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The Shutdown, According to Trump

Linda Qiu and Michael Tackett

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Most federal workers, even those with rent owed and bills due, would gladly forgo their paycheck as a measure of support for his \$5.6 billion border wall, President Trump said on Friday.

He also noted that Mexico would actually be paying for the wall through a new trade agreement, which at the very least raised the question of why the government had to be shut down over a funding dispute involving American tax dollars if the funding was coming from another country. And then there was a Plan C: He said he could use “emergency powers” to build the wall.

The wall was needed for many reasons, Mr. Trump said. Stopping drug and human trafficking, and a nonspecific reference to a torrent of terrorists and coyotes easily flowing in over the southern border. “They drive right in, and they make a left,” he said.

But there also was sunshine amid the gloom. Mr. Trump spoke of a stunningly positive jobs report and a stock market that soared, at least for a day. Lower gas prices? One person to thank.

The purpose of the president’s hastily arranged, hourlong news conference in the Rose Garden was to give his side of the negotiations over a partial government shutdown that stretches into its third week on Saturday. And, for the record, Mr. Trump is not calling the partial closing of the government “a shutdown.”

“I don’t call it a shutdown,” he said. “I call it doing what you have to do for the benefit and for the safety of our country.”

The news conference was freewheeling, and the president seemed in high spirits, even with the government shuttered in many places. “Should we keep this going or not?” he said.

Here are some takeaways and fact-checks.

The president favors flexible design plans

Mr. Trump has called for a concrete wall on the border with Mexico, though he denied it, telling reporters, “I said I was going to build a wall. I never said I’m going to build a concrete.” (Just four days ago, Mr. Trump tweeted that “an all concrete Wall was NEVER ABANDONED.”)

Now, he said, steel might be the preferred material, suggesting that would also help a resurgent steel industry in the United States, and could be preferable for its see-through and more aesthetic qualities.

“All of the border things that we’ll be building will be done right here in the good old USA by steel companies that were practically out of business when I came into office as president. And now, they’re thriving.” Later, he said, “the steel industry was almost dead.”

"Dead" is an exaggeration. Steel production has been in decline, as has the number of employees in the industry. But the metals industry still employed over 360,000 workers and produced 80 million tons of raw steel in the year before Mr. Trump took office.

At any rate, Mr. Trump continued, “we’ve already built a lot of the wall” and “renovated a tremendous amount of wall.” (The Trump administration has replaced some existing barriers with new barriers, and will begin constructing 14 miles of new wall in February. But to date, construction on his border wall has not started.)

Shutdown ownership and impact

In his first meeting about a shutdown with Representative Nancy Pelosi and Senator Chuck Schumer in the Oval Office last month, the president forcefully said that he alone would own the shutdown. On Friday, he was selling shares in it. “You can call it the Schumer or the Pelosi or the Trump shutdown,” he said. “Doesn’t make any difference to me. It’s just words.”

Could he reach a compromise with Democrats to end the shutdown by coupling wall funding with a pathway to citizenship for the young immigrants known as Dreamers? Mr. Trump responded that Democrats lost interest as soon as the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld an injunction against his administration’s termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. (A deal on the program and to avoid an earlier government shutdown in early 2018 faltered last January, after Mr. Trump made vulgar remarks on immigration. The court ruled on the case in November.)

That was such a bad decision from the court, Mr. Trump asserted, that even his predecessor, “when he signed the DACA, with the executive order, made a statement to the effect, this isn’t going to work.” (President Barack Obama did not sign an executive order to implement the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. He announced it as a Department of Homeland Security policy in a speech in 2012. He did not say it would not work, but called it a “temporary stopgap.”)

For federal workers who may need a safety net or financial assistance as they go without pay, Mr. Trump said “the safety net is going to be having a strong border,” especially because government employees support his wall. (A recent poll of more than 1,400 by Government Executive suggests the opposite: most oppose the shutdown and the wall.)

Mexico paying for the wall?

The president said that the new trade deal with Mexico and Canada will yield billions of dollars for this country. “That is paying for the wall,” he said. “Many, many times over. In fact, what we save on the U.S.M.C.A., the new trade deal we have with Mexico and Canada, what we save on that just with Mexico will pay for the wall many times over, just in a period of a year, two years and three years. So I view that as absolutely Mexico is paying for the wall.”

(Congress has yet to ratify the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, and it does not compel Mexico to pay for the wall. Whatever federal revenue it generates would come from American taxpayers, not Mexico.)

And, Mr. Trump said, why shouldn't Mexico pay for the wall through trade, given that "we are losing close to \$100 billion a year on trade with Mexico." (The United States had a \$69 billion trade deficit with Mexico in 2017.)

Mr. Trump also took another shot at the North American Free Trade Agreement that the new trade deal seeks to replace, arguing that "we lost millions of jobs" through Nafta. (The left-leaning Economic Policy Institute estimated that the United States lost 850,000 jobs because of Nafta. The Times was unable to find any credible estimate that supported Mr. Trump's "millions" figure.)

China paying tariffs?

Asked about ongoing trade talks with Beijing, Mr. Trump reported that "China is paying us tremendous tariffs." (The United States does not send China a bill for the cost of tariffs, which are often passed on to American importers or consumers.)

China, by the way, "is the biggest beneficiary of Apple," so Mr. Trump is not concerned that the company reduced its revenue forecast this week, sending stocks tumbling. Nonetheless, Mr. Trump said Apple is "investing \$350 billion because of what we did with taxes and the incentives that we created in the United States." (Apple was already on track to spend \$275 billion in the United States over the next five years. After a \$38 billion tax payment, the company's investment would be roughly \$37 billion.)

Terrorists stopped at the border

After suggesting that terrorists were pouring into the country over wall-less portions of the border, Mr. Trump turned to Kirstjen Nielsen, the homeland security secretary, for specifics. She said there were 3,000 such terrorists "that we know about," but said she could not divulge other information because it was classified.

(The 3,000 figure referred to "special interest aliens" stopped at the border, a term that applies to people from any country that has exported or produced one terrorist, according to the libertarian Cato Institute. Besides this ambiguous figure, Mr. Trump has yet to provide evidence for his claim. The State Department said in a September report there is "no credible evidence" that terrorist groups had sent operatives to enter the United States through Mexico. The report warned of the vulnerability, but said it was more likely terrorist groups would seek other means of entry.)

Eminent domain

Mr. Trump said that the government would have to use its powers of eminent domain to take private land to build the wall when owners would not agree to sell. He said that's how interstates, schools and other public buildings have been constructed.

Many in his base disagree, especially in Texas where private property rights are often paramount.

About impeachment

Mr. Trump said, mostly in jest, that he had raised the matter of impeachment with Ms. Pelosi, asking her why she did not use the border security issue as grounds. "And Nancy said we're not looking to impeach you. I said that's good, Nancy, that's good."

He added, "You can't impeach somebody that is doing a great job. That's the way I view it."

