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Technology Has Uneven Record on Securing Border

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Applying lessons the U.S. military has learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration is embarking on a multibillion-dollar bid to help secure the U.S.-Mexican border with surveillance technology -- a strategy that veterans of conflicts abroad say will be more difficult than it appears.

One component of the Strategic Border Initiative provides the technological underpinning for the bold prediction by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff that the United States will gain control of the Mexican border and the Canadian border in as little as three years.

The plan envisions satellites, manned and unmanned aircraft, ground sensors and cameras tied to a computerized dispatch system that would alert Border Patrol units. "We are launching the most technologically advanced border security initiative in American history," President Bush said in his address to the nation Monday.

Skeptics contend that the Department of Homeland Security's record of applying technology is abysmal. Industry analysts say that an initial $2 billion private-sector estimate is low. And by allowing the winning bidder to determine the technology and personnel needed to detect, catch, process and remove illegal immigrants, experts say, the plan ensures a big payday for contractors, whatever the outcome.

"If the military could seal a 6,000-mile border for $2 billion, Iraq's borders would have been sealed two years ago," said Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., executive director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a defense think tank.

SBInet, part of the border initiative, will dictate the government's long-term presence. Bush's push for a guest-worker program is grounded in the premise that conventional "enforcement alone will not do the job."

By reducing demand for immigrant labor, beefing up the Border Patrol and deploying next-generation technology to catch illegal border crossers, the administration plan "assumes operational control within . . . three to five years," Chertoff told Congress last month.

To supporters such as Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee that funds homeland security, the Pentagon already possesses the necessary technology.

"It's complex, but it doesn't have to be invented. It hardly even has to be modified," Gregg said. "It's really just a question of will -- and dollars."

On the ground, early results of the government's multibillion-dollar wager to plug the porous border already are on display.

In far southwestern Arizona, U.S. Customs agents, the Border Patrol and the National Guard patrol 120 miles of forbidding desert from a communications room filled with computer workstations and lined with 25 flat-screen televisions on the wall.

The Border Patrol installed 25 fixed cameras over favored smuggling routes in the sector in recent years. More than 100 sensors lie buried in the ground. Seismic sensors alert at the movement of large numbers of people. Infrared sensors pick up heat signatures of people and objects, and magnetic sensors detect vehicles.

Agents also point to what they call the "skybox" -- a 25-square-foot room 30 feet above the border on a hydraulic jack, with top-of-the-line night-vision equipment. Agents say it's claustrophobic but has one redeeming virtue -- air conditioning.

Overhead, the border agencies use blimps, unmanned aircraft, Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

"We are starting to see substantial improvements," said Chris Van Wagenen, a senior patrol agent assigned to Yuma, Ariz. "Now we've got sensors, cameras. We've doubled our manpower in a year, but we still need more."

Bush has budgeted $100 million this year for SBInet. But Chertoff's department declined to estimate how much the three-to-six-year contract ultimately will cost. Industry analysts expect at least $2 billion in spending -- and possibly much more over a longer period, based on the history of overruns in major Homeland Security technology programs.

By turning to contractors such as Boeing, Ericsson, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Raytheon to design the workings of the system, SBInet also marks a government reliance on private-sector partners to carry out missions without a clear idea of what the network will look like, according to experts and immigration officials.

"SBInet represents a potential bonanza" for tens if not hundreds of companies, said John Slye, senior analyst of federal opportunities for Input, a Reston-based federal contracting consulting firm. The project is the most anticipated single civilian information technology contract since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he said.

Skeptics in Congress cite a decade of frustration at the border.

Because of poor management, two failed border technology programs have cost taxpayers $429 million since 1998, the Homeland Security inspector general reported in December. Nearly half of 489 remote video surveillance sites planned for the border in the past eight years were never installed. Sixty percent of sensor alerts are never investigated, 90 percent of the rest are false alarms and only 1 percent overall result in arrests.

A 10-year, $10 billion system to automate border entry and exit data, US-VISIT, has yet to test security and privacy controls in its seventh year, congressional auditors reported.

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (Conn.), top Democrat on the homeland security committee, called the plan to solicit bids by May 30, pick a single winner and start to deploy by September "unrealistic" and filled with "too many questions."

"How is 'SBI' not just another three-letter acronym for failure?" Harold Rogers (R-Ky.), chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee, asked at a hearing last month.

Chertoff deputy Michael P. Jackson said government is not the best judge of innovation in rapidly evolving technology and will benefit from the nimbleness of the private sector while conducting disciplined oversight.

"We are not buying a pig in a poke. . . . We don't have to buy everything they sell," said Jackson, former head of a division at Lockheed Martin.

In Arizona, agents say cameras are mainly limited to populated areas because other parts of the border, where most illegal crossings occur, do not have electricity, and solar-powered cameras don't work. Sand, insects and moisture play havoc with the sensors, causing them to shut down or fire repeatedly. Agents and support staff are too busy to respond to each alarm.

On April 25, the Border Patrol's first and only Predator 2 unmanned aerial vehicle crashed outside Tubac, Ariz., just seven months after the $6.5 million craft began its flights.

To military experts, the goal of erecting a "virtual fence" recalls attempts four decades ago to shut down the 1,700-square-mile area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail used to infiltrate South Vietnam, and more recently, to halt incursions along 1,200 miles of Iraq's border with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

"It's always harder than you think," said Robert Martinage, Krepinevich's senior defense analyst. "The record is mixed."

Technology has, of course, advanced rapidly over the decades. The Southwest's climate and foliage pose fewer challenges, and U.S. law enforcement has advantages of mobility, security and infrastructure on its side, said retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Glen D. Shaffer, a former director for intelligence for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Shaffer, now president and chief operating officer of dNovus RDI, a Texas firm that may bid on SBInet, said the project is reasonable but not foolproof. "Where the military historically has fallen short is putting all investments in sensors and not enough in the people that exploit the sensors. I would hope that DHS can get this right."

But smugglers of drugs and immigrants also are highly adaptable and willing to escalate the border "arms race," said Deborah W. Meyers, senior policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank.

"Coyotes" are regularly caught with night-vision goggles, military-issue binoculars, hand-held global positioning systems, a treasure trove of cellphones and police scanners that allow them to listen to border agents.

Border Patrol agents said that smugglers dispatch scouts every five minutes to check enforcement through the border crossing at San Luis, due south of Yuma on the Mexican border.

"They even know the names of our drug dogs, and which are better at which drugs," one agent said. "It's unbelievable how much we are being watched."

Officials say they don't need to seal the borders. They just need to catch enough illegal border crossers to deter others from attempting the trip.

Robert C. Bonner, head of Customs and Border Protection from 2003 to 2005, said that at current staffing, the Border Patrol can handle only 10 percent of the illegal immigrant problem.

"But if you can reduce the flow even by half," he said, "with moderate increases for Border Patrol and technology, we actually can control our border in a way we haven't been able to in 20 or 30 years."

Pomfret reported from Yuma.