

The Militarization of the US-Mexican Border: Counterinsurgency or Immigration Reform?

By [Tom Hayden](#)

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tomhayden.com

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Senate immigration bill [SB 744](#) may be a savvy way to divide the Republican Party in the coming elections, or a small step forward at the cost of massive militarization of the border. Already many immigrant rights activists are in revolt against the now advancing compromise.

The political stakes are clear enough. President Barack Obama and the Democrats are pushing for a comprehensive immigration reform, and are willing to accept virtually any amendments to win Republican support. For the Democrats, the question is whether they have a bottom line and where it is drawn. On the Republican side, big business and traditional conservatives want cheap labor and a better brand name with Latino voters, but the Tea Party bloc is totally opposed to citizenship rights for immigrants because, frankly, that would dilute white voting strength nationally and in several key states.

The bottom line for progressives should be to legalize the undocumented so that they can be organized, unionized and empowered to vote. The president's 2012 executive order protecting the Dreamers' status will confer those benefits on upwards of 1.3 million young people. Under the proposed legislation, the Dreamers would become permanently legalized, no longer subject to administrative waivers. If the bill goes down in partisan flames, the Dreamers status would depend on continued waivers from whatever administration is in power. Approximately one million more agricultural workers will gain a five-year path to legalization while locked into the historically oppressive farm labor economy.



U.S. Border Patrol agent Sal De Leon stands near a section of the U.S.- Mexico border fence while stopping on patrol on April 10, 2013 in La Joya, Texas. (Photo: John Moore)

An estimated 10 million more undocumented people, mostly Latino and Asian, will be affected by the new legislation. According to the Congressional Budget Office report, only 60 percent of those people will make it through the administrative gauntlet of qualifications before becoming able to vote in 13 years. Other critics question whether the 60 percent figure is optimistic and predict that less than 50 percent will make it. This means that instead of 11 to 12 million undocumented people enabled to emerge from "the shadows", the number will be closer to six million new citizen-voters after another decade.

So the Senate proposal falls far short of opening a "path to citizenship" for 12 million people as often promoted, their electoral impact will not be felt fully until 2027 or later, and the Senate proposal already has been rejected by the House.

On the "enforcement" side, SB 774 looks like a war authorization as funding for Iraq and

Afghanistan fade. Labeled a “surge” by its proponents, the number of armed, full-time active duty US Border Patrol agents will double from 18,000 to “no fewer than 38,405...deployed, stationed, and maintained along the Southern Border” – more troops than will be in Afghanistan by the end of next year. The cost of added fencing and surveillance, including drones, is to be \$46.3 billion over 10 years. On the Mexican side of the fence, the DEA, FBI and CIA have been engaged in covert efforts to disrupt drug cartels, while border patrol agents and armed vigilantes chase down elusive immigrants, often with children, who enter our southwestern desert.

According to UCLA professor Raul Hinojosa, for the Border Patrol “to catch a Mexican,” it cost US taxpayers \$220 per capture in 1992, which escalated to \$8,000 by 2013, and would rise further to \$25,000 if SB 744 becomes law.

This is more like a counterinsurgency plan than one promoting worker rights and citizenship. The Mérida Initiative, introduced by the Bush administration and continued by Obama, mainly funds drug enforcement rather than development programs. From FY2008 to FY2012, Congress appropriated \$1.9 billion in Mérida assistance for Mexico; \$234 million in 2013 and \$183 million has been requested for FY2014. In general, border security will cost an additional \$50 billion over the next decade, 25 times more than Mérida Initiative funding channeled into Mexico at the current rate.

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