

Trump Is Debating the Shutdown on Democrats' 'Manufactured' Terms

The president's border visit showed the success of Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer's messaging.



LEAH MILLIS / REUTERS

When Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer finished their rebuttal to President Donald Trump's Oval Office address on Tuesday, it was not entirely clear what Democrats were hoping to accomplish. The dual remarks seemed largely like a rehash of familiar talking points.

But their effectiveness emerged Thursday when President Trump traveled to McAllen, Texas. On Tuesday, Pelosi, the House speaker, had said that "President Trump must stop holding the American people hostage and stop manufacturing a crisis, and must reopen the government." Schumer, the Senate minority leader, added, "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."

Read: What was the point of Trump's Oval Office address?

While reporters like yours truly puzzled over the point of the speeches, Trump heard it loud and clear. “Democrats have refused to listen to the border agents, and they say this is a manufactured crisis,” the president said during a roundtable about border security at the border between Texas and Mexico. He continued:

That’s their new sound bite. All over. I turn the television on—you know, I call it the opposition party. It’s called the fake-news media. And what happens is every network has “manufactured crisis. This is a manufactured crisis.” Every one of them. It’s like they, you know, send out to everybody, “Let’s use this sound bite today.”

Trump is wrong about the coordination, but as for the networks airing the line, that’s how sound bites work, as no one should know better than Trump: A politician says something, and then the press covers it. For more than three years, first as a candidate and then as the president, Trump has been the primary beneficiary of this dynamic, even (or especially) when he says things that are plainly false or offensive. And because the media’s foremost bias is toward novelty and flash, he’s been helped by his own knack for grabbing attention, as well as the diffusion of the Democratic Party, which has had no single leading voice.

Now Pelosi serves as the de facto head of the Democratic Party, and that is allowing her to play a role in setting the agenda, much to Trump’s chagrin. The result is that the president seemed on Thursday to be fighting the battle on Democrats’ territory, litigating whether the crisis was “manufactured,” rather than on his own, the purported need for a border wall.

“So it’s a manufactured—but it’s not,” Trump said. “What is manufactured is the use of the word *manufactured*. It is manufactured by them.”

Other speakers at the roundtable dutifully plied the same ground.

“To those of you who say this is a manufactured crisis, it’s a manufactured cover-up by your opposition. We had 500,000 people apprehended crossing the border from San Diego to Brownsville last year,” said Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, a Trump ally.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, who often struggles with facts, opted instead for dudgeon. “For those who would like to put their heads in the sand and pretend it’s manufactured, it’s not only an insult and disturbing to those who lost loved ones, but it’s an insult to our country,” she said.

Read: A frenzied week in Washington produced absolutely no progress

The Democrats' line about a manufactured crisis serves to take some heat off freshman members who are reportedly somewhat nervous over the ongoing shutdown. Many of them come from swing districts, and they didn't intend for their first weeks in Congress to be consumed with a shutdown. It's more advantageous to point a finger at Trump for fabricating a problem than it is to debate the merits of the wall, since few Americans really want to build the barrier.

This doesn't mean Democrats will win the shutdown fight politically. Polling has consistently shown that more Americans blame Trump than they do Democrats, but the numbers haven't shifted much over the three weeks the government has been partially closed.

Pelosi has many political skills, but public speaking isn't her forte. She'll never be as quick with a sound bite as Trump—almost no one is. But the fact that Trump is so focused on rebutting the “manufactured crisis” sound bite shows how winning the House has given the Democrats a more level playing field.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.



DAVID A. GRAHAM is a staff writer at The Atlantic, where he covers U.S. politics and global news.

Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/trump-fires-back-democrats-manufactured-crisis/580102/>

[Disclaimer]