

Handout 4.1 - Militarization of the Border

By Timothy J. Dunn, José Palafox. 2005

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States

Border enforcement has escalated sharply along the United States-Mexico border since 1993, as the U.S. Border Patrol has implemented four major operations that mass agents and other enforcement resources at traditional unauthorized border crossing points near urban areas. The operations are Blockade/Hold the Line (1993) in El Paso, Gatekeeper (1994) in San Diego, Safeguard (1994) in southern Arizona, and Rio Grande (1997) in South Texas. The Border Patrol and its parent body the U.S. Immigration and Citizenship Services (USCIS), until March 2003, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), have championed the approach as "prevention through deterrence," though the strategy also attempts to divert unauthorized border crossers into more remote, difficult terrain. It seeks to prevent unauthorized crossers, overwhelmingly Latina and Latino, from blending into largely Latina and Latino local communities, with a border police force that is approximately half Latina and Latino.

There is much debate over the effectiveness of this effort. The Border Patrol has succeeded in creating an image of the United States-Mexico border as "under control" by channeling undocumented migration into more isolated areas. Border Patrol apprehensions of unauthorized crossers in the Southwest-95 percent of whom are Mexican and most of the remainder Central American-have fluctuated wildly, jumping 68 percent from 1994 to 2000 (from 979,101 to over 1.6 million) and then dropping sharply through 2002 (929,809), just slightly fewer than when the main operations started in 1994, despite roughly doubling the number of Border Patrol agents (to almost 10,000) and almost tripling the budget for INS border-enforcement efforts. There has been a "squeezing the balloon" displacement effect among the Border Patrol's nine sectors along the United States-Mexico border, as apprehensions generally fell drastically in most sectors targeted by the operations (especially San Diego and El Paso), while rising in others (especially Arizona and eastern California). Meanwhile, the undocumented immigrant population within the United States more than doubled during the 1990s to an estimated 8 to 9 million, in part because many people opted for longer stays instead of circular migration as a result of increased border enforcement.

The increased enforcement has been accompanied by a rise in the number of deaths of unauthorized border crossers in the region, as they have been pushed into more remote and dangerous areas (deserts, mountains, and brush country). Estimated border crossing deaths range from more than 1,600 from 1993 through 1997, to 1,422 from 1996 through 2000, for an average of some 300 per year. In response, the Border Patrol implemented "Operation Life Saver" in 1998 and rescued over 1,800 migrants in distress during 2002. INS (USCIS) and Border Patrol officials blame migrant deaths on unscrupulous smugglers, and they use evidence of increased migrant smuggling and fees as evidence of the success of their enforcement operations.

Beyond this, the unit has a long record of human rights abuses, as their enforcement efforts have been overwhelmingly directed against Latinas and Latinos in the border region—citizens and legal residents, not just unauthorized border crossers. However, the more recent Border Patrol operations have lessened direct agent contact with the public, reducing the potential for abuses.

Operation Blockade/Hold the Line

The operation that became the model for the rest was launched in September 1993 by the El Paso Border Patrol as Operation Blockade (later renamed Operation Hold the Line). Previously, the El Paso sector had typically been the Border Patrol's second busiest in terms of apprehensions. In a radical departure from previous tactics that had centered on roving patrols in the city, some four hundred agents in Border Patrol SUVs were placed in fixed positions directly on the banks of the Rio Grande along twenty miles of the river dividing El Paso from Ciudad Juárez. This wall of agents was supplemented by frequent, low-flying helicopter patrols, the repair of holes in border fencing, and the placement of generators and bright lights on the river near agents' locations. It has continued ever since, though on a smaller scale after the first several months.

The origins of Operation Blockade were decidedly local. Over the preceding year there had been a growing outcry from Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants with evidence of mistreatment and rights abuses by agents, stemming from the unit's operations on the grounds of a high school and in Latina and Latino neighborhoods. Many abuse claims were validated by a federal judge's 1992 preliminary ruling in a remarkable class action civil lawsuit brought against the El Paso Border Patrol by Latina and Latino students and staff from the high school. Interestingly, the plaintiffs suggested as alternatives several measures that were incorporated into Operation Blockade, including posting agents directly on the river and patching the border fence.

The INS's new chief patrol agent for the sector, Sylvestre Reyes, implemented Operation Blockade in July 1993, in large part as a response to the rights abuses criticisms, as well as his view that unauthorized border crossing was "out of control" and brought poverty and chaos to the city. Apprehensions around El Paso by the Border Patrol dropped 80 to 85 percent in the first weeks and 72 percent in the first year.

Operation Blockade was overwhelmingly popular among El Pasoans from its inception. Two formal opinion polls of local residents over the next year found some 85 percent were in favor of the operation. Latina and Latino support was nearly equal to the overall level. A major reason for its popularity was the framing of the operation as an anti-crime measure. During the early weeks of the operation, criminal activity declined, although crime had already been dropping in the El Paso area since 1991. Although Operation Blockade was very popular, a proposal to extend it west by building a mile-long steel wall provoked a diverse and strong local opposition. Many opponents characterized it as a new "Berlin Wall" that contradicted growing binational economic integration. After much public debate, a compromise was reached to build a reinforced chain-link fence.

Operation Blockade effectively neutralized the glaring issue of rights abuses by agents that had so plagued the unit just prior to its implementation. Reports of abuses dropped drastically in the mainly urban area covered by the operation, as contact with the public was greatly curtailed. However, the problem was displaced to less visible outlying areas where agents still had direct contact with the public and the unit still employed roving patrols. By the end of the 1990s and into 2000 the problematic patrolling and questioning had shifted to Las Cruces, New Mexico, focusing on lower-income Latina and Latino areas. In addition, the deaths of unauthorized border crossers in the El Paso sector jumped 72 percent from 1993 to 1998 (from 18 to 31), which would prove to be relatively low compared to subsequent border operations.

Operation Gatekeeper

Operation Gatekeeper was launched in the San Diego/Tijuana border region in October 1994, as the first measure in the Clinton administration's 1994 Border Patrol "National Strategy," which was modeled largely on Operation Blockade in El Paso. This operation was a response to the fast-growing anti-immigrant sentiment in California during a severe regional recession and profound demographic shift toward becoming a majority-minority state. California's importance as a key electoral state for Clinton's looming 1996 re-election campaign was the motivation behind Operation Gatekeeper.

The San Diego Border Patrol sector, covering sixty miles of the border, had long been the highest volume site for unauthorized border crossings, accounting for roughly half of all Border Patrol apprehensions (typically around one-half million). Half of those occurred in just one five-mile stretch between Tijuana and San Diego. Gatekeeper focused initially on San Diego and gradually moved east to cover the entire California border by 1998. As in Operation Blockade, various enforcement resources were massed at the border, including a doubling of Border Patrol agents deployed in visible, fairly fixed positions along key sections, the extension of border walls (thin steel, ten to fifteen feet high) from fifteen to over fifty miles, high-intensity stadium lights, heat sensors, helicopters, and infrared telescopes. Various U.S. military agencies also provide "support." The operation deterred unauthorized border crossings near San Diego, creating a greater sense of calm there. However, it displaced such crossings progressively eastward to more remote areas. This is precisely what was intended, as a 1995 INS report noted that the operation would make illegal crossings "so difficult that aliens would be forced to areas east of the city, in more remote, mountainous terrain where it is harder to cross and where the Border Patrol has the tactical advantage" (Palafox, p. 3). Apprehensions by the Border Patrol in the entire San Diego sector were up a bit during the first two years of the operation, hovering around one-half million, and then fell steeply from 1996 to 2002. However, the unit's apprehensions spiked sharply upward in each of three sectors immediately to the east.

Gatekeeper has made the California-Mexico border much harder to cross and pushed enforcement further out of public view, but at an enormous cost in life. It is estimated that 134 migrants perished along the California-Mexico border during 2001. About 632 died there from late 1994 to 2000.

Operation Safeguard

In fall 1994 the Border Patrol announced Operation Safeguard for the Tucson Border Patrol sector, which covers nearly the entire desert-dominated, sparsely populated Arizona-Mexico border. An INS report notes that the operation was designed to "redirect illegal crossings away from urban areas near the Nogales port of entry to open areas that the Border Patrol can easily control" (Palafox, p. 2). Several years later Douglas, Arizona, became a focal point, and more recently the vast desert west of Nogales. The high-visibility posting of agents in urban border areas has been combined with roving patrols, as the number of agents more than quintupled from 1994 to 2000 to 1,535. In addition, the sector has received extensive new surveillance equipment, high-intensity lighting, and much helicopter surveillance. Border walls have been extended in Nogales and Naco and newly constructed in Douglas, ranging from two to five miles long. In 2002 the Border Patrol announced plans for the construction of 255 miles of border wall, including eighty-four miles of "secondary fencing," and almost eighty miles of high-intensity lighting. This massive proposal has sparked protests from environmentalists, border rights groups, and Native American rights activists.

Despite Operation Safeguard, the Tucson sector has been the primary displacement site for unauthorized border crossings by long-distance migrants deterred elsewhere. Between 1998 and 2002 it was the Border Patrol's busiest sector. As in Operation Gatekeeper, the death toll has been high. There has been a steep rise from 14 deaths in 1994, to 90 in 2000, to 145 in 2001, to more than 163 in 2002—roughly half the total deaths in the last two years. This growing tragedy led to a rare public criticism from within the unit, as the retired Tucson Border Patrol sector chief Ron Sanders critiqued the operation: "By every measure, the strategy is a failure. All it's accomplished is killing people." He went on to say, "But since these people are Mexicans, no one seems to care" (Moser, pp. 14, 16).

In addition to Border Patrol enforcement, armed vigilante groups such as Ranch Rescue, Civil Homeland Defense, and American Border Patrol in southeastern Arizona are trying to stop the "illegal immigration invasion" from Mexico. Using broadly applied "citizen's arrest" powers, ranchers and property owners in rural areas have detained and turned over thousands of would-be migrants to the Border Patrol and the INS.

On the other side of the issue, there is a growing movement of area citizens and even sympathetic ranchers working to help migrants in distress. Humane Borders, based in Tucson, has over two thousand volunteers maintaining over thirty-eight water stations along popular crossing routes in Arizona. Samaritan Patrol assists the water efforts and also patrols remote areas to search for migrants in need, often driving them to hospitals; the Border Patrol has threatened Samaritan Patrol with prosecution for the latter. Citizens for Border Solutions (CBS) has worked with area ranchers to reduce their animosity toward unauthorized immigrants crossing their property.

Operation Rio Grande

The last of the four major southwest enforcement efforts by the Border Patrol is Operation Rio Grande, launched in summer 1997. It is focused on the McAllen and Laredo Border Patrol sectors in south Texas, particularly the cities of Brownsville, McAllen, and Laredo. In the preceding three years, Border Patrol apprehensions had approximately doubled in both sectors, with McAllen reaching 243,793 in 1997. The operation employs the familiar tactics of massing various enforcement resources at the border (agents in high-visibility positions, miles of stadium lighting, fence improvements, brush clearing) to deter unauthorized border crossing at sites near urban areas and displace it to more isolated areas. The number of agents in the two sectors nearly doubled from 1996 to 2000, reaching 2,160. An innovative civil lawsuit brought by environmental groups led the Border Patrol to agree to modify its tactics, including placing shields on lighting and strict limits on brush clearing, to protect endangered species.

Operation Rio Grande has deterred unauthorized crossings in the main crossing zones in the cities of Brownsville and Laredo. However, a displacement effect occurred toward the west in the first three years. As in El Paso, the unit has trumpeted declining crime rates in Brownsville and Laredo as evidence of the operation's success, though again the actual relationship is not so direct. Nonetheless, there is greater calm and less traffic through city neighborhoods near the river. Yet Robert Lee Maril reports in his recent ground-breaking study that Border Patrol officials' claims of success in reducing unauthorized immigrant crossings in the South Texas region are completely detached from the reality of a growing movement of such crossers observed by local Border Patrol officers who are unable to apprehend them.

Despite these relative successes, the operation has also had its human-rights problems. Deaths of unauthorized migrants increased as much as 1,181 percent from 1996 to 2000 for the entire Texas-Mexico border. The largest single incident, as of 2003, was in May 2003 in Victoria, Texas, where nineteen Latino immigrants were discovered suffocated among a larger group packed into a semi-truck's sealed cargo trailer. Operation Rio Grande had forced more unauthorized immigrants to turn to smugglers, who have increasingly used this dangerous method to evade detection. Other human-rights problems have also arisen with the operation. There have been reports of continuing stops, questioning, and harassment of local Latina and Latino residents, even a federal judge, as agents patrol transportation points and low-income Latino and Latina neighborhoods outside central zones of border cities. The vigilante issue has also surfaced. In McAllen, two men who were part of an armed group patrolling a ranch were arrested for beating unauthorized Latina and Latino border crossers in March 2003.

Military Participation

Although immigration has been the main target of enforcement efforts along the United States-Mexico border since the early 1990s, the drug enforcement emphasis that had grown so markedly during the 1980s and early 1990s continued as well. However, in Texas in 1997 a Chicano high-school student was killed by a marine who mistook him for a drug scout. The incident prompted the Pentagon to cease all deployment of drug-enforcement ground troops, pending review.

The use of armed ground troops was merely the most militaristic of a wide range of military activities on the border that date back to the early 1980s. In 1999 the Pentagon issued a new policy that armed ground-troop missions required the approval of the Secretary of Defense or his deputy, while all other forms of military support could continue. This support takes many forms: engineering and construction (for example, road and border wall building), equipment loans, military training for police (from first aid to raid planning and execution to suspect interrogation), aerial surveillance, intelligence support, and more. Most visibly, the military has built border walls at various sites in Arizona and California. The Border Patrol has been the main beneficiary of this military support for civilian police anti-drug efforts.

Virtually all military support for drug enforcement spills over into immigration enforcement. The latter occasionally becomes the main focus. In early 1996 the Clinton administration directed some 350 troops to temporarily directly aid the Border Patrol immigration enforcement along the California and Arizona sections of the border, and in 1994 governor Pete Wilson requested the same of the California National Guard. The military itself generally has not been eager to involve itself in such matters but has become more willing to do so in the post-September 11 context. For security reasons, these efforts are less likely to be made public. Also following September 11, there were increasing calls in Congress to deploy troops on the border, and even to grant them arrest power.

Illegal Immigration and Human Rights

The vast buildup in enforcement along the United States-Mexican border has coincided with rising human rights problems, as enforcement operations have largely diverted unauthorized crossings and related human-rights problems away from urban areas to more remote, environmentally harsh areas, resulting in over three hundred deaths per year. Although it is a human-rights tragedy, this outcome is entirely legal under national law. U.S. border enforcement officials have denied any responsibility for the situation, blaming smugglers instead. They praise the operations for other successes, though these are more apparent than real. On the other hand, the new wave of border operations has generally reduced civil-rights infringements among Latina and Latino citizens and legal residents in border-urban areas by limiting agent contact with them.

This clash between national sovereignty and the human rights of immigrants has inspired several activist groups to file suit against U.S. border enforcement policies with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (part of the Organization of American States). However, Joseph Nevins points out that such critiques question the means but not the ends of such border enforcement, and leave aside more profound human rights concerns entailed in those ends. The tragedy of border-crossing deaths is likely to continue unless greater legal avenues for migration are opened up and much more is done to address the conditions that compel unauthorized immigrants to take such risks to come here in the first place. If "squeezing the balloon" the entire length of the border with ever-increasing

enforcement eventually leaves nowhere for unauthorized crossers to go, the balloon might burst, with unforeseeable consequences.

See also Border, The; Immigration; Immigration and Naturalization Service; and United States Foreign Policy.

Bibliography

California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) Foundation's Border Project. "Deaths." www.stopgatekeeper.org

Cornelius, Wayne A. "Death at the Border: The Efficacy and 'Unintended' Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy." *Population and Development* 27 (2001): pp.661-685.

Dunn, Timothy J. "Immigration Enforcement in the U.S.-Mexico Border Region, the El Paso Case: Bureaucratic Power, Human Rights, and Civic Activism." PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1999.

Eschbach, Karl, Jacqueline Hagan, and Nestor Rodriguez. 2001a (March) "Causes and Trends in Migrant Deaths along the U.S-Mexico Border, 1985-1998." WSP 01-4. University of Houston, Center for Immigration Research.

Eschbach, Karl, Jacqueline Hagan, Nestor Rodriguez, et al. "Death at the Border." *International Migration Review* 33 (1999): pp.430-454.

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). 2002. "Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for U.S. Border Patrol Activities in the Tucson and Yuma Sectors Arizona." October 2002. www.swf.usace.army.mil/ins/PublicReview/ENV-90.pdf

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). "Table 59. Deportable Aliens Located by Program, Border Patrol Sector, and Investigative District: Fiscal Years 1993-2002." 2003. www.immigration.gov./graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/enf02yrbk/table59.xls

Maril, Robert Lee. *Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol in Deep South Texas*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004.

Moser, Bob. 2003. "Samaritans in the Desert." *Nation*, 26 May 2003, pp.13-14, 16, 18.

Nevins, Joseph. "Thinking Out of Bounds: A Critical Analysis of Academic and Human Rights Writings on Migrant Deaths in the U.S.-Mexico Border Region." *Migraciones Internacionales* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): pp.171-190.

Palafox, José. "Introduction to Gatekeeper's State: Immigration and Boundary Policing in an Era of Globalization." *Social Justice* 28 (2001): pp.1-6.

Reyes, Belinda I., Hans P. Johnson, and Richard Van Swearingen. *Holding the Line? The Effect of the Recent Border Build-up on Unauthorized Immigration*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2002.

Rozemberg, Hernán, and Susan Carroll. "45 Percent of Crossing Deaths Occur along Arizona Border." *Arizona Republic and Tucson Citizen*, October 3 . 2002.

Turf, Luke. "Impact of Proposed Border Patrol Plan under Fire." *Tucson Citizen*, January 2 , 2003.

United States Border Patrol. *Border Patrol Strategic Plan: 1994 and Beyond*, National Strategy. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Border Patrol, 1994.

United States Commission on Civil Rights. *Presentation on the Civil and Human Rights Implications of the U.S. Southwest Border Policy*. San Diego, November 14 , 2002.

United States General Accounting Office. *Illegal Immigration: Southwest Border Strategy Results Inconclusive; More Evaluation Needed*. Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, 1997.

United States General Accounting Office. *INS' Southwest Border Strategy: Resource and Impact Issues Remain after Seven Years*. Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, 2001.

Timothy J. Dunn and José Palafox

How to cite this entry:

Timothy J. Dunn, José Palafox "Militarization of the Border" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* . Suzanne Oboler and Deena J. González. © 2005 Oxford University Press, Inc.. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* : (e-reference edition). Oxford University Press. University of Arizona. 4 May 2007
