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Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

Impact of the Federal Government's Near-Shutdown

Did the near-shutdown of the government in April affect you or your unit? If so, how? Given all the competing demands you have, are you doing anything now to prepare for a potential recurrence? This may not be the

most exciting conversation, but we think it is important. If you were affected by the threat of the shutdown or you have any good ideas on this topic, please join the conversation.

Erik Jorgensen

A/3-7 FA, 3 BCT, 25 ID

As commander of an artillery battery that was RIPing [conducting a relief in place] into RC-East [Afghanistan], the near-shutdown was a distraction that couldn't have come at a worse time. The average level of Soldier anxiety that accompanies any deployment was ratcheted twofold by the prospect of not getting paid and the hardship that would put on their families. This disruption interfered with Soldiers being able to focus on learning what they needed to from their outgoing counterparts, although ultimately our RIP was successful.

Now flash forward to the home front, with droves of agitated families who weren't sure if a paycheck was coming on the 15th, even though their loved ones were in harm's way. The possibility of the commissary closing was another

serious blow, as prices for groceries in Hawaii are almost twice as expensive off post as on. My wife, the FRG [family readiness group] leader, fielded countless phone calls and emails from concerned spouses in the battery asking what could be done in regard to the pay freeze. Unfortunately she couldn't offer many solutions.

I think two things came out of this close call. A positive outcome was that Soldiers took an honest look at their savings (or lack thereof) and realized that they might need to save funds for a rainy day. SDP [Savings Deposit Program] enrollments are very high in our unit, which I attribute to the averted shutdown. I think the negative thing I saw come out of the near-shutdown was that Soldiers lost a little faith in their elected leaders (i.e., Congress) for not possessing the leadership and loyalty necessary to ensure that something as basic as paying the people who were fighting a war (that they voted to start) was accomplished.

Jeffrey Montgomery

A & HHC/1-112 AR, TXARNG

In the Guard, it absolutely affected us. We had a MUTA-5 drill [training Friday evening through Sunday] scheduled, and the TAG [state-level command] made the decision to cancel all of the drills for the weekend. This put a severe crimp in our preparation for annual training, shut down ranges for weapons qualification, and killed some field-training classes on combat-lifesaving skills and drivers training. These events are difficult to reschedule because of ranges, space and ammo coordination. Also, we had Soldiers on advanced party [advon] whom we had to send home. All in all, the near-shutdown had a pretty substantial impact at all levels.

The biggest lessons learned were communication and

For CPT Erik Jorgensen, the near-shutdown of the government in April could not have come at a worse time. The battery he commands had just deployed to Afghanistan, and anxiety among soldiers and families was already high.



contingency planning. When it first looked possible to have the shutdown, we should have started thinking at all command levels about effects and reactions, and planning on the “what if.” The full-time unit staff started discussions a week prior, but the M-day command levels were not involved until Thursday morning [the day prior to the expected shutdown]. Significant running around was required to inform troops that drill was canceled, to return the advon guys, etc. We didn’t want to “cry wolf” and get people spun up for nothing, but in this case it would have been better.

Jamie Collier
312th EN Co.

I am the commander of a Reserve unit in Year One of re-set, fresh from a deployment to Iraq. We have a new operations NCO, new commander and new first sergeant, so I was planning to hold a leaders’ retreat with all FTUS [full-time unit support] personnel, platoon sergeants, and my one lieutenant and first sergeant. The 1SG and I spent more than 80 hours over one-and-a-half months (“God and Country time,” as usual) planning and getting permissions to make this extra training drill for leaders possible. It was canceled three days before its execution date, due to the impending shutdown. In addition, the affected battle assembly was our battalion’s individual weapons qualification, so all junior NCOs now have to wait until September for a chance to shoot for points for their promotion packets.

Mary Luciani Brownlee
F/1-18 IN, 2 HBCT, 1 ID

The near-shutdown did not affect my unit at large. We are deployed, so any grumblings of not coming to work would have been for nothing anyway.

We had already been enrolling Soldiers in financial-readiness classes throughout the duration of my command. As soon as the shutdown buzz started, we took the opportunity—after a resiliency class, with the company all together—to address people’s concerns as a group.

I am also lucky to have a 1SG who has been in the Army long enough that he was part of the shutdown of the 1990s, and he could explain how it ended up not being such a big deal in the grand scheme of things. Heck, I remember as a kid my dad not getting paid for some time because he was a state employee and there was a budget issue. So our Soldiers were able to hear a variety of perspectives as well as “cross talk” among themselves. It was just another example of the importance of building faith in one’s leadership to enable the leadership to say, “Don’t worry, we will always take care of you. We will figure things out as they come.”

CPT Mary Luciani Brownlee, accepting the guidon for F/1-18 IN, 2HBCT, 1 ID from LTC John Vermeech, says that her first sergeant, who had already experienced a previous government shutdown, helped allay her soldiers’ worries.

It’s also important to communicate to your FRG that you are tracking the issue, have talked with the troops, and—along with other leaders all the way on up the chain—are there to help. Soothe any panic in the families, and the panic in the Soldiers usually fades away, too.

We just knew we would get through anything together, and if need be, I’d be signing lots of AER [Army Emergency Relief] requests, which was unnecessary.

Tom Handy
C/303 MI BN

The near-shutdown forced my higher headquarters to limit the hours that their civilians work (i.e., overtime). G-2 [division intelligence] civilians provide intelligence updates to my unit once or twice a week, sometimes on Saturdays. We were told about the time of the potential shutdown to limit the intel updates on the weekend hours, if possible, since G-2 didn’t want to have overtime as a normal occurrence.

As a top-heavy, officer-and-NCO shop, we could easily do the briefings. But we don’t have the time to do research on countries and the threat since we have other responsibilities; our daily mission includes training, TDYs [temporary duties] and normal S-2 [intelligence] stuff. For the civilians performing the threat briefs, their primary mission is to prepare the briefs for my unit and their HQs. I’m still trying to find a work-around for this as this story continues.

Josh Thompson
E/232nd MED BN

The “almost” shutdown had minimal impact on my unit, but had the government actually shut down, the impact would have been huge. I’m a 68W AIT [Combat Medic Advanced Individual Training] company commander, and the vast majority of our medical certification training is conducted by GS [government service civilian] employees who are paramedics. Had the shutdown occurred, 80 percent of our instructional staff would have been no-shows, and we would have been doing a lot of warrior task and battle drill training as cadre to keep the Soldier medics gainfully employed during the shutdown.

I had a “come to Jesus” session with my platoon ser-





CPT Josh Thompson, center, with Afghan soldiers he was advising as part of a military transition team, feels that it is a commander's "responsibility to ensure that ... soldiers and NCOs are taking the necessary steps to prepare themselves and their own families" for unforeseen financial crises.

geants about understanding the big picture and planning for the future, due in large part to the "almost" shutdown. Not getting paid for a few weeks is a drop in the bucket compared to what's coming our way. Many Soldiers did not understand that the Department of Defense receives more than half of our country's discretionary spending. I tried to help them understand that budget cuts are coming and when the cuts come, they WILL be deep.

Just like we teach in FM 7-0 [*Training Units and Developing Leaders for Full Spectrum Operations*] about planning for the long haul and focusing our training on the desired end state, I think it's very important that we as leaders help our Soldiers and NCOs by ensuring that they are planning properly at home for their families. That goes beyond telling them that they need an emergency fund for when the Army doesn't pay them; we all need to have a plan for when the Army doesn't need us anymore. Many of us take this job for granted.

Hopefully you have prepared yourself and your family for what is to come. Assuming you have, I feel it is our responsibility to ensure that our Soldiers and NCOs are taking the necessary steps to prepare themselves and their own families.

Joe Grigg

183rd Maintenance Co.

I am writing this from a National Guard standpoint. There are 54 states and territories, and each one staffs its personnel requirements differently. However, all of them use federal technicians (dual-status civil-service employees) to some degree. The technician has two jobs—one a "full-time" job during the week and another "part-time" job that is one weekend a month and two weeks a year. The other category of staff is AGR [Active Guard Reserve], which has the same benefits and responsibilities as an active duty Soldier.

The plan during the shutdown was for the technicians to stay at home (unpaid vacation) and the AGRs to come into work in an unpaid status. My state was ready to allow the technicians to apply for partial unemployment, so there would have been a little relief there for those living paycheck to paycheck. What was big for my state was that the entire full-time vehicle and aircraft maintenance staffs are technicians, and all work would have stopped—no services, no

unscheduled maintenance and no work on any deadlines pacing items. Ouch! Everyone can imagine the potential impact on readiness that a shutdown would have meant. There was authorization for "essential" technicians to keep working (i.e., pay branch, ops, etc.), but it did not include maintenance. I was able to obtain only an exception for clerks to run AMSS [Army Materiel Status System] and receive incoming supplies. Other states have AGRs in their maintenance staff who can be utilized on work orders for pacing items.

Lessons learned from the potential shutdown? My full-time force should not be purely technicians. I will be fighting an uphill battle in our headquarters to try and change half of our slots to AGR to address the above weakness.

Roy Ramey

HHT/1-150 ARS, WVARNG

The government's "almost" shutdown did have an impact on our operations, as my unit had a field-training exercise [FTX] during the week and weekend of concern. We had support resources scheduled that were canceled after we were in the field, leaving us in a bad position to find alternate support, only to have the resources restored at the last minute.

We knew the budget impasse was a pending issue. We knew the deadline ahead of time. The lesson learned is that, as in any other operation, we have to have a trigger point to cancel or change a mission based on certain criteria rather than waiting until we are committed to find out that the budget did not pass and then be stuck without support. In MDMP [military decision-making process], this is called a decision point to conduct a branch or sequel. The trigger might be that if the budget has not been passed at least one week prior to the beginning of training, cancel the training.

We also have to evaluate if the event is essential and necessary. Most training events are not essential to national security and cancellation or rescheduling could be justified, which would cause further difficulties but would be better than running the risk we accepted of being on an FTX without necessary support.

John Schuster

3 ESC

My unit didn't seem to have any real consequences other than that work really stopped and morale dropped to the bottom until the shutdown was resolved. As the deadline loomed, the personnel of the unit focused solely on this issue, and everything else fell to the wayside.

QueAndra Campbell

G/1-41 FA, 1 HBCT, 3 ID

The "almost" shutdown had a drastic effect on my unit. I had a lot of Soldiers ask about taking money out of their Thrift Savings Plan, taking AER loans, etc. This opened my



In CPT John Schuster's unit, the near-shutdown created a major distraction from the unit's ongoing mission. "Work really stopped," he says, "and morale dropped to the bottom" until the threat of a shutdown was resolved.

eyes to quite a few things: 1) Soldiers should not be that greatly affected by a half-month's pay, especially when they have just returned from a deployment. 2) Obviously, we need to have a financial-management class. 3) Soldiers need to look into programs such as adding insurance to their house, car and/or credit-card policies in case they "lose" their jobs. There is a lot of money-management information that we need to put out to all Soldiers; education is the key.

I also had a few Soldiers grumble about not showing up. I talked with them about what it meant when they had raised their hands and made an oath. Some Soldiers needed to be reminded that the government has been with them through the good and bad on the first and 15th of every month, so we should repay that loyalty.

Daniel Raymond

B/1-40 CAV, 4 BDE, 25 ID

The overall impact was positive. It forced those Soldiers who live paycheck to paycheck to figure out a solution, and if none existed, to develop a course of action to prevent an emergency in the future. I think the most profound impact is that it allowed leaders the time they needed to focus on this dilemma. I now know which Soldiers in my troop I need to keep an eye on and add to my high-risk Soldier matrix.

Laura Wang

Co. A, Walter Reed Army Medical Center Brigade

Excellent discussion. Money/G-8 is like commo/G-6: No one notices it until it doesn't work.

Because I am the budget officer for the Walter Reed Army Garrison, the threat of a shutdown was huge. My unit's mission boils down to a base-operations contract that keeps our post running smoothly—hot water in warrior lodging, steady stream of electricity to the hospital, shuttle

buses around campus for patients, etc. At the time, the continuing resolution limited the amount of money (less than 5 percent of its total) that we were allotted to put on the contract. So if there was a shutdown, we risked not having enough money on the contract to perform emergency services during the shutdown—bad juju for a place that has so many wounded warriors and their families.

From an operations standpoint, our garrison commander was responsible for reporting to the senior commander (a major general) on our plan of action in the event of a shutdown. To prep him, we as a garrison staff briefed him on each section's risks, constraints, assumptions, RFIs [requests for information], specified and implied tasks, and recommended excepted personnel. We didn't have to execute on Plan B, but we had a plan of action so that the impact on the mission would be minimal.

From a leadership perspective, I sympathize with all the commanders out there who not only had to keep the mission going but also had to calm panicked Soldiers and their families. What a test of calm leadership! However, I share in the frustration that others expressed in that there are way too many Soldiers and families out there who are living paycheck to paycheck (through overextension, bad planning or just bad luck). The upcoming cuts in defense spending could make this a high-visibility leadership issue.

Just as our tactical decisions in war can have strategic consequences, our government's strategic decisions in Washington, D.C., can affect our Soldiers and families and our day-to-day service to them. It's good to maintain situational awareness and to discuss ideas and challenges among ourselves. If you are a currently commissioned past, present, or future company-level commander who isn't already in the conversation, log on to <http://CC.army.mil> and connect with your fellow professionals.

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...becoming more effective.



Art by Jody Harmon

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