categorical error. In an era defined by pandemics, synthetic biology, fragile supply chains, and the weaponization of disruption, public health capacity is national security capacity. A country that cannot sustain surveillance, biodefense coordination, and health system continuity under fiscal pressure is not demonstrating resilience. It demonstrates exploitable weaknesses.

That is precisely why the shutdown's impact on the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should concern strategists as much as its effect on TSA. HHS's own [FY 2026 contingency staffing plan](#) states that 23,128 employees, roughly 31 percent of its workforce, would be furloughed during a lapse in appropriations. The plan further notes that numerous non-expected functions would be paused or curtailed, including elements of grant oversight, data collection, validation, analysis, and portions of public communication. That may sound bureaucratic, but it is not.

Health system functions form the connective tissue of national preparedness. Surveillance, analytics, research oversight, and continuity of clinical and administrative operations are what allow the U.S. to detect biological threats early, understand cascading risks, and sustain resilience under stress. [Public health emergency management](#) is foundational to biodefense capacity, particularly in areas such as interagency coordination, situational awareness, testing, surveillance, and surge resilience. When those systems are interrupted, the country does not simply lose paperwork, it loses awareness, agility, and recovery capacity.

This point is reinforced by broader preparedness of scholarship. [Public health emergency preparedness](#) in the U.S. has long suffered from uneven and declining support, leaving critical state and local response systems more vulnerable to disruption. In deterrence terms, disruptions lower the cost for an adversary seeking to exploit a biological event, amplify public panic, or overload institutional response capacity.

System disruption and deterrence is where budget shutdowns become strategically self-defeating. The U.S. invests heavily in advanced military capability, but periodically undermining the civilian systems that make that capability credible is defeatist. No adversary needs to destroy American resilience if Washington is willing to suspend parts of it on its own. That contradiction sends a damaging signal to both allies and competitors.

For adversaries such as China and Russia, recurring shutdowns offer a useful strategic readout. They reveal domestic political brittleness, weak continuity discipline, and a governing system vulnerable to self-imposed paralysis. That does not automatically invite direct confrontation, but it does encourage gray-zone opportunism. Cyber probing, disinformation, infrastructure stress campaigns, and strategic influence operations all become more attractive when the target appears distracted and internally divided. [Shutdowns are self-inflicted wounds](#). In a deterrence environment, self-inflicted wounds are still wounds.

For U.S. allies, the signal is quieter but equally corrosive. Extended deterrence relies not only on military capability but also in the confidence of American competence and continuity. Partners want to know that the U.S. can manage crises at home while sustaining commitments abroad. A federal government that struggles to keep airport screening and health preparedness stable during a budget fight risk is undermining that confidence at exactly the wrong moment.

For these reasons, shutdowns should no longer be treated as routine political leverage when they affect core homeland security and resilience institutions. Congress should establish automatic continuing resolution mechanisms for agencies and functions that are central to deterrence. This includes transportation security, emergency preparedness, biodefense, and public health surveillance. Political disagreement is unavoidable; however, institutional self-sabotage is not.

Deterrence is often discussed in the language of force posture, strategic messaging, and escalation dominance. This all matters. Yet, deterrence lives in the ordinary machinery of a functioning state: an airport screening lane that stays open, a health surveillance system that keeps collecting data, and a workforce that knows the government will not ask it to defend the nation for free. When that machinery stalls, deterrence does not collapse overnight. It thins. It flickers. It becomes easier to stress. That is the danger of a shutdown. It does not merely interrupt government. It advertises vulnerability.

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