

The Mexico-U.S. Border in the American Imagination¹

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The border between Mexico and the United States is not just a line on a map. Nor is it merely a neutral demarcation of territory between two friendly neighboring states. Rather, in the American imagination, it has become a symbolic boundary between the United States and a threatening world. It is not just *a* border but *the* border, and its enforcement has become a central means by which politicians signal their concern for citizens' safety and security in a hostile world. It has become routine for politicians and pundits to call federal authorities to task for failing to "hold the line" against a variety of alien invaders—communists, criminals, narcotics traffickers, rapists, terrorists, even microbes.

Although the Mexico-U.S. border has long been deployed as a symbolic line of defense against foreign threats, its prominence in the American imagination has ebbed and flowed over time. Over the past several decades, however, the political and emotional importance of the border as a symbolic battle line has risen. Indeed, the border has become a central trope in current political discussions about the nation's security, a process that scholars refer to as the "securitization of migration."² Calling for more border enforcement has become the all-purpose response to whatever threat happens to appear in the public consciousness. As a result, the symbolic framing of the border as a line of defense has become increasingly real. Walls have been built, forces mobilized, and resources deployed in its defense, with profound consequences for American society.

Here I offer a brief history of the Mexico-U.S. border as a symbolic demarcation in the American mind before discussing its rise to prominence in recent years. After documenting the concrete expression of the border's rising prominence in terms of the U.S. enforcement effort, I

1 Read 25 April 2015.

2 Bourbeau, P., *The Securitization of Migration: A Study of Movement and Order* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

review the dysfunctional consequences of border enforcement as a public policy and conclude by considering why, after decades of obviously counterproductive results, defending the border continues to be such a potent political metaphor in American political discourse.

HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BORDER

The Mexico-U.S. border is a relatively new construct, both in reality and in the American imagination. At the nation's inception, it did not exist—not in 1776 at the Declaration of Independence, not in 1783 when the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War, and not in 1789 when the Constitution was adopted. In the early years of the republic, there was only an amorphous western “frontier” subject to conflicting claims by European powers with hazy boundaries between their spheres of influence. At that time, the principal threat on the frontier was Native Americans, not Latin Americans, and one of the complaints lodged against King George III in the Declaration of Independence was that “he has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.” From our earliest days as a nation, therefore, our frontiers were a line dividing us from threatening others.

In theory, the Mexico-U.S. border first came into existence with Mexico's achievement of independence from Spain in 1821, although very quickly the border was blurred by the entry of U.S. settlers into northern Mexico from southern and border states in the United States. To fill its own northern provinces with people of European origin who might provide a counterweight to people it also perceived as Indian “savages,” the Mexican government in 1824 enacted a National Colonization Law whose purpose was to entice Anglo-American settlers into the Province of Texas with the promise of generous land grants. Although the settlers expressed considerable discomfort with Mexican Catholicism and its centralized governance, the Texans' most serious grievance centered on the Mexican constitution's abolition of slavery and the attempt to enforce it in Texas after 1830.

In 1836 the Texans revolted and declared their independence from Mexico, much as the Confederacy did when U.S. election results threatened the future of slavery 30 years later. Unlike the rebels of 1860, however, the Texans succeeded in their revolt and established a new republic with a constitution explicitly authorizing slavery, stating that:

. . . all persons of color who were slaves for life previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now held in bondage, shall remain

in the like state of servitude . . . Congress shall pass no laws to prohibit emigrants from bringing their slaves into the republic with them, and holding them by the same tenure by which such slaves were held in the United States; nor shall congress have power to emancipate slaves; nor shall any slaveholder be allowed to emancipate his or her slave or slaves without the consent of congress.³

Thus, race was at the core of the earliest attempt to define a clear symbolic boundary between Anglo-America and Latino lands to the south.

Despite the success of the Texas revolt, the location of the border was never fully resolved. Mexico continued to claim all of its former province as sovereign territory, and although Anglo-Americans controlled the northern portion of the territory, lands immediately to the south but above the Rio Grande were actively contested, yielding an uneasy standoff. The logjam broke when Texas petitioned for and was granted entry into the American Union as a slave state in December 1845. In response, Mexico in 1846 proclaimed its intent to fight a “defensive war” against encroachment from the United States, which prompted Congress, in turn, to declare war on Mexico.

After quickly occupying Mexican settlements in Texas, New Mexico, and California, U.S. troops moved across the Rio Grande into Northern Mexico as the U.S. Navy blockaded Mexican ports and landed marines in Veracruz. The latter moved inland to capture and occupy Mexico City in 1847, an event commemorated in the Marine Corps hymn’s promise to fight America’s battles “from the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.” With U.S. troops occupying the capital, Mexico was compelled to sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, ceding to the United States the present states of Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, along with parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming, in return for \$15 million and the U.S. government’s promise to absorb \$3.25 million in Mexican debt.

The border was not finalized until 1853, however, when U.S. authorities returned to Mexico and persuaded its leaders to relinquish the southwestern portions of contemporary New Mexico and Arizona for an additional \$10 million. Known as the Gadsden Purchase, this last adjustment was enacted to enable the construction of a southern transcontinental railroad, not to extract more territory from Mexico per se. With the location of the border finally settled, at least on maps, American attention shifted to the symbolic definition of social

3 Website of Texas A&M University, Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, “Constitution of the Republic of Texas 1836.” Accessed on 11 August 2015 at <http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/texascon.htm>

boundaries between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in ceded territories to the north.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, migration into the former Mexican territories was overwhelmingly Anglo-American, and the rising number of white settlers quickly swamped the 50,000 Mexicans who had remained north of the border upon annexation, transforming them into a subordinate class dispossessed of land and subject to systematic discrimination and exclusion throughout society.⁴ During this time, the Mexican border largely receded from American consciousness for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Cross-border movements were overwhelmingly local, with residents moving back and forth across an invisible line that ran through the middle of cities straddling the border.

Long distance migration from Mexico began only in 1907 when the United States signed the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, under which the U.S. government agreed not to prohibit the entry of Japanese migrants in return for Japan's promise not to let them depart for the United States in the first place. The end of Japanese immigration, however, created labor shortages throughout the west, which employers immediately filled by recruiting Mexicans.⁵ U.S. sentiments toward Mexicans at the time are well summarized by the Senate's Dillingham Commission report of 1911, which described Mexicans as "notoriously indolent and unprogressive in all matters of education and culture," doing dirty jobs fit only for "the lowest grade of nonassimilable native-born races," although their "usefulness is, however, much impaired by [their] lack of ambition and [their] proneness to the constant use of intoxicating liquor."⁶

Precisely because they were seen as racially inferior and hence "unasimilable," however, they were not seen as likely to presume settling north of the border and thus not perceived as a threat. Indeed, according to the Dillingham Commission, "the Mexican immigration may increase for some time as this race offers a source of labor to substitute for the Asiatics in the most undesirable seasonal occupations," noting that "the Mexican is preferred to the Japanese. He is alleged to be more tractable and to be a better workman in one case."

4 Grebler, L., J. Moore, and R. Guzman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1970); Cook, S. F., and W. Borah, *Essays in Population History, Vol. III: Mexico and California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

5 Cardoso, L. A., *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931: Socio-Economic Patterns* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980).

6 U.S. Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industries: Part 25: Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., USA: Government Printing Office, 1911), pp. 50, 59, 94, 110.

Given these attitudes, when Congress moved to establish restrictive quotas in 1921 and 1924 to exclude presumptive racial inferiors from southern and eastern Europe, no quotas were applied in the Western Hemisphere.⁷ The Mexico-U.S. border remained little more than a line on a map, entirely unguarded by federal authorities until 1924, when the U.S. Border Patrol was established, not so much to prevent the entry of Mexicans as to catch Europeans trying to evade the national origins quotas by crossing the nation's land borders, which until then had no inspection stations. With just 450 officers to patrol both the Mexican and Canadian borders, however, in de facto terms the 3,000-mile border remained open and undefended for Mexicans, and it remained largely outside of American public consciousness.⁸

MAKING THE BORDER REAL

The Mexico-U.S. border reasserted itself in public consciousness with the advent of the Great Depression in 1929. Suddenly, people who had formerly been recruited as willing (if docile) workers came to be seen as competitors unfairly taking jobs from more deserving Anglo-Americans, or as potential deadbeats likely to go on public relief at the expense of U.S. taxpayers.⁹ From 1929 through 1937, some 458,000 Mexicans were forcibly deported, rounded up in Mexican neighborhoods throughout the nation, put on boxcars, transported to the closest border city, and summarily deposited on the Mexican side. Most of the deportees had been legally present in the United States prior to 1929 and were removed without due process, along with many U.S. born children and naturalized citizens whose deportations were entirely unconstitutional.¹⁰

The deportations may have made the border symbolically more real to Americans, but the experience of arrest and removal made it quite tangibly real for Mexicans. Photos from the period show Mexicans disembarking trains in border cities and filing past signs erected by the local Chamber of Commerce saying "Mexicans Keep on Going—We Can't Take Care of Our Own,"¹¹ as well as notices at local

7 Zolberg, A. R., *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

8 Massey, D. S., J. Durand, and N. J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Age of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

9 Hoffman, A., *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974).

10 Balderrama, F. E., and R. Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

11 See photo accessed on 11 August 2015 at <https://www.tumblr.com/search/mexican%20repatriation>

establishments saying “We Serve Whites Only—No Spanish or Mexicans.”¹² The deportation campaigns brought about a definitive end to Mexican immigration during the 1930s, and the border once more receded again from American consciousness. Whereas an annual average of 50,000 permanent residents and 15,000 temporary workers had entered the United States from Mexico from 1920 to 1929, the average fell to just 2,800 permanent residents by 1939, and the number of temporary workers was cut to zero after 1930.

After a decade of quiescence, the border returned to American consciousness in the 1940s when the United States entered World War II. This time, however, awareness lay in the desire to attract Mexican workers northward across the border rather than to deport them southward, for the military draft and war mobilization had created labor shortages throughout the nation, especially in agriculture. In 1942, U.S. authorities approached Mexico and negotiated a binational agreement known as the Bracero Accord, which annually authorized a set number of Mexican workers to enter the United States legally for periods of short-term seasonal labor under government supervision.¹³

The Bracero Program was originally envisioned as a temporary wartime measure and thus was limited to moderate size through the war years, with a total of only 168,000 workers entering and leaving between 1942 and 1945. The end of the war was followed by an economic boom, however, and labor shortages not only persisted but increased. In response, Congress extended the program on a year-to-year basis through 1949, but this effort was not enough to meet demand, and employers increasingly took matters into their own hands by recruiting workers without authorization, causing border apprehensions to rise.

Although Congress authorized sizable increases in the Bracero Program in 1951 and 1954, these were still insufficient to meet demand, and border apprehensions continued to grow. The issue came to a head with the recession of 1953, which reduced GDP by 2.6% just as Korean War veterans were returning home to look for work. In this context, Mexican migrants again came to be seen as undeserving competitors for American jobs, and a new border crisis erupted, compelling federal authorities to launch “Operation Wetback,” an all-out militarization of the border region that generated 865,000 apprehensions in 1953 and 1.1 million in 1954.

12 See photo accessed on 11 August 2015 at <http://axiomamnesia.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/hist6.jpg>

13 Calavita, K., *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

“Wetback,” of course, is a derogatory term for someone who crossed the border without authorization, presumably by swimming across the Rio Grande or along the Pacific or Gulf Coasts (thus producing the wet backs). In addition, because 1953–4 marked the height of the McCarthy Era, Mexicans were also derogated as communist agents. A compilation of newspaper headlines from the period tell the story: “Illegal Aliens Flood Nation,” “Wetbacks Cited as Aids to Mobs and Subversion,” “Mexico Center of Red Spy Ring in Hemisphere—Fifth Column Seen,” “Alien Influx Perils Nation, Senate Told.”¹⁴ In addition to constituting a racial threat, Mexican migrants now became a political threat as well.

Although Operation Wetback is often credited with ending unauthorized migration in the 1950s, what really brought it to a halt was a quiet, behind-the-scenes expansion of the Bracero Program by Congress, which increased the number of Bracero work visas from a mere 67,000 in 1950 to 445,000 in 1956. Legal immigration also surged as employers began sponsoring Braceros for permanent residence to ensure continued access to their services. At that time, there were, of course, no numerical limitations on the number of residence visas that could be issued to Mexicans, and legal immigration rose from 9,600 in 1952 to 65,000 in 1956. Apprehensions, meanwhile, dropped from 1.1 million in 1954 to just 30,000 in 1959. Once again the border was perceived to be “under control,” and accordingly, it disappeared from public discourse as a symbol of both a racial and political threat.¹⁵

MILITARIZING THE BORDER

At the height of the Bracero Program in the late 1950s about half a million Mexican migrants legally entered the United States for work each year, around 90% with temporary work visas and 10% with permanent resident visas. All of the former and many of the latter circulated back and forth across on an annual basis, and the border remained largely out of American consciousness. What disrupted the status quo and set the Mexican border on a path toward militarization was a series of congressional actions undertaken in 1965 for a very laudable reason: to eliminate racial bias from the U.S. immigration system. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned reforms made no allowance for the by-then

14 Astor, A., “Unauthorized Immigration, Securitization, and the Making of Operation Wetback,” *Latino Studies* 7 (2009): 5–29.

15 Massey et al., *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*.

well-established and highly institutionalized yearly flow of 500,000 Mexicans legally into and out of the United States.

In the context of a burgeoning civil rights movement, the Bracero Program came to be seen as an exploitive labor system on par with black sharecropping, and Congress chose not to renew it in 1965, ending 22 years of guest worker migration from Mexico. At the same time, the national origins quotas imposed in the 1920s, along with outright bans on Asian and African immigration, had come to be seen as intolerably racist, and in 1965, Congress also passed amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act intended to create an unprejudiced and fair system of visa allocation. Each country was granted up to 20,000 permanent resident visas per year, to be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis according to family reunification criteria and labor market needs until a worldwide total of 290,000 was reached.

However, quotas of 170,000 and 120,000 were allocated to the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, respectively, thereby imposing the first-ever numerical restrictions on immigration from the Americas. Although country-specific limits were not initially applied in the Western Hemisphere, Congress in 1976 created a single worldwide quota of 290,000 visas with all countries subject to a yearly cap of 20,000 visas. Therefore, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, Mexico went from having access to half a million legal visas (temporary and permanent) to just 20,000 permanent visas and no temporary visas.

The conditions of labor supply and demand in Mexico and the United States had not changed, of course, and after more than two decades, under the Bracero Program, seasonal labor migration was well-integrated into social structures and individual expectations on both sides of the border. Although the doors to legal U.S. entry may have closed, employers and workers were still embedded in well-developed social networks that connected hundreds of Mexicans in sending communities to employment sites throughout the United States. As a result, when opportunities for legal entry withered, Mexicans did not stop migrating but simply continued under undocumented auspices.

From 1965 to 1979, unauthorized migration steadily rose to achieve roughly the same circulatory volume that prevailed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Thereafter, the flows stabilized and fluctuated in tandem with changing social and economic circumstances on both sides of the border.¹⁶ As before, movement was overwhelmingly circular, with 86% of undocumented entries between 1965 and 1985

16 Massey, D. S., and K. A. Pren, "Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Policy: Explaining the Post-1965 Surge from Latin America," *Population and Development Review* 38 (2012): 1-29.

being offset by departures, yielding a slowly growing undocumented population north of the border.¹⁷ In practical terms, little had changed in the Mexican migration system. The same migrants, overwhelmingly male, were migrating from the same communities in the same numbers to the same U.S. work sites in the same states and returning regularly to invest and spend their earnings at home. In symbolic terms, however, much had changed, for now the vast majority of migrants were “illegal” and thus by definition “criminals” and “lawbreakers,” readily framed as a threat to the United States and building on Americans’ long-standing fears of racial pollution and more recent concerns about communist infiltration.

As the number of border apprehensions rose in the years after 1965, so did a new Latino Threat Narrative in the media and public discourse. A systematic coding of weekly U.S. news magazine covers dealing with immigration from 1970 to 2000 found that negatively framed covers increased markedly in frequency through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.¹⁸ Migration from south of the border was increasingly referred to as a “crisis” and was labeled either a “flood” that would “innundate” the United States and “drown” its society or an “invasion” of hostile “aliens” pitted against “outgunned” Border Patrol agents who sought to “hold the line” against “banzai charges” by migrants who would “overrun” American society. From 1965 to 1979, mentions of Mexican immigration as a crisis, flood, or invasion in major American newspapers increased in tandem with the rise in apprehensions.¹⁹

The rising number of apprehensions created a golden opportunity for self-interested bureaucrats, politicians, and pundits to fan the flames of public hysteria for their own gain. The bureaucratic charge was led by Commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Leonard F. Chapman, who in 1976 published an article in *Reader’s Digest* entitled “Illegal Aliens: Time to Call a Halt!”, warning Americans that a new “silent invasion” was threatening the nation:

When I became commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in 1973, we were out-manned, under-budgeted, and confronted by a growing, silent invasion of illegal aliens. Despite our best efforts, the problem—critical then—now threatens to become a national disaster. Last year, an independent study

¹⁷ Massey, D. S., and A. Singer, “New Estimates of Undocumented Mexican Migration and the Probability of Apprehension,” *Demography* 32 (1995): 203–13.

¹⁸ Chavez, L. R., *Covering Immigration: Population Images and the Politics of the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Chavez, L. R., *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2008).

¹⁹ Massey, D. S., and K. A. Pren, “Origins of the New Latino Underclass,” *Race and Social Problems* 4 (2012): 5–17.

commissioned by the INS estimated that there are 8 million illegal aliens in the United States. At least 250,000 to 500,000 more arrive each year. Together they are milking the U.S. taxpayer of \$13 billion annually by taking away jobs from legal residents and forcing them into unemployment; by illegally acquiring welfare benefits and public services; by avoiding taxes.²⁰

Once again, Mexican migrants became illegitimate claimants to U.S. jobs and services, and the commissioner went on to argue for the passage of restrictive immigration legislation that he argued was “desperately needed to help us bring the illegal alien threat under control” because “the understaffed [Immigration] Service vitally needs some budget increases.” Although no “independent study” was ever released, the exaggerated numbers served the threat narrative better than more cautious estimates, which later put the actual number of undocumented residents in 1975 at 1.1 million rather than the 8 million claimed by Chapman.²¹

With immigration agency bureaucrats stirring up the public to gain resources for their agencies, politicians got into the act to mobilize voters for political ends. In 1985, President Reagan declared undocumented migration to be “a threat to national security” and warned Americans that “terrorists and subversives [are] just two days driving time from [the border crossing at] Harlingen, Texas” and that Communist agents were ready “to feed on the anger and frustration of recent Central and South American immigrants who will not realize their own version of the American dream.”²² More recently, Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona, has become his state’s most popular politician by combating “illegal immigration, drugs and everything else that threatens America.”²³

While politicians deployed the Latino Threat Narrative for purposes of political mobilization, pundits used it to get rich by selling books and to boost media ratings. On his television program, Lou Dobbs told Americans that the “invasion of illegal aliens” was part of a “war on the middle class” organized by nefarious U.S. elites,²⁴ whereas

20 Chapman, L. F., “Illegal Aliens: Time to Call a Halt!,” *Reader’s Digest* (October 1976): 188–92.

21 Warren, R., and J. S. Passel, “A Count of the Uncountable: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens Counted in the 1980 United States Census,” *Demography* 24 (1987): 375–93.

22 Clift, E., “With Rebel Leaders at His Side, Reagan Presses for Contra Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 1986. Accessed on 11 August 2015 at http://articles.latimes.com/1986-03-04/news/mn-15033_1_contra-aid

23 Arpaio, J., and L. Sherman, *Joe’s Law: America’s Toughest Sheriff Takes on Illegal Immigration, Drugs and Everything Else That Threatens America* (New York: AMACOM, 2008).

24 Dobbs, L., *War on the Middle Class: How the Government, Big Business, and Special Interest Groups Are Waging War on the American Dream and How to Fight Back* (New York: Viking 2006).

political commentator Patrick Buchanan alleged that illegal migration was part of an “Aztlán Plot” hatched by Mexican elites to recapture lands lost in 1848.²⁵ From his lofty Harvard perch, Samuel Huntington (2004) portrayed Latino immigrants as a threat to America’s national identity, warning that “the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.”²⁶ Thus class warfare, cultural pollution, and irredentist goals were added to the growing list of threats posed by Mexican migrants.

None of these pronouncements was based on any substantive understanding of the realities of undocumented migration, of course. At best, they were distortions designed to cultivate fear among native white Americans for self-interested purposes; at worst, they were outright fabrications. Nonetheless, even though the actual flow of undocumented migrants had stabilized by the late 1970s and was no longer rising, the Latino Threat Narrative kept gaining traction to create a growing moral panic about illegal aliens.²⁷ Over time, as more Border Patrol Officers were hired and given more equipment and resources, they naturally apprehended more migrants, and the rising number of border apprehensions was then taken as self-evident proof of the ongoing “alien invasion,” justifying agency requests for still more enforcement resources, which produced even more apprehensions, ultimately yielding a self-feeding cycle of enforcement, apprehensions, more enforcement, more apprehensions, and still more enforcement.²⁸

The resulting militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the annual budget of U.S. Border Patrol from 1970 to 2010 in constant dollars. As can clearly be seen, the real value of the enforcement budget fluctuated around \$300 million from 1970 through 1985. The militarization of the border began in 1986 with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), accelerated with the launching of Operation Blockade in El Paso in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994 (the two busiest border sectors), and accelerated once again with the passage of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. By 2010, the budget stood at \$3.8 billion, almost 13 times its pre-1986 level—despite the fact that the undocumented inflow had stopped growing around 1979.

25 Buchanan, P. J., *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books 2006).

26 Huntington, S. P., “The Hispanic Challenge,” *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2009): 1–12. Accessed on 11 August 2015 at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/28/the-hispanic-challenge/>

27 Flores-Yeffal, N. Y., G. Vidales, and A. Plemons, “The Latino Cyber-Moral Panic Process in the United States,” *Information, Communication & Society* 14 (2011): 568–89.

28 Massey and Pren, “Unintended Consequences.”

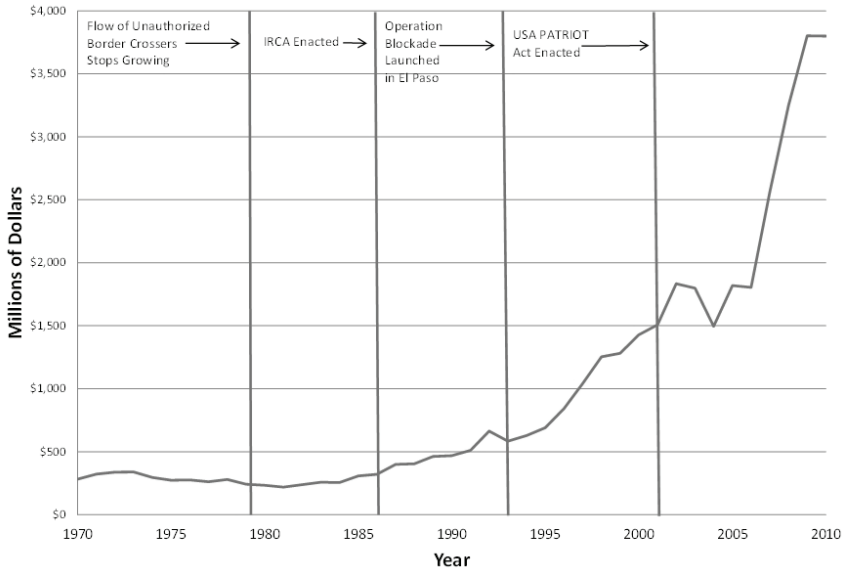


FIGURE 1. Budget of U. S. Border Patrol in constant \$2013 dollars.

THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION

Interventions of this size and scale into a complex, well-established, and truly massive social system such as Mexico-U.S. migration are ripe for unintended consequences and are not likely to turn out well. In this case, border militarization had the perverse effect of increasing rather than decreasing the net rate of unauthorized migration and thus accelerated undocumented population growth north of the border. As I pointed out in an earlier article published in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Operation Gatekeeper also diverted flows of undocumented migrants away from traditional border crossings along the border with California and redirected them through the Sonoran Desert into Arizona, from whence they proceeded onward to new destinations throughout the United States.²⁹

Also noted in that article was the fact that the diversion of crossing routes away from urban areas, into rugged mountains, and through high deserts dramatically increased the costs of undocumented border crossing, as migrants turned more and more to professional guides who charged higher fees for increasingly elaborate services. The new crossing locations also increased the risk of death and injury, and in response to these greater costs and risks, migrants quite logically minimized border crossing—not by staying in Mexico but by remaining longer in the

²⁹ Massey, D. S., “Understanding America’s Immigration Crisis,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 151 (2007): 309–27.

United States once they had achieved entry, both to work off the higher costs of crossing but also to avoid facing the gauntlet at the border once again. As men stayed longer north of the border, they were increasingly joined by wives and older children, and the former soon began giving birth north of the border. Research done since that article has only reinforced and strengthened these conclusions.³⁰

During the 1990s and early 2000s, then, U.S. immigration and border policies transformed what had been a circular flow of male workers going to just three states (California, Texas, and Illinois) into a rapidly growing and much larger population of families settled in 50 states. The numbers tell the story. At the close of the IRCA legalization program in 1988, the undocumented population stood at just 1.9 million, but by 2012, it had grown to a record 12 million persons.³¹ Moreover, from 1990 to 2010, the percentage of undocumented migrants living in the “big three” traditional states of destination fell from 60% to 44%, and by the latter date, 90% of all undocumented migrants lived in “mixed status” households along with legal migrants and U.S.-born citizen children.³²

Although the rapid growth of the “illegal” population was caused by U.S. enforcement policies themselves, the growing presence and increasing visibility of undocumented migrants throughout the nation paradoxically only served to increase the salience of the Latino Threat Narrative, leading to further calls for more aggressive immigration enforcement, both along the border and internally within the United States. At this point, Mexicans, Latinos, and illegal migrants are hopelessly conflated in American social cognition, and taken together or separately, they trigger subconscious and conscious perceptions of Latinos as stigmatized, menacing “others”—aliens, invaders, criminals, job stealers, and welfare cheats who threaten to pollute U.S. culture and contaminate American identity.³³

30 Massey, D. S., J. Durand, and K. A. Pren, “Explaining Undocumented Migration,” *International Migration Review* 48 (2014): 1028–61; Massey, D. S., J. Durand, and K. A. Pren, “Why Border Enforcement Backfired,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1557–600.

31 Wassem, R. E., *Unauthorized Aliens Residing in the United States: Estimates since 1986* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011).

32 Warren, R., and J. Robert Warren, “Unauthorized Immigration to the United States: Annual Estimates and Components of Change, 1990–2010,” *International Migration Review* 47 (2013): 296–329; Taylor, T., et al., *Unauthorized Immigrants: Length of Residency, Patterns of Parenthood* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, 2011). Accessed on 13 August 2015 at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/12/01/unauthorized-immigrants-length-of-residency-patterns-of-parenthood/>

33 Lee, T. L., and S. T. Fiske, “Not an Outgroup, Not Yet an Ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30 (2006): 751–68.

The incessant deployment of these images by politicians and pundits have helped to cement the symbolic status of the border as *the* line of defense for America, a rampart that must be enforced at all costs to protect citizens from a host of dire external threats. The great irony in the elevation of the border to such a potent symbolic status is that it occurs at a time when undocumented migration has actually ended and Mexican migration in general is much reduced and likely even negative.³⁴ Undocumented migration certainly ended in 2008, when the Great Recession caused the unauthorized population to fall by a million persons, the first decline in size since 1986.³⁵ Thereafter, the total undocumented population has fluctuated narrowly around 11 million persons, but the Mexican share of the population has slowly declined as most migrants crossing the border are now from Central America. In 2014, for the first time, more non-Mexicans were apprehended at the border than Mexicans, and although the total number of apprehensions was up over the prior year, it was still at its lowest point since 1973.

Although Mexican migration may appear to have been brought to a decisive end by the Great Recession, it had, in fact, been steadily declining since 2000. Indeed, if historical patterns had continued to prevail, undocumented Mexican migration would have rebounded with the economic recovery that began in 2010, but it has not. In fact, the underlying decline in undocumented migration from Mexico stemmed not from changed economic conditions or increased border enforcement but from Mexico's demographic transition. The age-specific rate of migration follows a characteristic curve that rises through the teens, peaks in the early twenties, and then declines rapidly to age 30. If people do not migrate between the ages of 15 and 30, they are unlikely to do so later in life, and because of Mexico's fertility transition and the fact that so many young Mexicans have already settled in the United States, the average age of those at risk of leaving has steadily risen, in one database going from 23.4 in 1972 to 45.9 in 2010.³⁶

Whereas in 1965, Mexican fertility stood at 7.2 children per woman, by 2000 it had fallen to 2.4 children per woman, and today it stands at just 2.3 children per woman, barely above the replacement level.³⁷ As a result, over the past two decades the rate of labor force

34 Passel, J. S., D. Cohn, and A. Gonzalez-Barrera, "Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and Perhaps Less," *Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends*. Accessed on 12 August 2015 at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/net-migration-from-mexico-falls-to-zero-and-perhaps-less/>

35 Villareal, A., "Explaining the Decline in Mexico-U.S. Migration: The Effect of the Great Recession," *Demography* 51 (2014): 2203–28.

36 Massey, Durand, and Pren, "Why Border Enforcement Backfired."

37 Tuiran, R., et al. 2002. "Fertility in Mexico: Trends and Forecast." *United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Completing the Fertility Transition, March 11, 2002*. Accessed at <http://www.>

growth has steadily fallen and Mexico has become an aging society. Although undocumented migration from Central America continues, in many ways it has only become visible because of the absence of Mexicans along the border. Fertility levels in that region are also dropping; between 1965 and the present levels decreased from 7.4 to 3.0 in Honduras, 6.6 to 2.2 in El Salvador, and 6.4 to 3.8 in Guatemala.³⁸

Given the demographic situation in Mexico and Central America today, a return to the mass undocumented migration observed during the 1980s and 1990s is simply not feasible. Despite this fact, public discussions of immigration reform inevitably begin with calls for more enforcement to “secure the border.” Indeed, the border as a symbolic line of defense has now generalized beyond immigration to represent the emblematic bulwark against any and all external threats. In political rhetoric today, the achievement of a “secure border” with Mexico has become the central demand for ensuring American national security, not just with respect to illegal aliens but from any threat that appears on the horizon, including political Islam. As a result, more border enforcement has become a central feature of America’s “war on terror.”

In April 2013, for example, Texas Republican Congressman Louie Gohmert said on C-SPAN’s *Washington Journal* program, “we know Al-Qaeda has camps over with the drug cartels on the other side of the Mexican border. We know that people are now being trained to come in and act like Hispanics when they’re radical Islamists. We know these things are happening and . . . it’s just insane not to protect ourselves.”³⁹ Likewise in August 2014, Texas Governor Rick Perry told an audience at the Heritage Foundation that there was a “very real possibility” that individuals with the extremist group ISIS have crossed into the United States from Mexico, specifically arguing that the border is “insecure,” that “we need to have clear and compelling forces, both law enforcement and otherwise, to send the message that the border is secure.”⁴⁰

In the wake of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the border shifted from being a line of defense against threatening people to becoming also a bulwark against menacing microbes. In October of that year, Republican Senate candidate Scott Brown said in a radio

un.org/esa/population/publications/ completingfertility/RevisedTUIRAN-PARTIDApaper.PDF

38 Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*. Accessed on 11 August 2015 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

39 Robillard, K. “Pol: Al Qaeda told to Act ‘Hispanic,’” *Politico*, 17 April 2013. Accessed at <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/louie-gohmert-al-qaeda-told-to-act-hispanic-090212>

40 Killough, A., “Rick Perry: It’s Possible ISIS has Crossed Southern Border,” *CNN*, 21 August 2014. Accessed at <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2014/08/21/rick-perry-its-possible-isis-has-crossed-southern-border/>

interview that he doesn't want undocumented immigrants crossing into the United States because they might be carrying Ebola, pointing out that "people coming in through normal channels—can you imagine what they can do through our porous borders?" This warning followed Republican Phil Gingrey's July letter to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stating that "reports of illegal migrants carrying deadly diseases such as swine flu, dengue fever, Ebola virus, and tuberculosis are particularly concerning." Likewise, in an August talk radio interview, Republican Representative Todd Rokita told listeners that he and Republican Representative Larry Buschon shared a worry that migrant children from South America might bring Ebola across the border; and in his campaign for North Carolina's senate seat, Republican Representative Thom Tillis attacked his Democratic opponent Kay Hagan for her weak stance on undocumented immigration, claiming that "we've got an Ebola outbreak, we have bad actors that can come across the border; we need to seal the border and secure it."⁴¹

Alarmist claims that Al-Qaeda terrorists, ISIS cells, and Ebola infected migrants had crossed the border were offered without any substantiating evidence, of course, and generally without regard even to the rules of logic. For example, Mexico does not have a significant Muslim or African population and contains no known Islamic terrorist cells. Apart from this fact, planning an attack from Tijuana or Juarez makes little sense given that Arabic-speaking Al-Qaeda and ISIS operatives would certainly stand out in raucous Spanish-speaking border communities where drugs, alcohol, gambling, and other pleasures are openly peddled and where drug cartels wield considerable influence. Even if they were to establish a base of operations in one of these cities, when they got ready to strike the United States, Islamic militants would face the most heavily guarded border in the world, with the sole exception of the Korean DMZ.

Under these circumstances, it is revealing that the Mexican border is singled out as the key line of defense given that America's northern neighbor, Canada, houses substantial Islamic and African immigrant populations, has known terrorist cells, and, compared to Mexico, offers a longer and far less intensively defended border with the United States. Moreover, sealing either the Mexican or Canadian border makes little sense when the United States itself has direct air flight connections to Africa whereas its neighbors do not. What makes the southern U.S. border stand out uniquely as a symbolic line of defense in a threatening

41 Flores, R., and M. Koren. "These Politicians Want to Close the U.S.-Mexico Border Because of Ebola," *National Journal*, 9 October 2014. Accessed at <https://www.national-journal.com/s/52017>

world is its centuries-old framing as a barrier to ominous threats: to the institution of slavery in 1836; to full employment in 1929; to the capitalist way of life in 1954; to victory in the Cold War during the 1980s; to the war on terrorism, drugs, and microbes today; and throughout American history to the “brown tide rising” to the south.⁴²

As Texas Democratic Representative Beto O’Rourke told *The New York Times* in very concrete terms, “there’s a longstanding history in this country of projecting whatever fears we have onto the border. In the absence of understanding the border, they insert their fears. Before it was Iran and Al Qaeda, now it’s ISIS. They just reach the conclusion that invasion is imminent, and it never is.”⁴³ In more abstract academic language, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo observes that “the U.S.-Mexico border has become theater, and border theater has become social violence. Actual violence has become inseparable from symbolic ritual on the border—crossings, invasions, lines of defense, high-tech surveillance, and more.”⁴⁴

Aside from building on historical American currents of racism and xenophobia, the framing of the Mexico-U.S. border as a line of defense separating the United States from a hostile world does tap into the very real and widespread feelings of economic and physical insecurity in the United States today. Although blown out of proportion by the media, the risk of violent terrorism at the hands of Islamic militants is not a mirage—Muslim terrorists have struck targets in the United States and around the world many times and promise more in the future. In addition, economically, Americans have experienced three decades of rising inequality with respect to income and wealth, which have hollowed out the middle class and handed to the vast majority of Americans declining real incomes.

Whereas American fears of terrorism and economic insecurities may be well-founded, their projection onto the Mexico-U.S. border is not. Unfortunately, it is much easier and more palatable for politicians to chastise federal authorities for failing to “hold the line” and make a show of throwing more money into counterproductive but symbolically useful border enforcement than actually tackling the intractable problems that underlie terrorism and inequality today. In pursuing this charade, they find plenty of supporting actors, for fanning the flames of the Latino Threat Narrative boosts ratings to please the corporate

42 Santa Ana, O., *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

43 Schmidt, M. S., “U.S. Pushes Back Against Warnings That ISIS Plans to Enter From Mexico,” *The New York Times*, 15 September 2014. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/us/us-pushes-back-against-warnings-that-isis-plans-to-enter-from-mexico.html>

44 Rosaldo, R., “Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism,” in W. V. Flores and R. Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 33.

media, creates jobs to please unions that represent immigration enforcement agents, satisfies mayors of border cities where the Border Patrol is the largest employer, boosts the profits of stockholders of firms that provide prison space for the immigration detention system,⁴⁵ helps pundits sell books and raise their speaking fees, and all the while distracts the public from asking the many questions about rising inequality or real weaknesses in the system of national security.

The misplaced obsession with border security might simply be written off as another tragicomic example of human folly were it not for the fact that border enforcement is itself so wasteful, harmful, and counterproductive. It is wasteful because the Border Patrol currently has some 21,000 officers and a budget of \$3.7 billion during a time when undocumented Mexican migration has effectively ceased, undocumented migration from Central America is small, and total apprehensions are at their lowest level since 1973, when the Border Patrol had just 1,700 officers and a budget of \$345 million in today's dollars.

Likewise, the border obsession is harmful because it is not only costly but deadly, with at least 6,900 deaths among undocumented migrants from 1986 through 2012 and 477 corpses in the latter year alone.⁴⁶ The border obsession is harmful because its high cost in dollars and lives serves no purpose, given that past border enforcement had no effect in deterring undocumented migrants from leaving for the United States but did deter them from returning home and thus actually accelerated the rate of undocumented population growth. The time has come for the Americans to wake up, and for all those who have profited from the border obsession to admit the charade and join with others to channel resources away from border enforcement into more productive investments in the nation's economic health and security.

45 Douglas, K. M., and R. Saenz, "The Criminalization of Immigrants and the Immigration-Industrial Complex," *Daedalus* 142 (2013): 199–227.

46 Anderson, S., *How Many More Deaths? The Moral Case for a Temporary Worker Program* (Washington, DC: National Foundation for American Policy, 2013).