

# Scenes From The Government Shutdown (Rockhound Edition)



Washington, we all know is in lock-down – or lock-out, as is more accurate for the 800,000+ federal workers deemed “non-essential” (ouch!) now that the U.S. Government has entered Fiscal Year 2014 without a budget.

So what was it like, our grandchildren will ask. Where were you during the Shutdown?

For those of us who remember the Great Shutdown of 1995-96 – here in Washington we refer to these things the way other people reminisce about major blizzards or hurricanes – the major difference is that Shutdown 2013 takes place in our thoroughly wired world. Emails to officials draw an auto-response reciting the Shutdown catechism; phone calls go straight to voicemail. Even the ability to end-run the lock-out by meeting in a local coffee shop or lunch spot is fraught with danger – what if the federal worker’s government-issued cellphone shows he or she was taking work calls to coordinate a clandestine visit? Can you even respond to an email saying you can’t respond to emails – or is that considered to be an official act?

In 1995, enforcing the Shutdown was nearly impossible. Federal workers found ways to meet with private-sector representatives, lobbyists and the like. Washington’s wheels rolled on. Not today. The electronic leash is drawn far tighter.

That doesn't mean the Shutdown isn't being transformed into one more Washington exercise in who has more pull. Washington being a sub-culture where small differences are magnified into measures of self-worth – someone actually asked me the other day what my parking space number was when I worked at the White House – yesterday on Capitol Hill, the after-work spots on Pennsylvania Avenue felt more like August than full-swing Fall, but you could still hear lobbyists on their phones, speaking over-loud to show that their federal meeting would still take place – even if all of yours are cancelled. That's clout – in the Big Endian/Little Endian world of Washington where small matters... matter.

For rockhounds – us folks who dwell in the natural resource world – we woke to find big chunks of the U.S. Geological Service off-duty, deemed “non-essential.” No surprise there, in a sphere where permitting a mine takes 7 to 10 years on average, what difference could a day – or several – make? Still, I consider USGS one of a small number of federal agencies that are truly essential – or at least they would be, if we had a strategic resource policy.

But I digress

In other ways, the Shutdown seemed to be planned with extreme prejudice for the mining world. One western state junior was told to still its drills and demobilize the drill team – expensive steps to take – because the U.S. Forest Service official responsible to oversee drilling was among the non-essentials. If something went amiss, who from the federal government would be there to take note? Call it private-sector collateral damage.

Yet the logic seems faulty, or at least inconsistent. By this same logic, the NYSE and other exchanges ought to shut down – there being no SEC overseers to police them. Grocery stores too, as USDA food safety inspectors were told to stay home.

Then there are the only-in-Washington vignettes. The Panda-Cam at the national zoo was turned off, prompting one Shanghai'ed mining official to note that, given how little the pandas move, they could have substituted a still-photo on the site and waited to see how long it would be before anyone noticed.

And then there was the Battle of the World War II Memorial, where someone had ordered this open-access memorial "shut down" with metal barricades around its circumference. A group of 80 and 90-year old vets, up by bus from Mississippi – some for their first look at the memorial to their war – were not deterred. With some help from their hometown Congressman, they pushed past the barriers, walked and wheel-chaired in.

Just like old times, they took their objective.

Said one 80-something member of the Greatest Generation: "We did our job. Washington has to settle down, and do its job."

Maybe there's still hope for American Democracy after all.