Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the graduate center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Welcome to a special edition of The Thought Project. The US government shut down on December 22, 2018 because President Trump has refused to sign a congressional continuing resolution that would keep the government open and running. At the time of this recording, the government remains shut down. To help us understand what's at stake, and how the Congress can get the government reopened, professor and political scientist Charles Tien, of Hunter College and the Graduate Center, returns to The Thought Project to share his analysis and thoughts. Welcome back to The Thought Project, Professor Tien.

Thank you for having me.

Last night, President Trump, for his first address to the nation from the Oval Office, spoke about the government shutdown and the humanitarian crisis on the southern border. He called it a humanitarian crisis, and many of his critics would argue he in fact has created a humanitarian crisis, but now the US Congress is really in a crisis. They do have ... They're likely to have the votes, but thus far, the majority leader in the Senate refuses to move a continuing resolution. What is the way out of this situation?

I think President Trump still would prefer a negotiated settlement, so that means both sides giving in a little bit, and that means the Democrats may be coming up higher than the 1.6 billion, and Trump not asking or settling for less than the 5.7 billion that he's been asking for. That way both sides can declare victory. There can be a compromise, and we can move on.

So you think that the speech last night was part of an effort to persuade Congress?

Yes, so presidents can persuade members of Congress two ways, right? One way is through private negotiations. Staying private is what some political scientists call it. That's dealing with members of Congress individually or in small groups, having them to the White House. That doesn't seem to have worked in, or been working for President Trump, so a second strategy for convincing members of Congress is by going public, and so by going public, you essentially speak to their constituents, try to get their constituents to then pressure members of Congress to support what the president wants. Not so sure that Trump, though, was effective in doing that. Don't think he changed a lot of minds, and it was a short address. He wasn't, I don't think, at is best in that setting, and so far, I think, we're essentially where we were a day ago, or before the address.

It seems that he's in a weaker position today. However, it is probable that nor the House or the Senate have the votes to do a veto override.
Charles Tien: That’s right, so you need two thirds in both chambers to override a veto, so let’s say the Senate, and Mitch McConnell does put the House passed continuing resolution onto the Senate floor, and it passes, and Trump vetoes that, there doesn’t seem to be, enough Republicans in both chambers to override a veto. Therefore what you need some type of negotiated settlement, maybe passing piecemeal continuing resolutions, for departments and agencies that aren’t directly involved in the wall controversy, would be a way to go, and then you just leave funding for Department of Homeland Security to be the last thing to be negotiated.

Tanya Domi: Given all of that, he ... The government, Mr. Trump specifically, threatened during negotiations that broke off last week, that he would keep the government shut for months, if not years, one and two. He admitted during a presser with journalists that he was reviewing his emergency powers. Both of these scenarios seem to be really dire, with terrible consequences, quite frankly, for the Republican Party, don’t you think?

Charles Tien: Yes, absolutely. The longer the government stays shut down, I think, the more Republicans he's going to start losing. If it were weeks, months, or even years, I don't think it gets to that stage because by then you would have enough votes, I think, to override any type of veto. Ten it's just Congress, right, negotiating amongst themselves and passing a continuing resolution, so we're going to, I think, see some movement within the next week or so. Now the-

Tanya Domi: Yu think it will become the longest government shutdown in history, then. It'll continue through the weekend?

Charles Tien: I think so, so we’re at Wednesday. Today, even if they pass the bill tomorrow, I think it would need another couple of days, for the government to start reopening. If you were to call a national emergency, I think Democrats have then threatened to take him to court, and so that would be tied up probably for weeks.

Tanya Domi: If not months, right?

Charles Tien: Right, and it's interesting. I-

Tanya Domi: He would probably lose based upon jurisprudence, historical jurisprudence.

Charles Tien: I think so. I think so. Even his own State Department write reports have not shown that there is an emergency at the border. Right, and media has been saying there haven’t been, right, the hundreds of terrorists or terrorist suspects coming over the southern border.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. NBC reported six. Six terrorists were identified coming through legal port of entries. In fact, the data shows that the numbers of people coming into the country have really, really been diminished in the last decade. Eight to 10 years,
numbers are way down. Indeed, a lot of Mexicans returned to Mexico, because the economy did improve in Mexico, and two, didn't want to be here listening to this guy talk about how terrible they were.

Charles Tien: I don't think we're at the point now where we're actually talking about, right, a wall or a real wall, right. We're talking about what the wall symbolizes, and for Trump it symbolizes a victory, and for Democrats, right, it symbolizes everything that they don't like about Trump, and what the Trump administration has done for the last two years. I don't think facts really matter all that much at this point. It's just finding a way out where everybody can go back to their base, I think, and say that they got ...

Tanya Domi: They got something.

Charles Tien: ...Something.

Tanya Domi: They got something. I think, Leon Panetta probably said it best. He's written an op-ed about going through the 1996 shutdown with Bill Clinton, and he said, he wrote that people never works as a consequence of a government shutdown. Many of the people hurt are actually in Trump's base.

Charles Tien: Sure. I think the attention during shutdowns is on the federal employees, right? The furloughed federal employees, or those who are working for no pay, and the challenges they face without their paychecks, whether to pay for prescription drugs or groceries, right. Missing mortgage payments. Those are real, real consequences for real, real people, and these shutdowns hurt real Americans, and the longer it goes, the more stories there will be about, right, how real a Americans are being hurt. That doesn't help Trump. For that matter, I think it doesn't help either party I think trusts simply erodes in our federal institutions.

Tanya Domi: It's corrosive. It's corrosive. Right.

Charles Tien: Yup.

Tanya Domi: I want to thank you, Professor Tien, for coming in today for this special edition of The Thought Project on the government shut down. It looks like we're going to hit the historical high number this weekend, that this will be the longest in history, but on behalf of all of us, we hope it will end soon.

Charles Tien: Thanks for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Charles Tien of Hunter College and the Graduate Center CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.