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Border Security: A Comprehensive Review of the United States' Approach to Southwest Border Policy

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A Comprehensive Review of the United States' Approach to
Southwest Border Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the effect that the presence of a physical border wall on the southern United States-Mexico border has on deterring unauthorized immigration, illegal drug-trafficking, and countering narco-terrorism. While current techniques and legislation have intended to secure major crossing locations, they have resulted in a redistribution of border route traffic putting more immigrants in fatal danger and increasing demand for coyotes, or human trafficking guides. Not only have the government and media created a public perception of fear in its efforts to protect the homeland through national security, but there have also been negative effects on people on both sides of the border in the process. The impact of political-economic factors of border security and its ties to foreign policy will be considered as well as the relevance of drug violence and immigration perspectives in creating legislation. This paper will seek to describe a more comprehensive and contemporary border policy that utilizes technology and more inclusive policy while still upholding prevention of danger on America's homeland.

The reality of a physical wall on the U.S.-Mexico border is unaligned with the fantasy of complete deterrence from illegal border crossing. Until a near-perfect virtual detection system is effectively-tested and established, the United States should be taking the approach of more inclusive and less paranoid contemporary border policies, while focusing border policing on drug smuggling and human trafficking organizations as opposed to immigrants and refugees. In policing the stream of immigrants and drugs crossing the US-Mexico border, one of the biggest indicators of the escalated immigration attention and border law enforcement has been the physical wall as an emblematic barrier. This escalation has been converted into action through the increasing budgets for agencies, a synthesis of merging law enforcement and national security interests and assignments, stricter legislation, and the implementation of continually progressive state-of-the-art surveillance technologies (Andreas 2009). Although escalated attention is occurring on both sides of the border line, the United States has gone on the offensive with tougher policies that result in the ultimate design of fences built to stop undocumented workers and potential terrorists. Current US policy also targets and marginalizes undocumented workers through requiring them to carry identification using ‘show-me-your-papers’ laws, yet conflictually encouraging cheaper labor to build profits for corporations (Cabrera 2014). However, such laws in place for routine encounters have been reproached as a form of racial profiling. In an attempt to secure major border crossing locations from illegal immigration under the veil of increased terrorism danger – which includes drug cartels and their affiliations – an amplified border policing state has been the primary tactic of the United States. In analyzing the state of security at the nation’s southern border, it is necessary to consider other approaches within the domain of social, political, and economical contexts in regards to both the Mexico and the United States’ federal, state, and local initiatives.

The perception of unauthorized immigration as a threat to American ideals has legitimated the strategies of border control that are currently in place. These new transnational threats that have been the primary focus of concern – unauthorized immigration, drug trafficking, and transnational terrorism – have initiated responses that generally serve military and economic objectives. Yet through a decrease in inter-state wars and progression in international trade, globalization has contributed to a “border-

blurring” effect and the objective of denying territorial access to “clandestine transnational actors” (Rytz 2008).

Since September 11, the American population has been generally fearful of the threat of terrorist attacks against the homeland. This fear was largely inserted into the border discourse and the threat that immigration provided to national security as a whole (Andreas 2009). As a result, national security and border agencies were consolidated into one department to present the aura of a strengthened, united presence to curb the menace of terrorism. Along with the merging of protective forces came the Secure Border Initiative providing legislation to waive any interference in raising a \$3 billion wall extending 670 miles from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego in addition to a \$1.6 billion virtual fence called SBInet in Arizona (Correa-Cabrera 2014). The collective emphasis of physical and virtual border wall deterrence policies have attempted to impart the perception of an increased risk of fatality and decreased probability of getting past federal officials. However, policies that had an intended purpose to deter illegal immigration and drug trafficking have had the unintended consequences of a redistribution of the flow of people across the border. Deadly outcomes of unauthorized migrants altering their routes north towards more environmentally treacherous journeys through remote areas have posed a human rights concern on undeterred border crossers (Rytz 2008).

The growing sense of fear instilled within Americans, largely through the spread of mass media, has combined the prospect of transnational terrorist threat with the unparalleled drug violence within Mexico and Honduras and the potential for border spillover (Correa-Cabrera 2014). Through a phenomenon often called the ‘politics of fear’ where journalists and politicians take into account their own self-interests and agendas through the excessively dramatized depiction of violence and hypothetical hazard, a media spectacle is created. The fear of infiltration is thus regularly used to rationalize the overzealous border security and occasional inhumanely strict legislation establishing processes that are often intentionally incomprehensible to unauthorized immigrants seeking safe haven and economic opportunity (Correa-Cabrera 2014). In addition to fear politics, there also exists an anti-immigration argument that more unauthorized workers in the United States take jobs from native-born Americans,

saturate the economy, benefit from tax payers, and result in higher crime rates, though few of these arguments are derivative of a factual basis.

The portrayal of the individual illegal alien immigrant as a potentially dangerous harbinger of drug violence is an overused, inaccurate scare tactic and a hindrance to the progression of pragmatic, forward-thinking American legislature. The constant fear has not only a negative impact on the psyche of the American citizen, but is also an affront to the national opinion towards unauthorized immigrants through their portrayal as the archetypal enemy. In allowing the media to tie immigrant status into the hostility of drug-violence spillover, the American public has successfully distanced the responsibility of human rights tolerance validated by a fallacious fear of personal and national danger. Yet the assumed spillover of gang violence has been almost non-existent on the United States' side of the border, despite the exponential growth of drug-related violence within Mexico since former Mexican President Calderon declared war on drugs in 2006 (Correa-Cabrera et. al. 2014). Supporters of an excessively militarized border may and often do attempt to attribute the minimal occasion of drug-cartel related incidents to the current border security measures. The fact of the matter is that despite the amplified procedures, although less people are actually crossing the border, immigrants are still attempting to make the crossing regardless and more and more are dying due to extreme elements.

Driven by the events of September 11, the increased political support to immobilize illegal immigrants crossing the border and prevent the loss of US jobs has allowed the organizational combination of illegals and terrorists into the same grouping. "Thus, the problem of objectively dehumanizing people also lays the groundwork for legitimately keeping them out of our borders at any cost and without regard for the social, political, and economic consequences for innocents who happen to be unfortunate enough to reside along the Rio Grande" (Garrett and Storbeck 2011). The physical border wall then becomes a symbolic representation of the source that separates "us" from "them". The term "illegals" alone contributes to this depiction of otherness where immigrants are dehumanized and perceived as undeserving of the same constitutional or even human rights. Through this perception, their defined existence becomes solely based on this status of illegality in a country where laws openly and

actively oppose their presence (Nevins 2010). The effective groupism combined with the exploitation of post-9/11 insecurity is enough, in the eyes and perception of the general public, to create subjective, geographically representative boundaries that fit the 'us-vs-them' narrative in what is ultimately a human construct (Jones 2011). Human constructed borders are often necessary in defining the homeland from the outside world. In passively accepting and practicing the narrative that people are only allowed to legitimately belong to a certain territory, the media and politics of fear have successfully and figuratively created aliens of undocumented immigrants.

The apparatus of the border wall provides a manifestation of security mainly for constituents who do not live within the region and thus believe its physical presence will tangibly stop terrorists. Yet there has been partisan rift on the border wall's existence. Generally, groups supporting the wall consist of members of the executive branch of the American government and the substantial fraction of the American public who see the wall as an idea of protection rather than a physical presence. Mainly agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection support the militarization of the border and generating a microcosm economy with a larger government presence and more federal employment. In this model, reducing a militarized border presence would result in a loss of jobs as well as bureaucratic standing and power (Garrett & Storbeck 2011). However, people residing in or around the region of the Rio Grande Valley are heavily opposed to the wall's existence. Public resistance from citizen groups, mayors, business leaders, property owners, public officials, clergy, and local individuals have and continue to oppose the detriment the wall contributes to the social, political, and economic well-being of the area. These individuals often cite issues such as disruption of ties with friends and family in border communities, destruction to the environment, reduction of trade between communities and across border, negative economic impact, loss of property, and undesirable aesthetics of the construct don't believe the trade-off for the alleged security is worth their troubles (Garret & Storbeck 2011).

The construction and phenomenon of the border wall as well as its portrayal by the media as a safety blanket can undoubtedly be attributed to globalization and the war on terror. Whereas the United States once condemned the implementation of a border

fence as antiquated and merciless through the likes of the Berlin Wall, the sentiment has shifted dramatically towards an emphatic vision of the border wall that ensures liberty, protects US national security, and upholds modern civilization. This shift has more or less came about from the perception as the United States being on the righteous and vindicated side defending the general welfare of its people from the horrors of murderous drug cartels and infiltrating terrorists. Despite predictions that globalization could potentially create a homogenized, borderless world where conflict might stem from defense of traditional practices, the late 90s-early 00s, in the context of post-9/11, saw more borders going up than the previous four decades of the Cold War period combined (Jones 2011). In this framework, border security isn't a novel result of the war on terror, but rather the summation of providing protection to wealthy, privileged societies of the first world from people of 'other' places. The dramatized fortification of civilization has created the "confluence of the narratives of globalisation and the global war on terror" producing "the most bounded and bordered world we have ever known" (Jones 2011).

In following this narrative and critiquing government-implemented techniques with the intention of deterrence, it is imperative to note that regardless of the escalated drug-related violence on the Mexico side of the border, there has been no knowledge of terrorists entering through the US-Mexico border yet it continues to be the domestic policy focus on the war on terror (Garrett & Storbeck 2011). The earliest policy implication of drug violence on the US-Mexico border can be traced to Nixon's campaign declaring war on drugs in the 70s following increased recreational use. Reagan's administration complemented this policy implementation through targeting drug smuggling in the southeast through southern Florida from the Caribbean. Due to successes in reduction of smuggling by air and sea, the flow of drugs transferred to the ground primarily through Mexico and in the process empowered Mexico's drug-trafficking organizations (Andreas 2009). These organizations conduct violent business in a highly competitive market because of the high demand for product on the other side of the border. Cartel organization violence would be less of a threat if there wasn't such a sizeable customer base within the United States. US policy and the dwindling war on

drugs are tied up in the disarray of securing the border from the profit gained from selling those drugs within the US.

Since former Mexican President Calderon declared war on drugs in Mexico in 2006, over 60,000 people have been killed in conjunction with drug violence (Correa-Cabrera et. al., 2014, p. 39). The association that the war on drugs has with drug war border violence has impacted and contributed to the nations' public perceptions of fear and has brought about government policies to target drug trafficking with political-economic legislation. The modernization of Colombia's armed security forces through the Colombia Plan to combat revolutionaries and drug-traffickers was one of the building blocks to a new strategy of securing geopolitical and socioeconomic interests in South America under the stabilization of its national security interests (Delgado-Ramos, 2011, 94). Through this strategy of stabilization-destabilization, the United States achieves Latin American dependency while maintaining geopolitical goals in the process. The Merida Initiative, aimed to provide Mexico with tactical advice, military training, and equipment to combat narco-terrorism, ties into this plan of reliance and socioeconomic interests by generating spending on weapons, equipment, and their maintenance (Nelson 2009). It is by way of these provisions that the Initiative aims to balance out a disproportionateness within the administration of Central America. In navigating corruption in Mexico's state and local governments, the United States intended to focus the Merida Initiative on Mexico's army rather than police. Drug cartels and traffickers in Mexico continue to gain more power and leverage within their territory as a result of organizational profits. To reverse the increase in influence of drug trafficking, the Merida Initiative supplies arms, advanced surveillance technology, inspection equipment, technical advice, and secure communications systems (Nelson 2009).

Although a physical wall exists along much of the southern border, its existence does not diminish the necessity of having federal border patrol agents present. Agents enforce not only the ports of entry from Mexico to the United States, but the boundaries around and between the ports as well as the infrastructure and roads that lead through the borderlands. While most access through the border is lawful, border patrol agents encounter many incidents during enforcement. These violations include people falsely

claiming citizenship, hiding in vehicles, smuggling restricted goods and contraband besides drugs, and people presenting either falsified documents or falsified identities (Heyman 2008). In cases where these incidences occur during border enforcement, undocumented immigrants attempting to cross the border are turned around and often venture to try crossing in the future.

An innovative and rational suggestion in approaching the border wall is to focus more attention to eliminating the symbol of oppression versus the symbol of protection that bordering creates, and creating an expansive virtual wall. Applying technology and its capabilities towards the possibilities of playing a fundamental role in pragmatic border protection technique must become an objective of the nation's federal government. Funding must be sought in catching border practices up with proficiencies in modern technology and advanced computer surveillance (Andreas 2009). More adaptive information processing is necessary to improve communication on the border and has the potential to conserve budgetary options in the long-run (Heyman 2008). A virtual wall may also have the effect of deterring future cross-border, transnational terrorism with the attention a novel, cybernetic apparatus may include.

In responding to the state of security at the border and applying solutions that take more humanistic, comprehensive approaches, one must reflect on the existing flaws of the current system. The United States has an obligation to distinguish between grouping terrorists with immigration policy and changing the national atmosphere. The terrorist complex injected into the border discourse from the post-9/11 anxiety must be approached from a compassionate and pragmatic perspective to make the general public more open to immigration discussion and reception. Support has also increased in favor of research towards an invisible virtual wall with improved enforcement effects without the negative attention that comes with having the physical wall in place. To enhance the security aspect of border control by reducing smuggling operations such as drug-traffic, scholars also recommend reducing cover for terrorists through a comprehensive reform that would substantially slow the flow of unauthorized entrants (Heyman, 2008, p. 327). Thorough reform needs focus on accommodating competent direction towards citizenship to adequately reduce recurring political hostilities from immigrants.

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