

Don't seal off Mexico

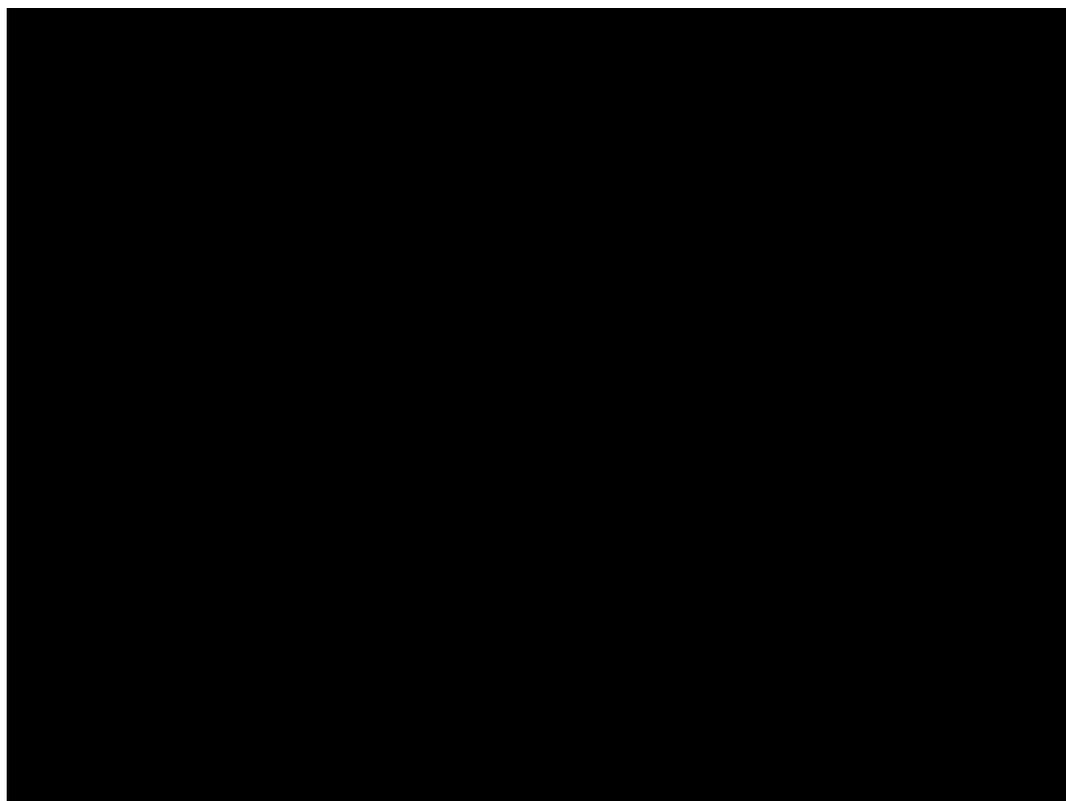
By **Peter Andreas and James Ron**

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ONE OF THE tragic ironies of political life is that presumed policy cures often turn out to be part of the problem rather than the solution. Worse, when the medicine exacerbates, rather than alleviates, the targeted ailment, the policy response is simply to increase the dosage, with poisonous results. Our border immigration control policy is a striking example of this policy syndrome.

Since the early 1990s, U.S. immigration control efforts along the Southwest border have gone from being a low-profile and low-maintenance activity into a high-intensity campaign commanding enormous attention on both sides of the line.



Between 1993 and 1999, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) budget grew from \$1.5 billion to \$4.2 billion, defying the trend toward slimmed-down federal budgets. More INS agents now are authorized to carry firearms than any other federal law enforcement agency. One of the agency's biggest problems has been managing its fast-paced growth and attracting enough recruits to fill its many new job openings.

The border crackdown first concentrated on high-profile crossing points for illegal migrants such as El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, Calif. Migrants have predictably responded by spreading out across the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, dramatically complicating enforcement efforts. Small border towns have now become major entry points for migrants heading north. For example, Douglas, Ariz., population 15,000, has

witnessed apprehensions climb from 3,000 a month in 1995 to 27,000 in 1999.

Hardening the border has transformed what once were simple border crossings into sophisticated, clandestine maneuvers orchestrated by professional migrant smugglers. Small-time free-lancers increasingly have been replaced by larger and smarter smuggling groups adept at evading the expansive border-control net. The border enforcement offensive, in short, has transformed what once was disorganized crime into a more formidable form of organized crime. Rather than having fewer illegal border crossings, the Border Patrol strategy has led to more dispersed and harder-to-detect crossings facilitated by transnational smuggling organizations.

As intensified law enforcement has complicated illegal entry, smuggling premiums have risen, ensuring there will be enough people willing to ply the risky trade. While enriching smugglers, higher fees have generally not deterred migrants, since these fees are often covered by friends and relatives already in the United States.

While higher fees can be a substantial financial burden, this can be paid back in a relatively short period because of the ready availability of employment. Ultimately, migrant smuggling stubbornly persists because the nation's appetite for immigrant labor remains strong. A less celebrated and less noticed dimension of the U.S. economic boom has been continued high employer demand for migrant workers.

Who benefits from the continued border enforcement buildup? Migrant smugglers certainly do. So do law enforcement bureaucracies, which are rewarded with bigger budgets. Politicians are also winners, since the high-profile border enforcement campaign enables them to signal that they are tough on illegal immigration.

Meanwhile, billions of dollars are wasted on a failing and flawed border-control campaign. At the same time, the collateral damage has been enormous: a mounting death toll as migrants attempt the crossing in hazardous terrain; border communities that increasingly feel like militarized zones; and deepening levels of corruption on both sides of the line.

In the long term, the solution to the nation's immigration problem will not be found by barricading the border but rather by narrowing the U.S.-Mexico wage gap and increasing employment opportunities in migrant-sending communities.

Despite the draconian wishes of isolationists such as Pat Buchanan, the U.S.-Mexico border cannot be made impermeable in an era of growing economic integration. We have the technical capability to seal the border, but political and economic realities require that it remain porous.

As the busiest crossing point in the world, the border is an increasingly important bridge: In 1998, 278 million people, 86 million cars and 4 million trucks and railcars legally entered the United States from Mexico. It would be economically disastrous if border agents were to truly search every vehicle and cargo

container entering the country. Trying to detect smuggled migrants along the border is the equivalent of looking for that old needle in the proverbial haystack -- and the haystack keeps getting bigger and the needle keeps getting better at hiding.

Trying to weed out undesirable from desirable border crossings will likely continue to be a recipe for policy frustration. How this frustration is politically managed will significantly shape the future of the border region and U.S. relations with Mexico.

We should stop trying to transform an artificial line on the map into an ever-more fortified barrier.

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