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Bend a little on the wall: Editorial

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Who will blink first on the wall and the government shutdown?

President Trump? House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer? Or Republican legislators growing increasingly queasy about how the shutdown and Trump's insistence that spending billions on the wall is the best way to make the border with Mexico secure?

Neither Trump nor the Democratic leaders in Congress have given any indication they are about to bend. If anything, Trump's nine-minute TV address to the nation Tuesday night seems to have hardened positions. Trump stormed out of a negotiating session on the wall Wednesday after Pelosi said she would not fund it.

If a compromise can't be reached, Trump's only face-saving option may be to invoke "national security" to get the funding needed to extend the wall. That would allow him to end the shutdown, although the move would likely lose court challenges. For Trump, being able to say he did everything possible to keep his signature campaign promise to build a big, beautiful wall stretching from sea to sea might be enough. Not so for Republicans in Congress faced with constituents who believe that border security is important but spending billions on a wall is a waste of money. Which it decidedly is.

Trump Tuesday night trotted out all the usual misstatements and exaggerations concerning the positive impact completing the wall along the 2,000-mile southern border would have on reducing illegal immigration, combating terrorism, curbing the flow of drugs into the U.S., reducing violent crime caused by illegal immigrants and improving job prospects and wages for American citizens.

Last week, Trump said he accepted full responsibility for the government shutdown, On Tuesday night, he shifted blame to the Democrats, who he said "wouldn't fund border security." Another untruth. After Democrats took over the House of Representatives last week, they passed a funding bill dedicated to border security. It just didn't include funding for Trump's wall. Understandably, they don't want to spend \$5 billion more to extend it. The border already has 700 miles of wall and fencing. Not counting natural barriers, that would leave about 1,100 more miles to seal off, much of it in remote areas.

The various rationales for extending the wall simply don't stand up to scrutiny. Terrorists are not pouring over our southern border. The biggest threat comes from homegrown, radicalized citizens. While horrific crimes have been committed by illegal immigrants, multiple studies have shown that immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than the U.S. population as a whole.

A libertarian Cato Institute study found that the homicide arrest rate for native-born citizens was nearly 50 percent higher than that for illegal immigrants.

A wall also would do little to stop the importation of drugs. According to the most recent data from Customs and Border Protection, nearly 90 percent of the heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine seized at the border is intercepted at a legal port of entry.

More must be done to halt illegal immigration in this country. And it will take money to do it right. But it should be spent wisely, on improved security at airports, on additional interdiction at sea, on better use of technology on land, and on better pay for overworked, underpaid and ill-equipped Border Patrol officers.

Can a compromise be found? We hope so, and soon. We disagree with Pelosi's view that a wall is inherently "immoral." But nearly 2,000 miles of wall is foolhardy.

Yet, in the interest of allowing government employees to return to work, and getting on with the job of making our borders more secure, Democrats should relent and authorize funding for a modest amount of barriers in areas where they would yield the most benefit.