

THE ROOSEVELT RESERVATION ON THE US-MEXICO BORDER

by Mark Adams

There is a 60-foot area north of the border wall that is called the Roosevelt Reservation federal land. This land historically has been under the jurisdiction of the Department of Interior. It runs along the border from the Texas/New Mexico state line all the way to the Pacific Ocean—so, the southern borders of New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

President Trump has transferred jurisdiction of this strip of land to the Department of Defense and declared it a “military installation.” It is not marked as such, but this gives the military the ability to detain people on the land because they would be considered “trespassing on a military installation.” The military’s role on the border thus far has been limited to support roles (surveillance, construction, maintenance etc) primarily due to the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which prevents the military from enforcing civilian law.

The military has been deployed on the border through both Republican and Democratic administrations to support the Border Patrol, which grew from 5,000 to 10,000 agents during the Clinton Administration and up to almost 20,000 under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. There have actually been funds appropriated by a bipartisan vote to increase that number to more than 22,000.

By declaring the Roosevelt Reservation a military installation, the current administration can claim that they are not violating the Posse Comitatus Act when detaining people on the border, and they can add legal charges to the charge of illegally entering the country without inspection.

Here at Frontera de Cristo, we often use the Roosevelt easement in Douglas for liturgical and other events as well as for educational purposes with delegations. Just today, for example, our Children’s Enrichment Ministry choir participated in a binational concert on the border as part of the Children’s Day celebration. Earlier this week, we met with our local Border Patrol leadership to ask if they saw any imminent changes in our area because of the declaration. They said that they did not foresee the military taking over their role in our area and that the military in our area would continue in support roles. What I did not ask is whether the US Attorney’s office would start assessing folks an additional charge after being arrested on the Easement. But I do know that there was a group in New Mexico apprehended after crossing the easement, and charged with violating the new restriction.