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Democrats are right to call President Trump's border wall bluff

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As the partial federal government shutdown over President Donald Trump's demand for \$5 billion in border wall funding finished its second week — and Democrats resumed control of the House — that dollar figure sounded increasingly like a ransom note with a curiously flexible price tag.

With that, a nagging question hangs over the whole confusing border mess: Where did that \$5 billion estimate come from?

The House under Republican control passed a bill that included \$5 billion for border security. But the Republican Senate's version included less than \$2 billion. Trump has said he wouldn't sign a bill that includes less than \$5 billion for the wall because "Top Border Security, including a Wall, is \$25 Billion. Pays for itself in two months. Get it done!" wrote Trump. And after a Friday meeting with Democratic leaders, Sen. Chuck Schumer said the president was so insistent on funding the wall that he threatened to keep the government shut down for "months or even years."

But a report by Senate Democrats said last April that a border wall could cost more than three times as much as initial estimates, a steep price for a project whose effectiveness at stopping illegal immigration, drugs and human trafficking has not been demonstrated as much as Trump would have us believe.

An internal report by the Department of Homeland Security said the wall would cost about \$21.6 billion, not including maintenance. That's considerably higher than a \$12 billion figure cited by Trump in his campaign. Estimates by former Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have run as high as \$15 billion.

The more you look into it, the more Trump appears to have pulled that \$5 billion estimate out of his, uh, hat.

And what about his promise that "Mexico will pay for it?" That's not happening either.

Nor is it happening for newly re-elected Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and her fellow Democrats. Recent polls also indicate that most Americans — although not most Republicans — tend to agree. In short, they say yes to "border security," no to a "wall."

With all this “fuzzy math,” as President George W. Bush used to call Washington arithmetic, I have a modest proposal for a good old-fashioned compromise: Democrats could offer to earmark the \$5 billion now in question for the wall in exchange for such concessions as protections and work permit eligibility for “Dreamers,” immigrants who were brought into the U.S. illegally as children.

The only condition: The wall’s building cost can’t run one penny over \$5 billion or President Trump would have to pay for it — or Mexico, if he somehow manages to make that deal. My idea, delivered somewhat tongue in cheek, is inspired by the reality that government construction costs almost always exceed their predicted budgets.

It also is inspired by the well-intentioned GoFundMe campaign, “We The People Will Fund The Wall,” that Florida Air Force veteran Brian Kolfage launched recently to help fund the wall. As House leadership was changing, the effort had raised more than \$18 million in pledges. Even though it was started late in 2018, it came in second only to the #MeToo-inspired Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund’s \$22 million among the site’s big fundraisers for 2018.

Still, the wall fund would have a long way to go to raise the billions necessary to build a wall that, on closer examination, appears to be no more practical than the menu of barriers and detection devices we already have at the border.

“The president has not updated his facts,” Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration specialist at the libertarian Cato Institute, told me. Today the majority of new illegal immigrants arrive legally with visas but don’t leave when the visa has expired. “The number illegally crossing the border,” he said, “is near to a 45-year low.”

Nowrasteh calculates, based on the \$21 billion DHS estimate, that the \$5 billion debated on Capitol Hill would pay for only about 289 miles of the 1,954-mile border, of which about 317 miles is already fenced.

Yet, perceptions can quickly become reality in politics. When an audacious salesman like Trump tells people to be very afraid, he may win over a minority of the total population, as he has. And his MAGA-hat-wearing brigades have been a loud, determined and high-turnout minority, big enough to win the Electoral College for Trump and frighten congressional Republicans into submission.

That may be fine for them. But if the rest of us don’t want to pay the bill for a project with high symbolic value but questionable cost and effectiveness, we need to let our lawmakers know it.