

Chain Link Fences and Border Security

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Border Security and NAFTA

At the turn of the 21st century, the United States' land borders with Mexico and Canada have become increasingly closed to human movement. The systematic militarization of the 2,000-mile Mexico-U.S. border with long stretches of chain-link fencing begun during the economic downturn of the 1970s. In the 1990s, under President Clinton, enforcement took a larger-scale form. In the context of California's economic recession, undocumented immigration began to be characterized as a threat to social services, employment, and the racial composition of the United States. Because these discussions identified the porosity of the Mexico-U.S. border as the main reason for the growth in undocumented immigration, this site was also thought to be the most appropriate locale for enforcing the increasing criminalization of "illegal" entry, exemplified in California's Proposition 187.

The replacement of chain-link fences with wall-like steel structures and the implementation of intensified patrolling activity, exemplified in California's 1994 Operation Gatekeeper, dramatically transformed popular border crossing points in California, Texas, and eventually in Arizona. These changes coincided with the eradication of trade tariffs under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which accelerated the creation of maquiladora assembly factories in Mexican border

towns. Even though the trade agreement was sold to the U.S. public as a way to minimize immigration through job creation in Mexico, the opposite happened. Job opportunities in the maquilas attracted Mexicans from the interior of the country and led to a massive growth of border towns and their transformation into gateways for larger numbers of would-be migrants to the United States. Border enforcement did not stop these movements, but only shifted them to more dangerous parts of the border. Since the mid-1990s, proportionately more immigrants have died from exposure, particularly in the Arizona desert, than perished in the mid-1980s from drowning (mostly in the Río Grande) or from homicide and auto-pedestrian accidents in the late 1980s.

Terrorism and the U.S. Border

Under George W. Bush, the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border with new fences, additional Border Patrol, and National Guard troops that routinely assist in border patrol operations has been justified by linking undocumented immigration to the ever-present threat of terrorism since the attacks of September 11, 2001. The emphasis on terrorism has also brought into renewed focus the 5,000-mile Canada-U.S. border. This site had virtually disappeared from public attention in the 1940s when undocumented immigration across the Mexico-U.S. border increased as a side effect of the temporary guest worker “Bracero” program.

Today, both U.S. land borders are viewed through a lens that often blurs the lines between terrorism, immigration, and cross-border smuggling. Even though the Palestinian Gazi Ibrahim Abu Mezer had as early as 1997 been caught at the Canada-U.S. border with bomb-making material, it took 9/11 to change prevailing views of this boundary as “the world’s longest undefended border” to one foregrounding its function

as a potential entry point for terrorists. Early investigative reports suggested that some of the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks illegally entered the United States via Canada.

Although all of the nineteen terrorists arrived legally on a variety of visas, these often-repeated allegations served to attack Canada's more liberal refugee laws and visa-free agreements with other countries. Under pressure from the United States, the Canadian government soon "harmonized" their policies with similar U.S. provisions and also deployed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to border patrol and counterterrorism tasks. U.S. enforcement included a tripling of U.S. border agents stationed at the Canada-U.S. border, the installation of new surveillance equipment, and (plans for) the erection of fences along particularly "sensitive" portions of the northern border. For example, the "Seaway Corridor" that bisects Cornwall Island on the transnational Akwesasne Mohawk reservation now sports a ten-foot chain link fence topped with barbed wire, and plans exist to build fences separating the towns of Derby, Vermont and Stanstead, Québec, which share an opera house and a library that are literally bisected by the border.

There are indications, however, that in the last years of the Bush Administration, the threat of terrorism may be beginning to lose its force as a major justification for U.S. border militarization. When Congress authorized \$1.2 billion for the erection of additional 700-miles of "virtual" and steel fencing along the Mexico-U.S. border in 2007, it did so to control undocumented immigrants and drug smuggling. The shift from terrorism as a major reason for border militarization to undocumented immigration and drug smuggling may indicate a return to long-standing practices in the United States

that have associated the dominant fears of a particular time period, such as alcohol during Prohibition and drug trafficking in the 1980s, with crossborder human movement to justify increased border enforcement.

Historic Border Enforcement Failures

Perhaps the next president of the United States can learn a lesson about the futility of border enforcement from the last great migration (1870 to 1914), which far surpassed the current rate of immigration relative to population size. The passage of restrictive immigration legislation in the 1870s and 1880s and its enforcement at U.S. land borders did not prevent migration. Instead, immigrants continued to arrive in the United States “illegally” and on more circuitous routes. Following the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in the context of a recession after the completion of the railroads, Chinese immigrants entered at official U.S. ports with fraudulent documents or traveled to Canada and then traversed the unsupervised border into the United States.

After the passage of the 1885 Foran Act, large numbers of Europeans now fearing to be excluded as “contract labor” also used the Canadian boundary as a back door into the United States. The stationing of U.S. inspectors at Canadian seaports where they inspected immigrants destined for the United States and the creation of Canadian border checkpoints in the 1890s exemplified the increasing enforcement of the Canada-U.S. border to human movement. At the United States’ southern boundary, U.S. enforcement personnel was charged with preventing immigration from China, and since the 1920s, with controlling the much larger number of immigrants from Europe

who defied exclusionary quota legislation passed in the context of yet another recession.

It took the Great Depression and World War I to slow immigration from Europe and Asia to a trickle. By the 1930s, these changes also led to the decline of immigration from Mexico, whose growth during the 1910s and 1920s led to the creation of quarantine stations along the border and the application of existing immigration law to Mexican nationals.

The Economic Influence

What has historically minimized human border crossings, then, has not been U.S. border enforcement, but economic and political developments on a global scale. We may be seeing similar developments today. Between the first quarter of 2006 and 2007, border apprehensions fell 26 %. This decrease may correlate with a slowing of immigration in response to the ongoing economic downturn in the United States.

The past may be on the verge of repeating itself. Every time the United States enters some form of recession, “illegal” movements by people or goods across U.S. national borders surge to national attention, while the underlying structural reasons for the economic decline are seldom discussed. But the end of George W. Bush presidency may also mark the beginning of change. Perhaps we have now arrived at a time when the United States is no longer able to disguise its fall from sole superpower status through a focus on supposed external threats to the U.S. nation, such as terrorism, undocumented immigration, and smuggling, against which national borders need to be fortified.