

Trump continues to demand cash for wall

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President Trump used the backdrop of the Oval Office on Tuesday to push his fact-challenged case for a taxpayer-funded wall with Mexico, repeatedly claiming there's a "crisis" on the southern border even though illegal crossings have plummeted over the past two decades.

In his first-ever national address from the esteemed office, Trump stopped short of declaring a national emergency but reiterated his talking points for why he finds it necessary to keep the federal government shuttered until Congress budgets at least \$5.7 billion for the wall he used to promise Mexico would pay for.

The President claimed -- incorrectly -- that a new trade deal with Mexico and Canada that hasn't been ratified by Congress will pay for the wall, even though there's no such provisions tucked into the agreement.

He also falsely claimed Democrats have requested a "steel barrier" be built instead of a "concrete wall." Despite those assertions, Dems remain unanimously opposed to earmarking any taxpayer dollars for a border project they deem pointless, expensive and rooted in racism.

"How much more American blood must we shed before Congress does its job," Trump said in the prime-time speech, as the government shutdown was set to grind into its 19th day and on track to become the longest one in American history. "To every member of Congress, pass a bill that ends this crisis. To every citizen, call Congress and tell them to finally, after all of these decades, secure our border."

Trump said he had invited congressional leaders from both parties to discuss the shutdown at the White House on Wednesday afternoon. Three previous such meetings have proved unfruitful.

This shutdown will become the longest one ever if it drags beyond Friday.

Democratic leaders Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) delivered a rebuttal to Trump from the U.S. Capitol, in which they excoriated him for using an Oval Office address -- a solemn format typically reserved for national emergencies and major policy initiatives -- to perpetuate what they see as immigrant-bashing rhetoric.

"This President just used the backdrop of the Oval Office to manufacture a crisis, stoke fear, and divert attention from the turmoil in his administration," Schumer said, urging Trump to reopen the government by committing to signing a bipartisan spending package passed by the House and previously supported by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.).

"We can secure our border without an expensive, ineffective wall...The symbol of America should be the Statue of Liberty, not a 30-foot wall."

Trump plans to visit border agents in Texas on Thursday -- but he's apparently not too excited about it.

"It's not going to change a damn thing, but I'm still doing it," Trump said of the upcoming border excursion during an off-the-record lunch meeting with TV anchors ahead of his Oval speech, according to The New York Times.

The President reportedly also told his lunch guests he wasn't inclined to hold the Oval address but was talked into it by press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders and communications director Bill Shine.

Sanders did not return a request for comment.

In his speech, Trump listed off a handful of gruesome crimes committed by immigrants in the country illegally, including the murder of a police officer in California last month.

Critics have ripped such talking points as misleading, pointing out that immigrants statistically commit crimes at a far lower rate than natural-born citizens, according to a slew of studies, including one from the libertarian-leaning CATO Institute.

A growing number of Senate Republicans have called on Trump to cut it out and reopen the government, as some 800,000 federal employees continue to work without pay or not work at all because of the President's refusal to sign any spending legislation that doesn't earmark billions of dollars for his signature campaign promise.

"For us to assume that this is not going to be a problem is arrogant and it's dismissive and it's wrong," Sen Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) told reporters earlier in the day, referencing the furloughed federal workers and calling on Trump to sign the House-passed bill.

The lower chamber measure would release the stranded workers from the hostage-like situation they're in by reopening eight of the shuttered Cabinet departments with full fiscal year funding while the Department of Homeland Security would reopen on current spending levels through Feb. 8 -- a compromise meant to allow for lawmakers to continue discussing their differences on border spending.

But McConnell has refused to put the sweeping spending measure up for a vote because he says he doesn't want to pass something the President isn't committed to signing -- drawing rebuke from Democrats who accuse him of cowardice.

McConnell championed -- and himself voted for -- a near-identical package before the shutdown, which was derailed after Trump unexpectedly threatened to veto it after right-wing TV pundits ridiculed him for not sticking to his guns.

It was widely rumored ahead of Trump's address that he was planning on declaring a national emergency to use money from the Pentagon budget to build a wall -- an option that he has himself openly entertained in recent days.

Legal experts say such a move would prompt immediate court challenges and could likely be deemed unconstitutional. Trump, nonetheless, hasn't ruled out the option.

"He would have to justify it as a military expense," Cornell Law School Vice Dean Jens David Ohlin told the Daily News. "That could certainly be a basis for a legal challenge because it really doesn't relate to the military."