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Billions Spent on Border Security Have Failed

By [Joshua Holland](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [May 9, 2006](#).

The U.S. has pumped billions of dollars into beefing up security at the Mexican border -- resulting in more arrests and big profits for private contractors.

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If you like seeing Mexicans in handcuffs, have stocks in the big defense companies or need cheap, exploitable labor, then you should join the growing chorus calling for more border enforcement to deter illegal immigration. And whatever you do, don't look at the man behind the curtain; ignore the structural economic issues -- the "push factors" -- that have driven millions of illegal immigrants across our borders over the past decade.

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The last 10 years have shown clearly that pumping billions of dollars into beefing up patrols and installing all manner of shiny new gizmos along our 2,000-mile southern border only results in an increase in arrests and detentions, and a nice, fat profit for [Department of Homeland Security contractors](#). It has just about *zero* effect on the number of immigrants coming into the country.

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Consider the numbers. According to a [study](#) by the Pew Hispanic Center:

The number of migrants coming to the United States each year, legally and illegally, grew very rapidly starting in the mid-1990s, hit a peak at the end of the decade, and then declined substantially after 2001.

Over that very same time period -- starting in Bill Clinton's first term with his "[prevention through deterrence](#)" immigration strategy -- spending on border enforcement skyrocketed. In 1994, the [government spent around \\$550 million on border security and about \\$350 million on inspections](#) at entry points. Clinton increased the budget for border enforcement every year -- spending almost quadrupled during his presidency -- and the immigrants flowed right in. And under Bush's watch, it's quadrupled again; last year, we spent a total of \$7.3 billion on enforcement.

That money didn't buy a reduction in immigration; it bought an increase in arrests -- from around 1.2 million in 1992 to a peak of almost 1.7 million in 2000 (it's decreased somewhat since then, along with the total flow of immigrants).

It also has caused more innocent people to die -- as immigrants were forced to find routes through more remote parts of the border zone, and more ruthless professional gangsters have become involved in the process. Deborah Meyers, border policy expert at the Migration Policy Institute, told the [Arizona Republic](#): "It used to be your friend or uncle would smuggle you in. Now, it's in the hands of the professionals."

You know what Albert Einstein said about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

The reason enforcement alone doesn't cut it is simple: The surge in entries starting in the mid-1990s didn't originate in Mexico City, in Mexico's southern agricultural states or in the countries to Mexico's south. It started in mahogany-paneled conference rooms in Geneva and London and, most of all, in Washington.

[Consider the numbers](#) again. Employment in Mexico's agricultural sector dropped by 16 percent between 1993, the year before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, and 2002. Service sector employment was stable -- it didn't absorb many of those workers. And while manufacturing increased in the *maquiladoras* between 1994 and 2000 -- when it peaked with about 800,000 jobs -- the *maquiladora* zone shed 250,000 of those jobs over the next three years, most of them outsourced to China. Make capital mobile, make goods mobile and people will have no choice but to mobilize themselves.

Mexico was promised millions of new jobs under NAFTA, but the promise proved false. The country had a mini baby boom in the early 1980s, and its economy hasn't been able to absorb those babies as they've come of age and entered the work force. Mexico doesn't have unemployment insurance.

And because of Mexico's commitment to the corporate globalization agenda, its government can't do much to reverse the trend -- trade deals aren't about trade so much as tying governments' hands and keeping them from "intervening" in the economy. Mexico can't stimulate its agricultural sector with price supports, protect industries that are vulnerable to cheap imports or subsidize either agriculture or manufacturing.

Were Latin American elites complicit in all of that? Absolutely. But anyone who's read Aileen Kwa's classic [Power Politics at the WTO](#), which details how the European Union, Japan and the United States have used the IMF, the international development banks and good old-fashioned arm twisting to get these deals done, knows that it's a process of *coercion* as much as negotiation.

And it's not just NAFTA. Average wages in Mexico, adjusted for inflation, are lower today than they were in 1980. Much of Mexico's pain was due to the peso crisis in the mid-1990s ([\\$\\$](#)). That was a homemade crisis -- and the international institutions ended up bailing the country out of its hole -- but, as economist [Mark Weisbrot noted](#), the crisis was aggravated by Mexico's slavish adherence to the "[Washington consensus](#)" -- a set of policies designed to make countries friendly to foreign investors, often at the expense of domestic well-being -- in the preceding years:

In the period prior to the peso crisis, the Mexican government pegged the peso at a level against the dollar that was widely recognized as being over-valued. There were clearly political considerations behind this decision, some of which had to do with winning the approval of NAFTA by the U.S. Congress. The impact of the currency devaluation was also accentuated by Mexico's ... increased liberalization over the prior decade, [otherwise] the impact of a currency devaluation would not have been as serious.

What all this means is that no matter how much griping we see over immigration right now, the issue doesn't lend itself to quick fixes. I've [written](#) in the past that "a progressive approach to immigration would punish employers, not workers, for breaking the law." But even there the devil is in the details. The vast majority of employers already require proof that a person is eligible to work, and a cottage industry of document forgers has grown up to give them that "proof." Civil libertarians on both the left

and the right have consistently opposed the answer to that problem -- a national ID card -- for very good reasons.

Then there's the question of who would actually enforce the policy. Police departments across the country have been opposed to shifting resources from their traditional focus to immigration enforcement; a cop needs about 140 hours just in additional training to get a handle on immigration enforcement.

Of course, we're the richest country in the world and we *could* control every foot of our southern border. We could inspect every work site and check every worker's papers. But what would it take? Collecting every eligible worker's fingerprints? Thirty thousand guys with guns? Fifty thousand?

It's a slippery slope. Once you create an internal security force knocking on doors for one purpose, it's all too easy to turn it around and use it to control the population at large. Civil liberties groups have already expressed concern that the border zone is being used as a multibillion dollar laboratory for new, intrusive technologies that are being adopted by the rest of law enforcement. Be careful of what you wish for on the border, because it may well come to an antiwar protest near you.

Short-term fixes are elusive. The best hope is that people will turn all the emotion and energy that's developed around the immigration issue towards a more serious scrutiny of the trade policies our officials are pushing and at the workings of the international economic institutions that support them.

That's where you'll find plenty of culprits that *really* deserve to be punished.

[Joshua Holland](#) is an AlterNet staff writer.

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Fantastic article

Posted by: nbrown on May 9, 2006 12:27 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

I read this with enthusiasm. Good work Joshua.

This particular line, I think, deserves additional reflection:

Make capital mobile, make goods mobile and people will have no choice but to mobilize themselves.

How true.

The fact that rich people can move factories across borders, but workers are regulated very closely by the state, shows that globalization is for rich people only.

For anyone who agrees, I hope you'll bring this up in any globalization discussions. We can't really begin to talk about globalization unless there are uniform standards.

A real globalization would tear down borders, not militarize them!

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what Bushies are for

Posted by: rsaxto on May 9, 2006 3:37 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

That's what the Bushies are all about: making rich contractors richer and all poor workers poorer. Subsidizing the rich and giving the poor the finger.

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It's also about prison populations...

Posted by: adp3d on May 9, 2006 3:46 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

Why do you think the Republicans are big on law and order? Because many of the prisons are privately run, and these companies are campaign donors of course! To them prisoners are just a commodity, a way to boost the bottom line. Same with immigrant detainees.

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So What's Your Point?

Posted by: gar on May 9, 2006 6:06 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

The jist of this article appears to be that the long term solution to control of illegal aliens is reform of the World Trade Organization and NAFTA. If that is the point, I agree.

As usual, I disagree with the rhetorical trick of calling apples oranges and mixing the statistics on the two as if they were the same. That is, apples are not oranges and illegal aliens are not immigrants. The numbers on apples do not apply to oranges. The numbers on illegal aliens do not apply to immigrants. To do so invalidates any reasonable argument and obscures any point.

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[» Drama, rather than clarity, seems to be Holland's concern.](#) Posted by: Sojourner

That's Right

Posted by: Liger on May 9, 2006 6:15 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

Billions of dollars are misappropriated and wasted all of the time by the government (both the Dems and the Reps) - so why are you more concerned about this particular wasteful spending and not say welfare, Medicare or the billions of dollars given to corporations and states for pork projects? At least this spending is going to a cause intended to protect the US and its citizens. Defense and national security are some of the things clearly defined in the constitution as appropriate for the Federal Government to spend its revenues on – the others are not. So of all the waste, this at least is within the confines of our constitution – the others are clearly not.

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Wages

Posted by: rinpochet on May 9, 2006 6:54 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

"And it's not just NAFTA. Average wages in Mexico, adjusted for inflation, are lower today than they were in 1980."

Also applies to the USA; wages being driven down with the help of cheap illegal labor from Mexico!

It is strange to see corporations lambasted in this article for making money off building border controls when there is no criticism here for their profiting from illegal labor.

As a nation, we have a duty to our citizens and a right to protect our borders. A wall, or whatever barrier can be provided must be built so that we can then control immigration. It is a farce to require documentation from other visitors to this country, including Canada but then think its fine to allow millions to cross at will without documentation from the south.

If you want a third world country, this is the way to go.

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