

The Hardening of the United States-Mexican Borderlands: Causes and Consequences

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Introduction

The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and "*Operation Blockade*" define the paradox of the United States-Mexican relationship. As the two nations move to intimate commercial interaction, the United States Border Patrol organizes a campaign to block the passage of Mexican undocumented workers from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua to El Paso, Texas.

This study explicates half of the paradox in describing and analysing the "hardening" of the United States-Mexican borderlands. Most of the hardening effort evolves on the US half of the binational Borderlands, but some initiatives also characterize the Mexican side of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo.

Many prefer to speak of the "militarization" of the US-Mexican Borderlands. The adjective applies well enough, but it carries a passionate, inflammatory connotation. Moreover, it is not quite accurate; some elements of the Borderlands' hardening do not involve military measures. In pursuit of accuracy and a tone of measured objectivity, this analysis utilises the less provocative adjective, while recognising the weight of the argument that damns the militarization of the Borderlands.

The discussion divides into three parts. Part one illustrates the hardening of the Borderlands by setting out some data on the expansion of defensive personnel and hardware in the area. The second part explores the causes of those measures by positing and analysing the putative threats to US security or interests supposedly countered by the hardening of the Borderlands. That discussion offers special attention to US concern with the movement of undocumented workers and drugs from south to north across the international line. The final section analyses the consequences of the policies and programs to harden the Borderlands and argues that they have been more frequently negative than positive.

The Hardening of the Borderlands

Burgeoning budgets, growing numbers of defensive personnel, and increasing amounts of equipment penetrating the area define the hardening of the US-Mexican Borderlands. The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) budget nearly tripled during the 1980s to US \$859 million. Border Patrol funding increased 82 per cent between 1986 and 1991 - from US \$164 million to US \$299 million. In October, 1993, the US Congress appropriated an additional US \$45 million to the Border Patrol to hire more officers.

After the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, the Border Patrol added about 1,000 officers for a total of 5,000. The 1993 budgetary increase foresees an addition of 600 more Border Patrol officers. About 80 per cent of the total guard the US-Mexican boundary line. In addition to the Border Patrol, about 1,000 National Guard troopers also operate on the boundary line along with growing numbers of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Department of Agriculture personnel, occasional detachments of regular military on "training missions", and a bewildering panoply of state, county, and local police, sometimes operating in multi-group task forces.

On the Mexican side, the Mexican military spearheads the Northern Border Response Force. The effort reflects US aid to the Mexican anti-drug campaign during the 1980s and early 1990s, doubling to more than US \$20 million by 1991. The overall program in Mexico burgeoned from US \$15 million in 1984 to US \$140 million in 1991.

A vast array of new equipment and hardware has flooded the area as monies are spent and the personnel armed to harden the Borderlands. Capitalising on technology developed for the Vietnam war and the 1991 adventure in the Near East, the Border Patrol and others are now armed with night scopes, sensors, infra-red devices, and a baffling set of other Star Trek affectations designed

to peer over hills, through buildings, into automobiles, and around corners.

The skies also bristle with helicopters, air planes, and "areostats" in search of miscreants crossing the line to attend school, find work, shop, burgle homes, or deliver drugs. The aerostats are large blimp-like balloons armed with radar to detect aircraft crossing the international line. At a cost of US \$130 million, seven of the awkward-looking creatures now festoon the United States Borderlands.

The hardening of the boundary also reflects a series of projects designed to identify *indocumentados*, hoodlums, or drug smugglers as they cross the boundary, or to increase the physical difficulty of their moving into the US. For much of its 2,000 mile length, workers have cleared the boundary line of flora. In a number of areas, ditches have been plowed, and fences repaired.

Most significantly, the INS began in 1993 to construct a series of steel walls in strategic locations along the boundary line. Built from steel plates utilised in the construction of landing fields, the walls are being put in place from West to East along the line. By early 1994, they have been erected on the California/Baja California state line between the cities of San Diego/Tijuana and Mexicali/Calexico, and on the Arizona/Sonora line between San Luis/San Luis-Yuma. By mid-1995, the schedule calls for the steel walls to harden the entire expanse of the international line around key twin city urban agglomerations.

In sum, the United States-Mexican Borderlands wax ever harder. The INS is more generously financed, the Border Patrol larger and better equipped, and the National Guard on the scene. Helicopters buzz the local folks; aerostats hover high above; the line is clear of flora below. Ditches have been dug; weapons issued; steel walls put into place.

Causes

The most significant causes of this extraordinary policy appear relatively clear, but the several weights, myriad nuances, and various extrapolations present more challenges to the analyst. These causes range from relatively uncomplicated developments like increases in border city populations to more complex issues like undocumented migration, drug smuggling, and cross border crime. Often the analytical conundrum involves several combinations of the causes in a

frequently changing constellation that evolves according to time and place.

At the least complicated level of analysis, increases in border policing spring from growing volumes of traffic in goods and services across the international line. Burgeoning binational trade has combined with increasing tourism and the growing flow of traffic between ever more populous border twin cities to create significantly higher levels of international traffic. Moreover, the NAFTA has focused attention on the Borderlands' environmental degradation, triggering increased governmental personnel to monitor air and water and to police traffic in hazardous wastes. As luck would have it, finally, the invasion of Africanized "killer" bees crossed the international line in 1992, catalysing a flurry of activity, including "search and destroy" missions designed to counter the dangerous insects.

With that point duly recorded, the really fundamental causes of the move to harden the Borderlands emanate from United States reaction to the putative perils of Central American refugees, narcotic drugs, and undocumented migration.

In the popular mind, undocumented worker migration and movement by refugees to the United States tend to be one dimensional. On the contrary, they involve differing motivations and populations - and distinct response from the US government. Undocumented workers come from Mexico; refugees emanate from Central America.

Movement of measurable numbers of Central American refugees to the US Southwestern Borderlands has about ceased in the 1990s. It no longer contributes to the siege mentality explaining the hardening policy, but during the 1980s anti-refugee policies played a major role in the US government's efforts to harden the Borderlands. The movement of Central Americans increased dramatically in the 1980s as internecine turmoil ravaged several Central American countries. In the US, the Reagan/Bush administrations ran scared. They saw both their anti-Communist foreign policy and their domestic popularity in jeopardy as American public opinion fabricated the image of an invasion of ever more brown-skinned Catholics, who may well have been Communists and/or terrorists in the bargain.

The issue crystallized dramatically in 1988-89 when the INS changed procedures for processing petitions for political asylum from Central Americans entering the US through Mexico. In late 1988 the INS began to process petitions at the point of entry,

stranding thousands at the boundary line as they awaited decisions on their petitions. The INS then built a "detention centre" in South Texas where as many as 2,500 Central Americans were detained. In the same context, the US Justice Department moved in Arizona and Texas to arrest and incarcerate American Borderlands refugee-rights activists spearheading the Sanctuary Movement, by that time catalysing thousands of adherents and dozens of churches and synagogues throughout the country. As noted above, the refugee issue no longer weighs heavily upon the Borderlands, but it plays a significant role in the several causes that combine to explain the policies to harden the region.

Anti-drug policy as cause for the hardening of the Borderlands follows the same temporal pattern as the refugee issue, but it assumed even more cogency during the 1980s and has been slower to recede in the 1990s. US preoccupation with drug trafficking across the international line evolved in the early and mid-1980s during the Reagan/Bush years (1980-92). With the coming of President Bill Clinton, US anti-drug policy has changed and been relegated to lower priority.

During the Reagan/Bush administrations, the official dogma on drugs set forth two propositions: 1) the curse of drugs in American society was caused by the suppliers from south of the international line; 2) the solution to the problem lay with police/military action. A siege mentality developed. It led logically to the hardening of the Borderlands described in part one of this essay. Police, paramilitary, and military forces armed to the teeth rushed to the region to interdict the drug runners crossing the line. Helicopters and aerostats took to the skies; flora was cleared from the boundary line; steel walls were constructed.

Although the Clinton Administration's drug policy remained a trifle fuzzy by early 1994, the hardening of the Borderlands appears to be less significant in the overall strategy. Interdiction has been declared a failure and emphasis shifts from supply to the demand side of the equation. Hence, more resources will be spent inside the US on education and treatment and less on interdiction on the high seas and at the boundary line.

While the end of the refugee challenge and the redefinition of the drug crisis might seem to indicate a retreat from the defensive attitude on the Borderlands, US official and popular concern with Mexican undocumented migration heated up dramatically during 1993. Anti-immigration has become the new *cause célèbre* in the United States,

as it has in Western Europe. The new crisis promises to add yet another increment to the panoply of causes promoting the hardening of the Borderlands.

Several salient sub-themes interact to explain Mexican undocumented migration as a principal cause of policies to harden the boundary line. They include economic hard times, cultural racism, and a vague sense of the need for political efficacy that combines with amorphous security considerations. More recently, the issue of cross border crime appears to have surfaced as a cogent part of the larger calculation.

The argument from economic hard times goes straight-forward. The level of unemployment and the sense of economic inquietude in the United States directly correlates to measures to harden the boundary line and keep out supposed competitors for scarce jobs. That consideration helps to explain "*Operation Wetback*" in 1954 and "*Operation Blockade*" in 1993. The racism factor is equally clear. As in many nations in the world, racism runs deep in the US culture. Brown-skinned Mexicans continue to be discriminated against, and they make ready scapegoats to explain difficult problems to simple minds.

The political/security sub-theme tends to a bit more subtlety. In its least complex form, it focuses upon the threat of terrorists stealing across the international line. Border officials in the United States have studied the threat and have formulated contingency plans. From time to time a call for special vigilance issues from Washington, most recently during the American military adventure in Iraq.

More importantly, the political sub-theme was articulated by President Ronald Reagan's cry in the early 1980s that the United States had lost control of its borders. The charge seemed to erode Americans' patriotic self-image; it defied the claim to sovereign control of the republic, particularly damnable in a great power. Whatever the reason, Reagan's declaration nudged forward a policy to harden the Borderlands. A former INS Commissioner's threat of a "silent invasion" of the United States plays to the same theme. In truth, it confects an even more insidious threat because it also touches on the racist sentiments that inform US socio-cultural values.

The new wave of anti-immigrant sentiment sparked in 1993 combines with the evolving fear of cross border crime to provide an important motivation for the continuing fortification of the boundary line as

the steel wall is constructed between the Borderlands' cities.

California's Governor Pete Wilson catalysed the economic issue in mid-1993 when he initiated a campaign against undocumented migration charging that *indocumentados* were robbing the state of US \$2.3 billion annually in recreational, medical, and social services. Despite a fair amount of evidence to the contrary, that charge had been simmering for some time. Wilson's declaration catapulted it to the level of a national issue. At about the same time, the gnawing concern of cross border crime achieved new proportions with a rash of publicity coming from several cities along the international line.

Operation Blockade cum Operation Hold the Line defined the upshot of the anti-immigration fever sweeping the United States. The initiative began in late September, 1993 between El Paso/Ciudad Juárez and is scheduled for San Diego/Tijuana by 1994. The operation consists of the deployment of massive numbers of Border Patrol officers, national guardsmen, and other paramilitary along the border to repel undocumented persons attempting to enter the United States. The change in strategy is more than the numbers of officers deployed. It also means that border officers block the entrance of aspirant *indocumentados* at the boundary line rather than arresting them and returning them to Mexico after they have crossed into the United States.

In sum, causes motivating the hardening of the US-Mexican Borderlands range from increases in peaceful trade in legal goods and services through the rise of cross border crime. In the 1980s, the influx of Central Americans seeking refuge and the flood of narcotic drugs triggered defensive responses from Washington. Opposition to Mexican undocumented migration has intensified and combined with the fear of cross border crime in the 1990s to provoke new policies to harden the boundary line with even more formidable fences and even more numerous patrols.

Consequences

Many of the consequences of hardening the US-Mexican Borderlands tend to be negative. They range from minor boon doggles committed in the Borderlands to major errors in the formulation and implementation of national public policy. They include the misallocation of scarce resources and the misperception of socio-cultural, economic, and political relationships of cause and effect.

In the area of boondoggles and financial misallocation, the tale runs from the ridiculous to the reprehensible. The ridiculous involves such things as a prank by a young (and ill-trained and unprofessional) national guardsman who climbed into a casket coming from the Mexican side-cost to the US taxpayer, US \$50 for repair of the casket's lining. An ill-conceived action by a group of Marines approached being reprehensible. It ended in a fire that scorched 300 acres of federal forest land on the US side.

The resources wasted on some supposedly high tech equipment is reprehensible. The radar aerostats have become something of a bad and expensive joke. With an original outlay of US \$130 million in addition to ongoing operational and maintenance costs, the blimps are unreliable in the extreme. They demand frequent maintenance, they cannot be operated in high winds, some have literally fallen to the ground. At one point at least, three of the six operating at the time had been taken out of commission. The record of rotor-domed radar planes is not much better. At a cost of US \$30 million each added to operating expenses of US \$5,000 per hour, they have been plagued with malfunctions.

But that is not the end of the sorry tale. In 1993, the US Army lost a couple of US \$1 million aerial drones operating in the Borderlands. One crashed. The other was literally lost when it failed to obey commands and headed south into Mexico. At last sight, the drone crossed over La Paz in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur destined to lose power about 60 miles out in the Pacific Ocean.

Back on the ground, the turf battles amongst governmental agencies in search of the additional monies wax unseemly and counterproductive. During the 1980s, the combat over anti-drug funds reached epic proportions. In that context, the US Congress in 1987 named the Border Patrol the lead agency on the war on drugs in the Borderlands, thereby diverting the Border Patrol's attention and resources from undocumented workers to an anti-drug strategy, where the money was. In the meantime, the numbers of undocumented workers and border hoodlums crossing the line increased significantly, contributing to the contemporary crisis, triggering yet another round of border fortification.

It must be recalled, finally, that the drug interdiction policy has been correctly declared a failure by the Clinton Administration. Drugs continue to move into the United States in massive amounts, no matter

how many Marines stand at the boundary line between the United States and Mexico.

That point leads directly to still another negative consequence of the hardening policies - the employment of the regular military in the Borderlands. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 forbade the use of federal troops in civilian law enforcement. It endured more than a century before being modified in 1981 and 1986 to facilitate the military's role in the interdiction of drugs coming north.

During the debate in 1986, the Secretary of the Navy damned as "*absurd*" and "*childish*" the move to have the US military block the boundary. The Director of the INS agreed in condemning the measure as "*simplicistic*". The Navy Secretary warned that ceding police power to the military is "*a fundamental threshold that should never be crossed*". The INS Director admonished the Congress that more problems would evolve and more resources would be wasted.

The transgression of human rights in the region has been one of the most profound problems to be exacerbated in the wake of the hardening of the US-Mexican Borderlands. The entire context reeks of a military garrison as more armed personnel equipped with ever more sophisticated weaponry invade the Borderlands. As Washington applied pressure to scotch the flow of drugs and as the numbers of undocumented workers grew, a siege mentality developed amongst US officials on the line. The sense of the situation is exemplified by a suggestion from US Representative Jim Kolbe from the state of Arizona. Kolbe has proposed the need for sensitivity training for border officials to assist them in recognising that not all Mexicans are "bad". In truth, the border crossing is frequently an ugly scene simmering with emotions of personal outrage and wounded national pride.

Beyond wounding pride, the US Border Patrol stands accused by human rights advocates of a plethora of transgressions ranging from verbal abuse to death. The list also includes denial of due process rights, sexual assault, and bodily injury. In 1993, scathing reports condemning the transgression of human rights in the Borderlands issued from the American Friends Service Committee and Americas Watch. A spate of reports and journalistic accounts have also condemned the almost routine violation of human rights on the Mexican side where officials tend to be even more ham-fisted than in the US Borderlands.

The US violation of the rights of Mexican nationals combines with the larger panoply of the hardening of the Borderlands to gnaw at US-Mexican amity. As the introduction to this essay observed, the scandalous paradox of the NAFTA in juxtaposition with *Operation Blockade/Operation Hold the Line* and the construction of the steel wall corrodes productive relations between the two nations. Mexico's President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) kept his peace as he coaxed the free trade agreement from the United States, but the situation is essentially contradictory and unstable. A more permanent and balanced understanding needs to be established between the neighbouring nations lest the fragility of the relationship lead to serious discord.

From the United States' perspective, the hardening of the Borderlands is symptomatic of a pervasive mindset that discourages intelligent public policy by perpetuating the myth that force and military measures can resolve social and political problems. The lunacy of unleashing the military and hardening the boundary line to resolve the social malady of drug addiction in the United States is a crystal clear case in point. In like manner, the hardening of the Borderlands cannot alone address the socio-economic conditions that give rise to the movement of undocumented workers into the United States nor, for that matter, that nurture cross border crime. In truth, the hardening of the Borderlands may well delay the resolution of those problems by offering the false hope that steel walls and well-armed Border Patrol officers define a workable solution.

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