

Border Security

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So Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, as directed by President Trump, has ordered that the border wall be painted black. First, it seems like a gratuitous act of cruelty, using the heated metal as an additional means of controlling the wall and, second, it is an unnecessary expense in a situation that is already well under control. We have a huge and increasingly dangerous national budget deficit and it's time to stop throwing money at problems that have already been solved.

Here is an article I wrote about the wall between Sunland Park, New Mexico and Anapra, Mexico and the expensive enhancements that have been made.

It's 5:30 AM and still dark as we gather at the Sunland Park, New Mexico police station parking lot – Border Patrol (BP) agents, soldiers led by Major Edward Alvarado who helped make the arrangements for this border tour, several other journalists, my wife and me.

My goal is to see if illegal border crossings continue to be limited and if the addition of Army units with Stryker vehicles has made a difference. My hope is that controlling the border in terms of illegal crossings will lead to a resumption of the asylum process for those who are

pursuing a legal entry into the United States. The journalist, Thomas Friedman stated it best in an April 13, 2021 New York Times column titled “We need a High Wall with a Big Gate on the Southern Border.”

Friedman said, “I wish we could take in everyone suffering in the world and give each a shot at the American dream, but we can’t while maintaining our social cohesion, which is already fraying bad enough.” Then he added that “Because many Americans think that the border is open and out of control that they will elect leaders who will choke off all immigration, which is the lifeblood of our country. Have no doubt, a seemingly out-of-control border would be a godsend for the Trump GOP.”

The Biden administration finally woke up to this message and beginning in mid-2024 took steps which dramatically reduced the number of migration crossings but it was too late. His reality was swept away by Donald Trump’s rhetoric that the border was out of control.

Our first stop is at the border wall between Anapra, Mexico and Sunland Park. Formerly the site of numerous illegal crossings, it has now been largely shut down. My wife and I first drove along this wall on April 19, 2019 and were astonished to see it end abruptly near the base of the rugged Monte Cristo Rey. At that time, there was still a militia group, the United Constitutional Patriots camped near the wall. A month later I observed some twelve migrants running past my car near the end of the wall. Several times, “coyotes” who are returning to Mexico after having led a group of migrants across have dashed by our car and crossed back into Mexico. One of them actually climbed the wall with his bare hands. So historically this has been a high traffic area and a microcosm of border control issues.

Now there are Normandy-style barriers running up the slope of the mountain, designed to stop smaller vehicles like ATVs that can transport migrants across the rough terrain. There is also a road curving up the steep mountainside which gives good visual access into the Anapra side of the mountain enabling BP agents to spot migrant groups as they are gathering in Anapra for an attempt to cross into the US. These improvements plus the expanded use of automated surveillance towers have largely shut down illegal crossings.

The next step will be to expand the wall up and across Monte Cristo Rey. Will that be worth the enormous cost?

The second leg of this early morning tour was to follow the border wall westward towards the Santa Teresa Port of Entry. Over time, “coyotes” have cut dozens, maybe hundreds of openings in the mesh that makes up this wall in order to bring their migrant clients across. The time and cost involved in constant repairs must be enormous but much of the wall has been fortified now with vertical metal bollards.

Nonetheless, the plan now is to build a second parallel wall; we saw the first piece of this wall under construction close to Santa Teresa.

The third stop and the main reason I had asked for this tour was to see one of the Stryker vehicles and talk to the soldiers manning it. When the private wall was built back in 2019, I met soldiers there who had been assigned from Fort Polk, Louisiana and they spoke freely about their mission.

Now it’s much more restrictive; this tour would have been impossible without Major Alvarado’s support as well as that of Border Patrol agent Claudio Herrera.

The Stryker was introduced in 2002 to fill a gap between the heavier but less mobile M2 Bradley Fighting vehicle and the more mobile but lightly armed Humvee. It was named Stryker after two soldiers who posthumously received the Medal of Honor – PFC Stuart S. Stryker in World War II and Spec. 4 Robert F. Stryker in Vietnam.

Earlier this year, 2,400 troops from the 2d Stryker Brigade Combat Team in the 4th Infantry Division and their Strykers were deployed from Fort Carson, Colorado to the border. There were four soldiers at the Stryker we visited, the Company Commander and three enlisted men. Their morale was good and they seemed to feel that their mission was important and that their working relationship with the Border Patrol excellent. In addition to this huge vehicle sitting on a hilltop near the border wall as a “show of force,” as one Border Patrol agent put it, a Sergeant named Nevarez showed us two tools used for border control.

One was what he called a drone buster – a device that can jam the signals of the drones that cartel members in Anapra are using to spot the locations of Border Patrol agents.

The second was a sound device that can focus sound on a particular group in Anapra, for example, to tell them that they are being observed and will be detained if they cross the wall.

These seem to be useful border control tools but the reality is that there is very little activity now. Nevarez wanted this assignment and transferred from the 82d Airborne Division, the Division I served in many years ago. I hope that this works out for him, that boredom doesn't set in.

Is this enormous military commitment warranted? What is the best and most cost-effective way to control illegal border crossings?

In 1992, there were 4,130 Border Patrol agents. That number rose to 21,441 as a result of a hiring surge in 2010. Many of those agents are nearing retirement age and have to be considering opportunities to take retirement and go to work for another law enforcement agency with far less danger and physical stress. The first priority should be to retain as many as possible, taking advantage of their years of experience and training.

The second priority ought to be to hire new Border Patrol agents; they will always be more effective than soldiers whose training is very different. Hiring more women agents is important; they only make up about 5% of the BP workforce today, compared to 21% in the US Navy.

One obstacle that keeps coming up is the lengthy and oppressive lie detector test that applicants are required to take. Agent Herrera says that his lasted seven hours.

There also has to be continuous technological improvements like more autonomous surveillance towers as well as repairs to the wall.

We're dealing, however, with rhetoric as well as reality. Deploying soldiers, even those as well trained and enthusiastic as those we met that Wednesday, is extremely costly but if their addition helps convince the American public of the reality that the border is under control, it may be worth the expense.

The end result should be a separation of those who are attempting to cross illegally from those who have followed the law by applying for asylum. Once again, I refer to Thomas Friedman's comment that "We need a High Wall with a Big Gate on the Southern Border."

Showing that we have control over those who want to cross illegally should free us up to reinstitute the asylum system for those who are following the law. It should also help us rework our guest worker programs to allow the legal entry of migrants who could help fill employment needs in areas like agriculture, construction and other service industries; an issue where both political parties have been missing. Yes, these are tough issues but isn't that the job of a Congress that, to date, has been largely absent?

Morgan Smith, former member of the Colorado House of Representatives and Commissioner of Agriculture now lives in New Mexico and has been traveling to the border at least monthly for the last fifteen years in order to document conditions there and assist several humanitarian organizations in Juárez, Mexico, including migrant shelters. He can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net

