

The Border Fetish. The Militarization of the U.S. Mexico Border

The U.S. Frontier as a Zone of Profit and Sacrifice

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At first, I thought I had inadvertently entered an active war zone. I was on a lonely two-lane road in southern New Mexico heading for El Paso, Texas. Off to the side of the road, hardly concealed behind some desert shrubs, I suddenly noticed what seemed to be a tank. For a second, I thought I might be seeing an apparition. When I stopped to take a [picture](#), a soldier wearing a camouflage helmet emerged from the top of the Stryker, a 19-ton, eight-wheeled combat vehicle that was regularly used in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He looked my way and I offered a pathetic wave. To my relief, he waved back, then settled behind what seemed to be a large surveillance display mounted atop the vehicle. With high-tech binoculars, he began to monitor the mountainous desert that stretched toward Mexico, 20 miles away, as if the enemy might appear at any moment.

That was in 2012 and, though I had already been reporting on the militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border for years, I had never seen anything like it. Barack Obama was still president and it would be another six years before Donald Trump announced with much fanfare that he was essentially going to declare war at the border and send in the National Guard. ("We really haven't done that before," Trump [told](#) the media on April 3rd, "or certainly not very much before.")

Operation Nimbus II, as the 2012 mission was [called](#), involved 500 soldiers from Fort Bliss and Fort Hood and was a typical [Joint Task Force North](#) (JTF-N) operation. Those troops were officially there to provide the U.S. Border Patrol with "intelligence and surveillance." Since JTF-N was tasked with supporting the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on the border, its [motto](#) was "protecting the Homeland." However, it was also deeply involved in training soldiers for overseas military operations in ongoing American wars in the Greater Middle East.

Only weeks before, 40 Alaskan-based Army airborne engineers had parachuted into nearby Fort Huachuca as if they were part of an invasion force landing in Southern Arizona. That border operation (despite the dramatic arrival, all they did was begin constructing a road) "mirrors the type of mission the 40 soldiers might conduct if they were deployed to Afghanistan," JTF-N "project organizers" [told](#) the *Nogales International*. As JTF-N spokesman Armando Carrasco put it, "This will prepare them for future deployments, especially in the areas of current contingency operations."

So seeing combat vehicles on the border shouldn't have surprised me, even then. A "war" against immigrants had been declared long before Trump signed the [memo](#) to deploy 2,000-4,000 National Guard troops to the border. Indeed, there has been a continuous

military presence there since 1989 and the Pentagon has played a crucial role in the historic expansion of the U.S. border security apparatus ever since.

When, however, Trump began to pound out tweets on Easter Sunday on his way to church, Americans did get a vivid glimpse of a border “battlefield” more than 30 years in the making, whose intensity could be ramped up on the merest whim. The president [described](#) the border as “getting more dangerous” because 1,000 Central Americans, including significant numbers of children, in flight from violence in their home countries were in a “caravan” in Mexico slowly heading north on a Holy Week pilgrimage. Many of them were intending to ask for asylum at the border, as they feared for their lives back home.

Fox & Friends [labeled](#) that caravan a “small migrant army” and so set the battlefield scenario perfectly for the show’s [number one fan](#). The end result — those state National Guards caravanning south — might have been as ludicrous a response to the situation as a tank in an empty desert pointed at Mexico, but it did catch a certain reality. The border has indeed become a place where the world’s most powerful military faces off against people who represent blowback from various Washington [policies](#) and are in flight from persecution, political violence, economic hardship, and increasing ecological distress. (Central America is becoming a climate-change [hot spot](#).) Yet these twenty-first century border “battlefields” remain hidden from the public and largely beyond discussion.

The Fetish of the Border

As I moved away from the Stryker that day, I wondered what that soldier was seeing through his high-tech binoculars. It’s a question that remains no less pertinent six years later as yet more National Guard troops head for the border. Even today, such forces aren’t likely to ever see a caravan of 1,000 refugees, only — possibly — tiny groups of crossers moving through the U.S. borderlands to look for work, reunite with family, or escape potentially grave harm. Such people, however, usually travel under the cover of night.

Even less likely: anyone carrying drugs into the United States. [According](#) to the Drug Enforcement Agency, the majority of illicit narcotics that cross the border into the world’s largest market ([valued](#) at approximately \$100 billion per year) arrive through legal ports of entry. Least likely of all: a person designated as a “terrorist” by the U.S. government, even though that’s become the priority [mission](#) of Joint Task Force North and Customs and Border Protection. A flood of money has, in these years, poured into border budgets for just such a counterterrorism mission, yet no such person, not a single one, has been reported [crossing](#) the southern border since 1984. (And even that incident seems dubious.)

Indeed, the most likely thing to glimpse along that divide is evidence of the countless billions of dollars that have been spent there over the last 30 years to build the most gigantic border enforcement apparatus in U.S. history. You would be quite likely, for instance, to see armed U.S. Border Patrol agents in their green-striped vehicles. (After all Customs and Border Protection, or CBP, the Border Patrol’s parent outfit, is now the largest federal law enforcement agency.) You might also catch glimpses of high-tech surveillance apparatuses like [aerostats](#), the tethered surveillance balloons brought back from American battle zones in Afghanistan that now hover over and monitor the borderlands with long-range cameras and radar.

Those binoculars wouldn't be able to see as far as the small town of Columbus, New Mexico — the very town that Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa so famously [raided](#) in 1916 — but if they could, you might also see portions of an actual border wall, built with bipartisan support after the Secure Fence Act of 2006 passed, with [votes](#) from Democrats like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Chuck Schumer. Those 650 miles of walls and barriers cost an average of \$3.9 million per mile to [build](#) and additional millions to maintain, money that went into the coffers of the military-industrial complex.

In 2011, for example, CBP [granted](#) the former Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (a company known for its [profiteering](#) in Iraq) a three-year, \$24.4 million contract for border wall maintenance. And you can multiply that so many times over since, year after year, bigger and bigger budgets have gone into border and immigration enforcement (and so into the pockets of such corporations) with little or no discussion. In 2018, the combined budgets of CBP and Immigration and Customs Enforcement [amount](#) to \$24.3 billion, a more than 15-fold increase since the early 1990s, and a \$4.7 billion jump from 2017.

So, in those desert borderlands, that soldier was really looking at a market, a profit zone. He was also viewing (and himself part of) what sociologist Timothy Dunn, author of the pioneering book [The Militarization of the U.S-Mexico Border, 1978-1992](#), calls the “fetishization of the border.” That Stryker — the “[Cadillac](#) of combat vehicles” made by General Dynamics — fit the bill perfectly. The slick armored beast, which can travel at speeds up to 60 miles per hour, could track down just about anything, except the real forces that lay behind why people continually arrive at the border.

Low Intensity Doctrine and the Hidden Battlefields

In 2006, George W. Bush's administration [sent](#) 6,000 National Guard troops to the border during Operation Jump Start, the largest military deployment there of the modern era. Those troops, however, were meant as no more than a placeholder for a post-9/11 enforcement apparatus still to be organized. Before then, as Timothy Dunn told me in an interview, there had normally been only 300 to 500 soldiers in border operations at any given time, whose justification then was the war against drugs.

That Bush deployment was, as Dunn put it, “the first to have them out there in high-profile, explicitly for immigration enforcement.” Still, what those soldiers could do remained largely limited to reinforcing and supporting the U.S. Border Patrol, as has been the case ever since. As a start, the U.S. military operates under grave [restrictions](#) when it comes to either making arrests or performing searches and seizures on U.S. soil. (There are, however, [loopholes](#) when it comes to this, which means that National Guard units under state control should be watched carefully during the Trump deployments.) What those troops can do is perform aerial and ground reconnaissance, staff observation posts, and install electronic ground sensors. They can supply engineering support, help construct roads and barriers, and provide intelligence — in all, Dunn reports, 33 activities, including mobile teams to train the Border Patrol in various increasingly militarized tactics.

However, the Border Patrol, already a paramilitary organization, can take care of the arrests, searches, and seizures itself. It is, in fact, the perfect example of how the Pentagon's low-intensity-conflict doctrine has operated along the border since the 1980s. That doctrine [promotes](#) coordination between the military and law enforcement with the goal of controlling potentially disruptive civilian populations. On the border, this mostly means undocumented people. This, in turn, means that the military does ever more police-like work

and the Border Patrol is becoming ever more militarized.

When Bush launched Operation Jump Start, Washington was already undertaking the largest hiring [surge](#) in Border Patrol history, planning to add 6,000 new agents to the ranks in two years, part of an overall expansion that has never ended. It has, in fact, only gained momentum again in the Trump era. The Border Patrol has increased from a force of 4,000 in the early 1990s to 21,000 today. The Bush-era recruitment program particularly targeted overseas military bases. The Border Patrol, as one analyst [put it](#), already operated like “a standing army on American soil” and that was how it was sold to future war vets who would soon join up. To this day, veterans are still told that they will be sent to “[the front lines](#)” to defend the homeland.

The Border Patrol not only recruits from the military and receives military training, but uses military equipment and technology prodigiously. The monoliths of the military-industrial complex — companies like [Lockheed Martin](#), [Boeing](#), and [Elbit Systems](#) — have long been tailoring their technologies to homeland security operations. They are now deeply involved in the increasingly [lucrative border market](#). As one vendor [told me](#) many years ago, “we are bringing the battlefield to the border.”

Much like the military, the Border Patrol uses radar, high-tech surveillance, complex biometric data bases, and Predator B drones that fly surveillance missions across the Southwest, at the border with Canada, and in the Caribbean. Such forces operate in [100-mile jurisdictions](#) beyond U.S. international boundaries (including the coasts), places where they essentially have extra-constitutional powers. As one CBP officer told me, “We are exempt from the fourth amendment.” Border zones, in other words, have become zones of exception and the DHS is the only department the federal government permits to [ethnically profile](#) people in such areas, a highly racialized form of law enforcement.

By deploying heavily armed Border Patrol officers, building walls, and using surveillance technologies in urban areas that traditionally had been crossing spots for the undocumented, such migrants are now forced to traverse dangerous and desolate areas of the southwestern deserts. It’s a strategy that anthropologist Jason De Leon has [described](#) as creating “a remote deathscape where American necropolitics are pecked onto the bones of those we deem excludable.”

Instances of overt violence on the border, the sort that might be associated with increased militarization, sometimes make the news, as in multiple [incidents](#) in which Border Patrol officers, deputized [police](#), or even military troops have [shot](#) and killed people. Most border crossers, however, are now funneled away from the television cameras and reporters to those distant desert landscapes where hidden “battles” with the elements remain unseen and so are no longer a political problem. According to Dunn, this is the low-intensity-conflict doctrine at work.

Along the U.S. border with Mexico, [7,000 corpses](#) have been found since the early 1990s and a reasonable estimate of the actual death toll is triple that number. Thousands of families still search for loved ones they fear lost in what journalist Margaret Regan has termed the Southwest “killing fields.” Recently, while I was giving a talk at a New York state college, a young man approached me, having realized that I was from Arizona. He told me that he’d last seen his mother in the desert near Nogales and asked if I had any idea how he might search for her, his eyes brimming with tears.

Globally, since 2014 the International Organization on Migration has recorded 25,000 migrant deaths — a figure, the group [writes](#), that “is a significant indicator of the human toll of unsafe migration, yet fails to capture the true number of people who have died or gone missing during migration.” On such hidden battlefields, the toll from the fetishization of the world’s borderlands remains unknown — and virtually ignored.

Securing the Unsustainable

At a global level, the forecast for the displacement of people is only expected to rise. According to projections, when it comes to climate change alone, by 2050 there could be [between](#) 150 million and 750 million people on the move due to sea level rise, droughts, floods, super storms, and other ecological hazards. Former Vice President Al Gore’s former security adviser, Leon Fuerth, [wrote](#) that if global warming exceeded the two degree Celsius mark, “border problems” would overwhelm U.S. capabilities “beyond the possibility of control, except by drastic measures and perhaps not even then.”

At the same time, estimates suggest that, by 2030, if present trends continue, the richest one percent of people on this planet may [control](#) 64% of global wealth. In other words, what we may have is an unsustainable world managed with an iron fist. In that case, an endless process of border militarization and fortification is likely to be used to control the blowback. If the booming border and surveillance markets are any indication, the future will be as dystopic as a Stryker in the beautiful desert highlands of New Mexico — a world of mass displacements that leave the super-rich hunkered down behind their surveillance fortresses.

Pouring billions of dollars into border zones to solve political, social, economic, and ecological problems is hardly a phenomenon limited to the United States. The border fetish has indeed gone global. [Border walls](#) now commonly zigzag between the global north and south and are being built up ever more as a rhetoric — caught perfectly by the Trump administration — focusing on criminals, terrorists, and drugs only ratchets up, while the huge forces that actually fuel displacements and migrations remain obscured. Borders have become another way of making sure that nothing gets in the way of the sanctity of business as usual in a world that desperately needs something new.

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