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What to Watch For in Trump's National Address on Immigration

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President Trump's greatest hurdle in persuading Americans that there is a national security crisis on the southwest border may well be his own credibility.

Mr. Trump is using a rare currency — a prime-time address to the nation — to make the case for a border wall with Mexico, an issue that has forced a partial shutdown of the federal government.

His penchant for superlatives — “the best,” “the worst,” “never,” “always,” and now, “crisis” — and his record of falsehoods, misstatements and exaggerations on the topic will likely be challenged as never before.

Here is what to watch for and some of the larger issues the president faces.

When and where can I watch?

Mr. Trump will deliver his speech at 9 p.m. Eastern Time. It will be aired by major broadcast and cable news networks and streamed live at www.nytimes.com.

Will the president declare a national emergency?

Mr. Trump could try to circumvent Congress by declaring a national emergency to order that the wall be built, but administration officials who had seen a draft copy of his speech said the president was not preparing to do so.

This would be an extraordinary use of presidential authority. For example, President George W. Bush invoked emergency powers following the Sept. 11 attacks.

The rationale for the emergency power is to give the president the capacity to act quickly to deal with matters like an urgent security threat.

There are currently 31 national emergencies that are ongoing. The oldest dates back to 1979, when President Jimmy Carter invoked one to freeze Iranian government assets. The Trump administration has issued three emergency declarations so far, most recently in late November freezing the property of certain Nicaraguan officials.

How will he justify a “crisis?”

Saying a situation is a crisis does not make it so, but Mr. Trump and other senior administration officials have been using the word repeatedly in recent days.

They point to a direct connection between the flow of drugs from Mexico and the opioid epidemic in the United States. They say that migrants, particularly women and children, are victims of crime as they journey to the United States. And Mr. Trump has also strongly suggested that terrorists may be slipping across the border.

These threats are greatly exaggerated, if not fabricated. Migrant border crossings have been declining for nearly two decades. The majority of heroin enters the United States through legal ports of entry, not through open areas of the border. Immigrants are less likely to commit crimes in the United States than native-born Americans. The State Department said in a recent report that there is “no credible evidence” that terrorist groups had sent operatives to enter the United States through Mexico.

Despite all of this, Mr. Trump could repeat some of these statistics, which other administration officials have cited misleadingly.

Of the nearly “17,000 criminals” attempting to cross the border — a number used by officials recently — about 63 percent were stopped while attempting to enter legal ports of entry.

Of the “10 individuals on the terrorist watch list” stopped daily by the Department of Homeland Security, most were attempting to enter by air travel. And the watch list itself includes people who are suspected of having ties to terrorism — not necessarily those convicted of terrorism crimes.

And the more than 3,000 “special interest aliens” who have been stopped at the southwest border refers to people who come from countries that have exported terrorism or who exhibit travel patterns that indicate “a possible nexus to nefarious activity,” according to the Department of Homeland Security. A recent analysis from the libertarian Cato Institute found that of 45,000 “special interest aliens” caught at the border since 2007, none has committed terrorist attacks.

How will Democrats respond?

So far, Democrats have been highly unified in their opposition to Mr. Trump’s wall proposal. Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California has called it immoral. Instead, Democrats have demanded that the president immediately end the shutdown and allow Congress to pass funding legislation to keep the government functioning. Only then will they allow a debate on border security.

After television networks agreed to air the president’s speech, Ms. Pelosi and Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, demanded that their side be given time.

What’s next?

To further dramatize his case for a border wall, Mr. Trump is set to head to Texas’ border with Mexico on Thursday.

According to The Monitor of McAllen, Tex., the president’s trip would come about a month before border wall construction in the area would begin, relying on previously appropriated funding. The construction could affect several environmentally sensitive areas. Representative Vicente Gonzalez, Democrat of Texas, told the newspaper that a border wall was not the answer.

“I would remind the president that there are 7,500 open positions with Customs and Border Protection that have not been filled, and that this should be their top priority,” Mr. Gonzalez said in a statement Monday.

“With updated resources, technology and more Border Patrol agents, Customs officers and agriculture inspectors, we can keep this nation prosperous and protect our citizens from those who wish to harm us,” he said.

The crime rate in the city of McAllen has been generally in decline for nearly 30 years.