

Constructing a Virtual Wall: Race and Citizenship in U.S.–Mexico Border Policing

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The U.S.–Mexico border wall is not just physical—it is also virtual. *Virtual* in this instance has two meanings, one narrower and one broader. More narrowly, the virtual wall involves applying advanced surveillance and computer technologies to border law enforcement. Ground-level radar can be used to detect movement; information processed through a computer model indicates if it is, say, a cow or a person, and if the latter, the direction the person is likely to move, given the terrain. More broadly, the virtual wall points to the massing of police forces, including military and intelligence agencies, in the border region, which presents a web of obstacles to northward movement of illegalized people and goods, obstacles that usually are overcome, but at great risk and cost. Physical walls and fences and the technological “wall” are parts of this wider development, and should be understood in these terms.

The physical walls and fences present visible symbols of the coercive side of U.S. immigration policy (enforcement against undocumented migration; of course, there is also extensive legal immigration). They are crudely imposed between twinned border communities with long-standing ties, and they insult Mexico by treating it as a threat rather than a partner. Thus, U.S. governmental and policy circles hope that a technological system will pose an invisible wall with the same enforcement effects but without the negative attention. Also, the virtual technological wall offers corporations huge governmental contracts, drawing Homeland Security into the costly military-industrial complex.

We do not, however, have to accept the “technological solution” discourse at face value. Jason Ackleson (2003, 2005a) has demonstrated that border-control technology claims are overstated and that they face significant limitations in implementation. My goal here is to widen this

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critique by asking how and why the broad pattern—the constructions of physical, technological, and mass law-enforcement walls, has occurred, and what are its contradictions and limitations.

I begin this essay by delineating how the border-enforcement “wall” operates at the tactical level, and following that I explore the fundamental assumptions behind those tactics. Doing so helps take these technologies and tactics out of the realm of the normal and natural, to examine them as an overall system. I then state what these operations ideally should accomplish, from their immediate law-enforcement goals to the wider social goals that they are supposed to address. In turn, I consider the evidence on whether the border-enforcement wall has been effective or not. If it has been ineffective, why is the border wall being raised even higher? To answer this question, I consider how issues, such as migration and drug use, are turned into matters of national security, akin to military imperatives of defense against fundamental threats.

Moves to transform border issues into security issues are, we find, highly contested and contradictory. To tease out these complicated drivers of border policy, I explore some circumstances of the United States at the present moment, and some of the history through which we arrived at this point. This includes insecure prosperity and clinging to order in a world of vast inequalities of lifestyle, class, and power, and how such concerns are expressed in two ways: citizenship differences between deserving insiders and serving (but not deserving) outsiders, and racism against Latinas/os, especially Mexicans and Central Americans. A serious limitation of our current border policy is that it attempts to solve with one rigid and coercive mechanism a wide variety of issues in the societies on both sides of the boundary (Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Central America). I close by agreeing that citizenship, openness, security, and prosperity are important values, but argue that we err in displacing the challenges involved in obtaining them onto a single, illusory answer: a virtual border wall that has little effectiveness and causes much suffering.

THE VIRTUAL WALL IN PRACTICE

Enforcement occurs in three broad places along the Mexican border: at the ports of entry from Mexico into the United States; at or near the boundary between the ports; and in the buildings, streets, and roads of

the borderlands extending north from the boundary. At ports, literally millions of commercial vehicles, noncommercial vehicles, and pedestrians seek to enter the country. The bulk of this flow is legitimate, including international commerce and manufacturing, cross-border shopping and tourism, legal commuting across the boundary to work, and visits to friends and family living in the adjacent nation. Various laws and regulations are applied by Customs and Border Protection to this flow, such as declarations of imported goods.

Amidst this vast array of legitimate entries, the U.S. government attempts to detect law violations. These include the smuggling of a number of restricted or prohibited goods, including drugs. They also include people entering the United States by hiding in vehicles, by falsely claiming U.S. citizenship, by presenting counterfeit documents, or by presenting real documents that have been altered to falsify identity. Likewise, they include detecting people who enter with legitimate documents, such as Border Crossing Cards and nonimmigrant visas, but who violate the terms by working or residing in the United States.¹

The ports of entry face an inherent contradiction, in that they cannot function purely as a wall. They must serve as a filter that differentiates among entrants. Legitimate traffic must be cleared through the port for economic and social ties between the United States and Mexico to thrive, given that Mexico is the United States' second largest trading partner and its largest source of foreign-born residents. At the same time, the openness to entry and exit inherent in their filtering role represents a substantial gap in the outward security of the nation. Probably the bulk of illegal drugs enters through commercial shipments at land, air, and sea ports, while the 9/11 hijackers entered through airports (notably, not through the U.S.–Mexico ports). The ideal port would have an efficient, rapid detection process that sorted out law-violating from non-law-violating entries, that registered entries, and that assigned them regulations and tariffs as appropriate. Ports are far from this ideal, but their operations and technologies have strengthened in the last decade.

First, the documentation needed to enter the United States has become more rigorous. The Border Crossing Card is now hard to counterfeit, has a good-quality photograph, and has biometric identification (fingerprints) loaded on a computer-readable strip. Misuse of legitimate cards to reside and work in the United States continues, however, because few card-bearers are pulled aside for thorough questioning about their activities in the United States. As for false claims to citizenship, these have

become much harder to make in 2008, as land border entrants need to have a passport (possibly a less-expensive border identification card may also be issued). Border inspectors vary in how carefully they examine documents and ask questions, however, and they often do not or cannot enter computer-readable documents into databases, meaning that watch lists are not checked and entry registration does not occur.

Second, ports are being equipped with advanced detection technologies. Radiation detection devices, chemical signature “sniffers,” and activated neutron scanners can potentially detect both terrorist materials and (infinitely more frequently) smuggled drugs. Such devices are, however, inconsistently deployed and most commercial cargoes are not inspected with or without advanced detection technologies. The volume of border commerce is simply too great and the time required for inspection, even with such devices, too long for each and every shipment to be examined without bringing cross-border trade to a halt.

Another development is separate ports for privileged border crossers (both commercial shippers and noncommercial vehicles). To be pre-designated as trusted, the border crosser registers with the U.S. and Mexican governments, pays substantial fees, passes a background check, and, in the case of shippers, follows security procedures in documentation, warehousing, loading, and trucking. In turn, the trusted entrant can go through special lanes with faster transit times, while the U.S. government can dedicate less effort to examining such entrants, shifting resources to scrutinize nontrusted entrants.

Most non-borderlanders think of the border as those segments that are fenced or otherwise closed off, however, and not as open places of interchange. It is illegal to cross the border outside the ports of entry, and the Border Patrol works to detect and interdict such entries, including unauthorized migrants and drugs. The Border Patrol can either deter crossings by making the entrance too risky, or apprehend law violators, seizing contraband and returning or deporting migrants. The land border between ports can be roughly divided into two tactical zones: in or near densely populated areas and away from such areas. In the former, such as the boundary in San Diego County from the Pacific Ocean to the Otay Mountains; at and near Nogales and Douglas, Arizona; and so forth, the government has already implanted walls of solid iron plates or razor wire-topped chain-link fence, accompanied by high-intensity outdoor lighting and constant air surveillance. Since late 1993 in these locales the Border Patrol has stationed units in close proximity to the boundary

and in tight spacing relative to one another, which has had the effect of discouraging most unauthorized crossers from entering there. This has not, however, stopped or slowed the flow of undocumented migrants, but rather has displaced that flow along the border to more remote desert and mountain crossing areas. The concomitant rise in injuries, deaths, and smuggling costs will be discussed shortly.

The remote border areas have long been prime locations for drug smuggling, although most drugs probably pass through commercial corridors. After the change in migration policing tactics in late 1993, undocumented human crossing also rose dramatically in those areas. The government raced to catch up by deploying large numbers of patrol officers and extensive surveillance systems into the expanses of rural border. Such areas are too large for massed policing, however; urban deterrence strategies do not work in rural areas. Rather, people cross the boundary in these areas and move northward, while the Border Patrol attempts to detect their movement at or shortly after entrance, cut off southward escape routes, trap them, and effect arrests and seizures. This takes place over wide swaths of small settlements, farms, and deserts (including badlands and mountains), usually shot through with roads and trails. Walls and fences may be constructed but are constantly being cut, climbed over, or otherwise bypassed, and cannot in themselves constitute meaningful barriers without the activity of Border Patrol officers.

It is to this situation that the high-technology, virtual wall responds for the most part.² For decades, the Border Patrol has used fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters to monitor border areas from the air (as well as for other needs, such as emergency evacuation). Likewise, since the Vietnam War era the Border Patrol has used electronic motion detectors. Beginning in the late 1980s, heavily instrumented balloons and airplanes monitored the airspace over the border. The virtual wall, in part, involves increasing the density of and upgrading these existing technologies—to take just one example, by deploying unmanned aerial vehicles (“drones”) to carry surveillance cameras over the boundary. The application of new detection technologies forms a parallel development. They widen the ranges of electromagnetic radiation used in surveillance, deploy near-ground radar, place high-resolution visual cameras on high towers, and possibly use the satellites of the military or the National Security Administration. Another important development is computer integration of information from these detection systems, using landscape and movement models with multiple data inputs to guide Border Patrol

units on the ground to arrest unauthorized entrants. But it does still take ground units—no matter how much data is gathered, no matter how effective the models—to handle encounters in the field; to arrest people; to deal with emergencies; to transport people and contraband back to be processed; and to do the processing for seizure, voluntary departure, or deportation.

Some contraband and some undocumented immigrants remain in the borderlands, but mostly they move northward, precisely because these flows are embedded in U.S. society. This movement north requires transiting the roads of the border region, waiting in safe houses, and being transported through interior checkpoints by car, truck, and airplane. There is thus enforcement not only at or near the boundary, but in a heavily policed zone in the entire borderlands, including large cities, many small cities and towns, and farm districts. Almost all of these areas count majority Latino populaces. Houses are watched, streets cruised, and strip malls and swap meets monitored. Transportation points, such as bus stations, are checked often, and main airports always have officers watching passengers. Roughly twenty-five to fifty miles into the interior, fixed Border Patrol checkpoints halt traffic on all major highways, constituting a second line of questioning and identification before vehicles enter the rest of the nation. The whole border zone virtually becomes a wall.

People arrested for immigration violations are subject to criminal charges for illegal entry. But almost all such people are instead expelled through one of two administrative law processes: (1) deportation, a formal process of removal from the country, conveying a legal record and various consequent penalties (barriers to subsequent legal immigration, criminal penalties for reentry after deportation); and (2) voluntary departure, in which the migrant and the government waive the deportation process for quick (in the Mexican case, near immediate) removal to the home country. For Mexicans, this option allows for repeated attempts at entry until the person finally makes it through the border, meaning that all the efforts at enforcement are for naught. This practice of voluntary departure crucially allows for the steady influx of undocumented workers into U.S. society in spite of apparently massive efforts at border enforcement.

Since 2005, the U.S. government has held for formal deportation larger numbers of undocumented migrants, especially Central Americans but also many Mexicans. The government's motivation is more effective deterrence, an effect which has not been demonstrated. It certainly is

more legally punitive and involves time in prison (euphemistically known as a detention center). Small-scale smugglers rarely face significant penalties, unless they are abusive or defiant, simply being deported or given minor criminal charges (misdemeanor illegal entry, for example) because of the burden that border enforcement places on federal prosecutors, courts, and prisons in this region. In general, the high volume of arrests at the border imposes significant logistical barriers to full use of legal penalties as tools of deterrence or punishment.

The border has been partially militarized since the late 1970s, even though U.S. relations with Mexico are quite peaceable. National Guard units recently have been deployed to the border, as other military units have been in years past. One component of their work is logistical (such as construction and maintenance) and another is rear-echelon assistance in training in and using surveillance technologies. But, often military units are assigned to frontal listening post/operation post positions, where they conduct observations (but not arrests) and their visible, armed presence presumably acts as a deterrent. Joint Task Force North, operating out of Fort Bliss, Texas, coordinates military support to border law enforcement, especially in the areas of intelligence and surveillance. A web of civilian and military intelligence units also operates out of this location. In addition to literal military involvement in law enforcement, the border police organizations themselves have adopted approaches and tactics drawing on or related to military low-intensity conflict doctrine, bringing about the militarization of responses to civilian policy issues such as migration.

Immigration law enforcement is disproportionately concentrated along the border, although interior enforcement has modestly increased in the last three years (see Coleman 2007). The overall unauthorized immigration process—which we can think of as involving not only entry but transportation, employment, residence, consumption, and community life—extends far from the boundary and involves not only illegal entrants but also employers, landlords, stores, churches, and so forth. However, more than 90 percent of immigration arrests are made within twenty-five miles of the border. Also, these arrests are almost entirely of migrants, who are the most powerless people in the process, and to a very small extent of petty smugglers. Employers and other interior participants in the migratory process are rarely touched by law enforcement, and if affected at all, they are usually inconvenienced (temporary loss of employees) or fined; criminal prosecutions occur but are exceedingly rare. The geography of drug law

enforcement is more complex (there is more interior enforcement), but has a comparable overemphasis on the border. Likewise, migrant- and drug-producing processes occur far from the border in the interiors of the United States, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean. These observations pose an important question. If these processes span such a wide range of locales and could be regulated or reshaped at those locales, why does law enforcement focus so disproportionately on one boundary? That puts into question the very essence of the “wall.” Furthermore, because of the disproportionate enforcement focus on illegal entry at the border, Mexicans and Central Americans who enter without documents (about 60 percent of unauthorized migrants) are greatly overrepresented (well more than 90 percent of arrestees), while people who violate the terms of their nonimmigrant visas by staying past the expiration dates and working without authorization (about 40 percent of the unauthorized migrant population) are underrepresented in enforcement actions. Visa violators are more diverse by national origin and, it is worth mentioning, included most of the 9/11 terrorists (some were still within the legal terms of their visas).

Control of terrorism includes identification of small numbers of people by intelligence operations; their interdiction at airports, seaports, and the northern and southern land borders; and long-term law-enforcement operations against them within the nation. It is thus very different from the current U.S.–Mexican border obsession. The post-9/11 persistence and growth of unselective, non-intelligence-based, and non-investigative mass enforcement along the southern land border thus represents a policy choice to deemphasize protection from terrorist threats to civilian lives in favor of the regulation of Mexican and Central American service, construction, farm, and manufacturing workers. It uses the tools and rhetoric of national security for policy concerns about the class, ethnic, and citizenship composition of the nation.

This review of U.S. operations and tactics may prove a bit overwhelming. It is therefore worth highlighting its basic assumptions. Illegal activities, including unauthorized migration and drug smuggling, are to be kept out of the country at the place of entry, the border zone, rather than addressed within society. Such police action rests on the fundamental idea that the people involved in these activities can be deterred in two ways: being turned away by the visible presence of a border enforcement “wall,” or being discouraged by effective detection, arrest, seizure, and expulsion from the country. In turn, deterrence is enabled by information about

movement through the border area; that is, by comprehensive intelligence, surveillance, and assignment of police resources to prevention and interdiction. At the same time, the virtual wall must apply only to illegal flows, and must not misidentify or impede legal flows. This means that the virtual wall must also include an effective means of identifying and selecting those people and goods to be trusted as they cross the border or move near the border, versus those to be distrusted and targeted for law-enforcement operations. Again, deterrence is key: legitimate movers are not to be deterred, and illegitimate ones are.

THE IDEAL OF A VIRTUAL WALL

The ideal virtual wall would be *smart* and *secure* in several senses. Through advanced technology and tactics, the government would have the ability to sense and respond to almost all unauthorized incursions. The border would thus function as a hermetic seal against “bad forces” coming into the home space. Also, ports would intelligently and efficiently distinguish among people, vehicles, and shipments to sort out the law breakers, or at least those meriting close scrutiny, from trustworthy entrants. In other words, the border would be smart enough to deliver security to the United States while at the same time not impeding the cross-border flows crucial to Mexico’s serving as a low-wage export platform for U.S., Asian, and European corporations. The home space would thus be open to “good,” or at least profitable, outside forces. The ideal border would be a powerful and intelligent filter.

An underlying ideal of the smart and secure border sharpens the distinction between legal and illegal. The ideal situation is that people with legal and trusted status would be able to move about near or across the border without inappropriate stops, detention, and arrest, because of highly effective systems of surveillance and identification. U.S. citizens and legal immigrants would have nothing to fear, as stated so often in the current immigration debate, because they would not have broken the law. Privileged cross-border commuters and commercial shippers would actually move faster and with less scrutiny and inconvenience because of their high value, command of resources (ability to pay the costs of the program), and trusted status with the government. Only lawbreakers would have reason to fear surveillance, detention, interrogation, and arrest by the border-enforcement apparatus.

With respect to illegality, the smart and secure border would largely resolve three major societal problems: terrorism, psychotropic drug use, and unauthorized migration. This assumption posits that such problems come from outside the national territory. Hence, they would decline or disappear were they prevented from entering the home space. Unauthorized migrants, for example, would be so discouraged by the difficulty of crossing the boundary that they would quit coming in meaningful numbers. The United States would be saved from the illegal immigrant “problem.” The assumption states that the United States itself is not involved in the creation and perpetuation of these three issues—for example, that the U.S. domestic economy is not really involved in the employment, housing, and so forth of undocumented immigrants, and that the North American economy does not mobilize them from their homes in Mexico and Central America. Rather, bad actors from outside who penetrate an insecure boundary are entirely to blame, and the solution is having a comprehensively smart and secure border.

The border thus separates rightness, orderliness, and self from badness, disorderliness, and others. This conceptual boundary has been at terrible risk, but an ideal wall will reassert clarity and order. The virtual wall will reduce the ambiance of illegality and disorder, and renew the sense of protection and control. This will reassure a nation that no longer has unquestioned primacy in international relations, is stuck in intractable wars, has enemies that are difficult to discern, receives confusing global headlines from the mass media, and has an economy deeply penetrated by global forces, including both U.S. corporations moving outwards and foreign corporations competitively pushing in. The United States also faces disorderly internal trends, including widening income inequalities and rapid inflation of health-care costs, for which a perfect wall against lawbreaking outsiders offers a satisfying magic solution. We would all be safe and secure.

To an important domestic constituency, the ideal border would reverse the tide of social and cultural change that followed from the post-1965 Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian “new” immigration. Specifically, it would stem the so-called brown tide that has “invaded” the United States (Chavez 2001; Santa Ana 2002), the rapid growth in Latinos, especially people of Mexican origin, that is no longer just in long-standing Mexican-immigrant settlement areas but throughout the entire nation. It would stabilize socially, culturally, and economically an imagined America of the 1950s, after the cessation of mass European immigration and

before both the new immigration and the long decline of many regional economies that began in the 1970s. It would also reverse the forces of sprawl, expense, and degradation in the Sunbelt, restoring the perfect California, Arizona, Colorado, and so forth of the era when just internal U.S. migrants moved there, not these new international migrants. Of course, this vision confuses immigration of all kinds, including millions of legal immigrants, with the specific phenomenon of illegal entry, which a perfect border would prevent; it also neglects unauthorized migration via legal visa overstays. I discuss later the nuances of race, citizenship, and legality in the politics of borders and immigration.

However, multiple and contradictory visions of a perfect border complicate the ideal. To one set of interests and perspectives, the virtual wall would be the first step toward a managed, imported labor force, a new Bracero Program made up of people who would labor hard, would be glad (as it were) to receive a modest wage, and would return home when no longer needed or when being too demanding and assertive. Unauthorized migration would cease but well-controlled legal migration—permanent and temporary—would then grow. This is a vision in line with the border seen as a perfect filter of trade, as discussed. An ideal border would thus be open to capital investment, property ownership, commodity trade, information transmittal, and business trips and tourist breaks for the prosperous and well connected, but would tightly control working people—not completely closed to them, but always monitoring them, knowing when they entered and exited, and how they comported themselves while in the United States. Sometimes allied with but also sometimes bitterly opposed to proponents of this approach are the holders of a nationalist-isolationist vision of a restored past and a stable social, cultural, and economic present within the clearly delimited territory of the sacred nation.

IDEAL AND REALITY: HOW WELL HAS THE VIRTUAL WALL WORKED SO FAR?

The answer to this question is, not very well. The buildup of immigration enforcement and the tactical shift toward walls and intensive frontal policing in heavily traveled corridors began in late 1993. The Border Patrol, for example, grew from approximately 4,000 to 14,000 officers from 1994 to 2007, and projects having 20,000 officers by 2009. What

might appear to be powerful additions to law enforcement may actually prove ineffective, however, if the entries simply shift elsewhere or the undocumented migrants repeat their efforts at entry until they are successful—that is, if the deterrence assumption does not work. Surveying likely undocumented migrants in Mexico, for example, Fuentes et al. (2007) found that (1) information about U.S. border law enforcement did not deter them; (2) the rate at which past undocumented entrants reported being apprehended *fell* during the period of massive Border Patrol buildup; and (3) the rate of use and cost of smugglers rose dramatically during this period (also see Cornelius 2006 for an overview of evidence about success versus failure).

What do these findings suggest about the likely effect of a virtual wall along the border? Human smugglers have apparently kept ahead of the government, despite the post-1993 tactical shifts, added technology, and the buildup of forces. Likewise, unauthorized migrant flows have shifted to more remote sections of the border rather than being altogether deterred.

The migrants' "success" comes at a cost, sadly. Migrants now pay more money to smugglers, borrow more and thus are deeper in debt, and have higher levels of obligation to moneylenders, labor contractors, and so forth. They have been driven deeper into life outside the law, while smuggling organizations have become richer and better organized. Also, deaths and injuries at the border have risen dramatically because of the displacement of migration out of relatively safe urban corridors into mountain and desert areas. Conservatively, around four hundred people die each year crossing this border (Cornelius 2001; Eshbach et al. 1999; Eshbach, Hagen, and Rodríguez 2003).

A similar story can be told for illegal drugs, although street price data (a proxy for supply levels) are collected for the United States as a whole and not disaggregated for supplies specifically smuggled across the Mexican border. Drug law enforcement along the border started its recent intensification in the late 1980s, somewhat before the immigration enforcement surge. Michael Grossman, Frank Chaloupka, and Kyumin Shim (2002) found, however, that prices of heroin and cocaine fell substantially during the 1981–2000 period, and marijuana (more of which is domestically produced) rose in price but then fell again. As the authors point out, there are complex factors affecting illegal drug prices and diverse ways to assess law enforcement effectiveness, but drug prices offer no evidence that the virtual border wall has worked.

No publicly available evidence indicates that terrorists or terrorist materials have entered the United States through the Mexican border (Leiken and Brook 2006). It is possible that such activities have been deterred by border enforcement, and it is reasonable to argue that border inspectors should be trained and equipped for such an eventuality. But, as we have seen, the high degree of attention to the southern land border is a partial distraction from other risk locations, including sea-ports, airports, the northern land border, and internal terrorist actors. It is also arguable that the strengthening of smuggling organizations in response to immigration law enforcement makes the task of terrorism interdiction potentially harder.

The technology involved in the virtual wall, so far, is more promise than reality. Jason Ackleson (2003, 2005a) and Rey Koslowski (2006) have identified the main limitations. Technologies often are not yet proven to be operational and durable and their usefulness for ground officers not demonstrated. Detection technologies and computer database linkages have been deployed only in a limited number of places, and officers often do not use them regularly. Elaborate, integrated surveillance and targeting systems, in particular, are more in the realm of technological imagination than rugged, field-tested reality. The pilot project in Arizona for the virtual wall was an operational failure and will be redone from scratch, though with some lessons learned (Rotstein 2008, United States Government Accountability Office 2008). Without dismissing the new border technologies, we need to be skeptical about the grandiose rhetoric of corporations and government upper management, and likewise cautious about the U.S. cultural theme of “technology as miraculous solution.”

At the same time, we cannot assume that the virtual border wall will continue to be a porous failure. Annual border undocumented migrant arrests are down from 2006 to 2007, reports abound of shortages of undocumented workers in U.S. labor markets, and field observations suggest that immigrant communities are more scared than in the past. It is conceivable that crossing the border has become sufficiently difficult and expensive that either undocumented immigrants or drug smugglers, or both, will be deterred. We do not know, however, what to make of short-term fluctuations, and likewise do not yet have convincing evidence of a long-term change.

In the rhetoric of border buildup, the idea prevails that weak and flawed efforts were made in the past, that the border is in a state of crisis,

and that only adding more and more enforcement can address a situation that is out of control. These propositions are clearly wrong. The level of border-control effort has been both large and growing, whether measured in personnel or funding. So why continue to escalate border law enforcement? Shouldn't failure lead to reconsidering this approach? And why does the gap between the ideal of the walled border and the reality of continued flows not lead to rethinking these imagined ideals and their relationship to the realities of the United States, Mexico, and Central America?

Analysis suggests several possible replies to these questions. For example, many advocates of border escalation hold that not enough has been done, and that it has not been done well enough. But, what drives this impulse to do the same thing, over and over again, in the face of failure? Another reading is that border law enforcement has grown and is reasonably competent, but simply cannot succeed in the face of wider social forces, such as underdevelopment in Mexico and demand for immigrant labor in the United States. This may explain why the border enforcement approach is wrongheaded, but it does not explain why a wrongheaded policy is persistent and largely popular. One might posit that the ideal/reality gap is a deliberate failure, because the U.S. power elite actually wants a heavily policed, exploitable undocumented population. There is a thread of truth in this, but it is too simplistic as a whole-cloth explanation, as we shall see. Rather, I will argue, the impulse to fail and fail again at the border emerges from intersecting struggles in the politics, economics, and culture of the contemporary United States.

WHY ARE WE BUILDING A VIRTUAL WALL?

To approach this question, we need to step back from the standard ways we debate issues—whether or not a given policy mechanism, say immigration or drug enforcement, does or does not work. Instead, we need to ask exactly what frames are put around issues. What we see at the border, importantly, is the introduction of national security frames for the drug and immigration debates—a process called “securitization.” The 2003 creation of the Department of Homeland Security and its increasing emphasis on the Mexican border from 2005 onward reflects the trend. The death threat of international terrorism to the U.S. homeland after 9/11 certainly provided powerful rationales for expanding the security

frame to cover various border-crossing flows, even if they had little to do with the Mexican boundary.

Yet undocumented immigration is a very different issue from terrorism. Whatever position we might take on the impact of undocumented people on tax receipts and governmental expenditures, for example, this question is a matter of fine judgment about monetary costs and benefits, and not of preventing suicidal mass murderers of civilians. Clearly, knowledge of who passes through borders is relevant to terrorism deterrence and interdiction, but widespread arrest and detention of Mexican and Central American roofers and gardeners is not neatly explained as a way to stop terrorists. Indeed, it might make the detection of terrorists harder, in the sense of piling up a bigger haystack (more people, more paperwork, more distracted officers) in which to find the proverbial needle. What, then, is driving the unbounded securitization of marginally related border issues?

Securitization, fundamentally, makes a policy issue a matter of life and death of the state and the civilians within it. Its model is preparation for and deterrence of war. Thus, to securitize, say, reduction of violence by drug-smuggling cartels is to remove civilian policy tools and treat the issue as akin to war. Wars, above all, enormously strengthen the central state, in terms of personnel, resources, secrecy, and constraints on questioning policy choices. These trends certainly are occurring at the border. Likewise, securitization of a given social issue represents an extreme striving for order. Disorder is so severe that it is comparable to the death threat of attack, and only a war-preparation form of response can maintain or regain order. The border, as we saw, lends itself to such order-making visions. The analysis that follows, then, will delineate three networks of agenda-setters who favor such moves.

The first network is composed of corporate and bureaucratic entrepreneurs in the homeland security-industrial complex, who together with allied congressional representatives constitute the infamous “iron triangle” of budget allocation and public policymaking. Actors in the triangle gain budgets, personnel, technology, and authority by the growth of the virtual border wall. Internally, border enforcement bureaucrats fight over turf, but collectively they constantly feed the press, the Presidency, and Congress with continuous promotion of an intensified security approach. The public appearances on the border of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff in 2006–2007 exemplify the point. Meanwhile, the defense, intelligence, and surveillance industries see a

chance to turn modest border construction, maintenance, and equipment contracts into huge contracts for wall construction and implementation of advanced technologies (e.g., Boeing's \$2.7 billion contract for the Smart Border Initiative). Meanwhile, congressional representatives angle for contracts in their districts and jobs for their kin. Universities and think tanks pitifully lurk underfoot in hopes of a few research crumbs falling from the table.

A second network of border securitization agenda-setters are anti-immigrant ideologues. They have long existed, vocal and vituperative, with congressional allies in districts outside the borderlands (sometimes, however, just north of the border region). This network would have cheerfully led an anti-immigrant wave at any time in the last thirty years, but the particular opportune moment appears to have been provided in 2005–2006, when the Iraq War was turning politically sour and elections were forthcoming. Then, congressional Republicans brought forward immigration as a convenient distraction, putting the anti-immigrant lobby at the front of the media and U.S. political discourse.

The third key network that has recently promoted the border wall is major corporate and central state elites. During 2005–2007 this included Karl Rove, Michael Chertoff, Carlos Gutierrez, and presumably George W. Bush. These elites seek to mediate and manipulate lower-order political impulses (anti-immigration activists, iron triangle groupings) for their strategic ends. They seek two goals: to have an ample, inexpensive, easily disciplined transnational or migrant labor force, preferably one easier to manage than unauthorized migrants; and to have an efficient border-crossing system for people and goods transiting the global economic “highway” between the United States and Mexico.

These elites, while enormously sophisticated and powerful, face an important challenge. Their electoral political base is nationalist, to some extent authoritarian or at least security/state-oriented, and anxious about social and cultural change. The elite agenda-setters thus aim to keep globalization viable while appearing to please their nationalist following. Securitization of border control helps with their political task, though it threatens the policy agenda of rationalizing migrant labor flows, as seen in the failure of comprehensive immigration reform in 2007 combined with the continued escalation of border enforcement even without new legislation.

Such moves are opposed, of course, by politically significant pro-immigrant coalitions. One network of actors—with roots in Latino,

Asian, and other post-immigrant groups, some labor unions, and many churches—seeks an overall widening of legal immigration and legalization of current undocumented residents. These agenda-setters and constituents, sometimes termed the humanitarian or human rights coalition, have broadly resisted the securitization of the border, although some accept a law-enforcement approach at the boundary as a rhetorical and policy compromise in order to obtain greater legal migration. Border business, political, and nongovernmental leaders, who are historically ambivalent about boundary policing, have largely joined the recent coalition against physical border “walls” because they oppose visible symbols of U.S.–Mexico polarization, but they are split over virtual wall tactics because of the appeal of professional workforces and contracts in the homeland security-industrial complex.

A great mass of U.S. voters and media consumers form the constituency courted by these agenda-setters. They are anxious about globalization, fearful of terrorism, suspicious of “illegality,” and ambivalent about legal immigration. Public opinion about immigration and border issues is notoriously uninformed, contradictory, and hard to measure, with responses differing according to the exact question asked and the agenda advanced in the mass media at that moment. But, the broad tendency seems to be wanting lower rates of immigration, to be particularly negative about illegal immigration, and to express concern over the border being out of control (see Espenshade 2001; Pew Hispanic Institute 2006).

Kitty Calavita (1990, 1994) and scholars who have followed her (e.g., Andreas 2000; Heyman 1998a, 1999a) have argued that U.S. immigration and border policy can be interpreted as a symbolic political act. Symbolic politics involves adopting policy measures that give the appearance, in this case, of law enforcement, but are not carried out in meaningful ways. Or, if they *are* carried out, it is in a place and manner, as on the border, that does not actually injure powerful interests, such as employers who hire undocumented workers. Indeed, the virtual wall, taken as an entirety, produces the appearance rather than the reality of law enforcement.

Such symbolic politics satisfy the military-industrial and bureaucratic interests—after all, billions of dollars are spent on them. They placate the anti-immigrants—we are doing more and more at the border. They address some of the contradictory needs of the globalizers—satisfying their authoritarian and nationalist supporters while not really getting in

the way of the economic integration of Mexico into the North American system. If the elite has not fully obtained its ideal labor force, vulnerable workers continue to appear on employers' doorsteps, and key economic interests muddle through. Symbolic politics even satisfies the American public in important cultural ways. Outside is clearly separated from inside, legal from illegal. The troubling American addictions to drugs and inexpensive services can be put out of mind—no need for excessive self-honesty here—by displacing them onto the magnificent symbol of a threatened and then defended border.

Here we are starting to discern the faint outline of America's own contradictions, as we shift the inquiry away from how best to manage the outward boundary to inward questioning of our strange and contradictory politics of prosperity, integration, racism, order, and radical capitalism. Why do we pin so many hopes on this thin line to save us from our social and economic problems? Why, in the last three decades, do we obsess about Mexican immigrants? Why do we desire a wall that will be both secure and smart? In the face of incompleteness of results if not flat-out failure of existing walls, real and virtual, why do we insist on building a bigger wall?

THE VIRTUAL WALL: BUILT IN MILLENNIAL AMERICA

In the aftermath of the failure of comprehensive immigration reform in 2006 and again in 2007, the already substantial flow of resources into "border security" has sped up, and interior immigration enforcement has also increased, perhaps momentarily. As just discussed, we can understand these actions politically, as state and economic elites seek to satisfy a nationalist and xenophobic partisan base while promoting the global economy in the long run.

Let us restate this point, however, at a higher level of abstraction. The current political moment comes from the intersection of a more or less global capitalist economy and a particular U.S. capitalist society. Both dimensions need to be understood. The interests of key power elites in cross-border flows of investment, profits, commodities, and vulnerable labor are evident, as are their interests in having strong intelligence, policing, and military tools of the central state. But, to promote various power projects, they must practice politics within and utilize the social and cultural discourses of a specific polity and society. In this regard,

the United States' crucial characteristics include widening inequality, a vast central state, and many households with moderate to high material prosperity compared to the working poor of the nation and the world. Specific American legacies of racism and citizenship also influence the scenario. The obsession with imposing definite order, and using police and military tools to do it, arises in this context.

Our understanding of the mindset of defensive prosperity is imperfect, yet it is crucial to the contemporary United States. We should examine and critique it. One element might be a fear of sharing prosperity with others, including immigrants and their children (let alone the rest of the world). Leo Chavez (2001) has pointed out the concern in anti-immigration rhetoric about women and children coming across the Mexican border. One might also note the strong theme of closing the door to public benefits, including health care, municipal services, and public schooling. (I will discuss citizenship and law as idioms for this shortly.) Another motif is distaste, possibly hiding a sense of guilt and shame, at the hard, sweaty, unremunerative work of immigrant laborers. If such people are racially and culturally foreign, from beyond the wall, one does not need to identify with their struggles. A final thread is the confusion of prosperity with Americanness, and Americanness with a specific kind of post-World War II assimilation to Anglo-American culture and language, together with a distaste for otherness (a once-punitive lesson that descendants of poor rural Americans and past immigrants appear to have learned all too well).

Yet here come new waves of immigrants, some well educated and prosperous and others quite poor but hard-working, who through their distinctive languages, cultures, and social networks, threaten the comfortable cultural correlates of the American dream. Intertwined with xenophobic anxieties is disturbing knowledge of domestic and global environmental, economic, and political problems. There is much to be genuinely worried about in America's old age, and U.S. residents can be the bearers of both realistic concerns and paranoid fantasies all at once. Thus, in the virtual and physical wall, a certain selfish hope emerges for unity, uniformity, and prosperity and against insecurity, dialogue, and change.

In the period before 1940–1980, straight-up racism would have served to impose conceptual and material order in places where Mexicans migrated and lived. Public institutions were often segregated, pay rates were unequal, and immigration laws were applied capriciously to allow

workers in, keep them in line, and send them home when not wanted. Capitalist economic logic, ethnocentrism, and the selfish defense of prosperity aligned neatly along the boundaries of race. But Mexican Americans had long struggled for social justice and civil rights. Starting around 1940, they began to make real progress against strict racial inequality. The struggle took many years and is by no means completed, but by 1980, a new pattern had emerged. People of Mexican (and other Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian) origin now can often claim resources, rights, and standing in U.S. society as citizens, using that term in both its legal and its cultural senses. A more precarious status is legal permanent residence (still subject to deportation), but even then, the term *legal* denotes a standing in society as orderly, belonging, and not entirely foreign.

During the same period, however, labor and family-reunification migration from Mexico and Central America has amplified, not only in numbers but also in variety of occupations and locales. This has taken place through both legal and extralegal channels; indeed, the two are often hard to distinguish on the ground. As I discussed earlier, new immigrants, especially Mexicans, are often envisioned as threatening the imagined cultural correlates of prosperity. Yet marking off all Mexicans as outsiders and rendering them powerless is no longer as simple as it was during the period of strict racist hierarchy. A rearrangement of prejudice and victimization has thus emerged. The target now is “illegal immigrants,” mistakenly envisioned as always Mexican, with Mexicans often mistakenly envisioned as mainly “illegal” also. “Illegals” are precisely anti-citizens, anti-law, and anti-order. The U.S.–Mexican border distinguishes American law from chaotic outsidership. The people who cross it without authorization come from a mysterious and disorderly place, and by being in the wrong place for their legal status, they endanger the clarity of the protective categories. Hence, the intense concern with an all-knowing, all-seeing virtual wall to ensure the order desired by a wealthy but insecure society.

It is thus important to take seriously the rhetoric of citizenship and legality as many Americans inchoately express their understanding of who should have jobs, health care, college educations, and so forth. These debates are not simple, and not everyone who uses words like *citizenship* aims to reduce immigration and impose iron-fisted controls, but there is undeniably a thrust in the current language of citizenship toward drawing walls around the sparse sources of redistribution in an

era when wealth is becoming more unequal and social benefits smaller and smaller. Struggles over such claims may take place in Pennsylvania or north Texas, but the border is almost always invoked—as having broken down, as needing to be repaired. Symbolic politics is not just a phrase; the border wall is a giant public symbol for a television and Internet era that differentiates those who belong inside and have claims to public goods (citizens) and those who should remain outside with no such claims (aliens).

It is also important to take note of the contradictory placement of border residents and U.S. Latinos generally—on the one hand, pulled toward restrictive citizenship politics as entrances to and legitimation of prosperity and inclusion, including work for the police and military arms of the state; and on the other hand, repelled by the barely hidden racist themes in some border- and immigration-enforcement rhetoric, in particular the widespread confusion of *Mexican* with *illegal outsider*. In border and immigrant communities, then, it is important that we resist narrow, wall-like definitions of citizenship and strengthen the alternative citizenship politics of social justice and civil rights. Three reasons should inform us: (1) so that the subordinate labor position now and in the near future occupied by most immigrant Latinos and many others be valued by society and convey a decent standard of living; (2) so that this subordinate labor position not become permanent; and (3) so that immigrants and children of immigrants participate in and share the common goods of American life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

U.S. border-control policy does not consist only of the physical wall, I have argued, but also of a virtual wall of advanced surveillance technologies and massive police and military enforcement operations. The “border as wall” ideally would stop harms from coming into the country from outside, including undocumented migrants, illegal drugs, and terrorists. This vision assumes that such issues are solely bad forces from outside, and that American society would be safe from these dangers (and scary social changes generally) were the border to be walled off appropriately. It does not consider such issues as being deeply rooted inside the U.S. nation, its domestic economy and society, and its foreign policy, as well as being driven by globalizing changes in other parts of the world.

This border solution also assumes that deterrence and interdiction are successful in halting people and goods entering the country. However, evidence shows that the border is currently unsuccessful in these tasks, and more broadly, puts the underlying assumptions of the virtual wall into question.

Why, then, has the image of a boundary wall against all bads emerged so forcefully in the U.S. political imagination? I have told this story at several levels, describing specific coalitions pushing for border control interacting with the wider politics of a nation undergoing a period of insecurity, internal and external. Symbolic analysis helps us understand the appeal of borders as simplifications, turning complex issues into outside dangers that can be halted by a virtual wall of sufficient height and intensity. This context of widespread anxieties and symbolic resolutions poses both opportunities and challenges for key political actors. I have sought in analyzing controls over border flows, including capital, labor, and commodities, to recognize the instrumental power of capitalist and state elites and the structural tendencies of the capitalist economy, without requiring a perfect conspiracy or perfect systematicity, but also without succumbing to lists of plural factors that ignore unequal power. My view of the current situation is that U.S. and Mexican power elites accept the “good-enough” resolution of poorly controlled but large and vulnerable documented and undocumented immigrant labor supplies while advocating policies that would create, over the long term, more finely tuned and tightly controlled workforces alongside borders widely open to capital and commodity transfers. Yet the elite’s grasp on such goals is not by any means assured, especially if a variety of publics insists on having their voices heard.

It is, indeed, difficult to tell where the question of American borders will go. We live in a great period of rebirth and entrepreneurship sparked by the post-1965 immigration, as anyone can see in immigrant neighborhoods of once-declining cities and small towns. At the same time, about twelve million people suffer deep material and emotional hurt—withering, exhausting fear—every single day because of their status outside the law. The moral and practical threats to the American dream of prosperity, security, and belonging have not and will not go away because of a wall on the border, for these threats are both more global and more internal than anything a boundary can control. So far, the capitalist dream of an efficient wall that lets flows in and out muddles forward, while the homeland security-industrial complex salivates at

the billions to be made from pointless symbolic projects. But there is no large guest-worker program (there are some small ones), and the quintessential capitalist dream of importing Mexicans as temporary commodity units of labor has not come to pass. Radical capitalist surgery on Mexico and Central America continues, displacing common people left and right. The virtual border wall is just a moment in North American history, giving us no reason to think that it offers an enduring, let alone ideal, solution to our problems. We stagger toward globalization.

There is no simple solution to border controversies. If the virtual wall is not a magic answer, it would be equally wrong to dismiss all order-making functions of this and other borders. We should first separate much more clearly in our minds the distinction between securing civilians from terrorists (homeland security in the proper sense of the word) and immigration policy. Some terrorists were born or have lived inside the United States for many years, while others are migrants, but in all cases they are a tiny number of people, with specific ideas and networks that have little or nothing to do with the enormous masses of labor and family migrants who come to work, live decently, raise their children, and enjoy life. It is conceivable, though apparently not yet actually occurring, that terrorists could slip into the United States through a busy Mexican land border port of entry or among the thousands of undocumented entrants crossing by night. Yet the obvious response to this is to reduce the cover for terrorists by creating a comprehensive immigration reform that would slow substantially the flow of unauthorized entrants. We also need to reduce the business created for smuggling organizations and for drugs if the security apparatus of the government is actually to make us secure.

We need to rework the politics of the contemporary United States so that we relax the recurrent political hostility to immigrants and pressure to impose heavy-handed repression on the basically peaceful Mexican border. Choices about how to handle the border depend greatly on the climate in the national interior, and not just on objective assessments of border issues, and the policed-militaristic direction the border is going will not change until we alter these interior fears and impulses. In other words, we cannot just argue about how much sense alternative policies would make, but we need also to figure out what kind of politics will lead us in inclusive rather than paranoid directions. Otherwise, we will again duel over the imaginary perfect wall in a few years. Citizenship, openness, security, and prosperity are indeed important values, so we

need to develop alternative meanings and politics around them. They are double-sided, as easily used for repression and restriction as for widening the common good, and we need to think clearly about how to develop their humane and liberatory qualities.³ ✦

NOTES

1. A Border Crossing Card (sometimes called a local passport or laser visa) allows a Mexican border city resident with local ties such as a job and a house to enter up to twenty-five miles into the United States for up to seventy-two hours to visit and shop, but does not allow U.S. employment or residence. A nonimmigrant visa (sometimes called a *permiso*) allows the bearer to visit the United States beyond the twenty-five-mile border zone, for a period up to six months, but again not to work or reside in the United States.

2. In 2007, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it will spend \$1.2 billion for 700 miles of border “wall,” 370 miles of it to be double-layered fencing, mainly in urban areas, and the remaining 330 miles to use cameras, sensors, radar, and so forth. This is on top of 107 miles of walls and fencing already along the border.

3. I wrote this essay to read fluidly, with few scholarly citations, but I owe a significant debt to a number of scholars whose work should be recognized. The overall approach to U.S.–Mexican border enforcement is informed by Ackleson (2005b, 2005c); Andreas (2000); Andreas and Biersteker (2003); Calavita (1994); Chavez (2001); Coleman (2005); Cornelius and Lewis (2007); de la Garza (2006); Dunn (1996, 2001); Maril (2004); Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002); Nevins (2002); Payan (2006a, 2006b); Purcell and Nevins (2005); Santibáñez (2006); Sparke (2006); Tirman (2006); and my previous research and analysis (Heyman 1995, 1998a, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). Stoddard (1976) wrote the seminal article pointing out that undocumented migration is deeply embedded in the interior U.S. society and is not only a border matter. No single, similar piece exists on how outmigration is embedded in the unequal development of the Mexican countryside and the North American economy, but see Binford (2005) and Portes (2006). The concept of securitization is proposed in Wæver (1995) and Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), and a critical view of the securitization of migration is Huysmans (1995); critical examinations of the securitization of the U.S.–Mexican border are Ackleson (2005b) and Payan (2006b). Useful overviews of the history of U.S. immigration policy are Tichenor (2002) and Zolberg (2006); and histories/ethnographies of race, citizenship, and other invidious distinctions include DeGenova (2002, 2004, 2005); Hing (2004); and Ngai (2004). Citizenship ideologies; the divide between prosperous citizens and newcomers; and issues of connection, empathy, and exclusion are explored in Heyman (1998b, 2000, 2002); Hing (2006); and Sharma (2005). My symbolic interpretation of borders draws on Douglas (1966). For alternatives

to current border policies, see Heyman (1998b); Hing (2006); and Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002).

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