

**Border Walls, Control Operations, and Laws: Some Collateral Effects
of the United States-Mexico Border, 1991-2021****Muros fronterizos, operativos de control y leyes: algunos efectos colaterales
de la frontera México-Estados Unidos, 1991-2021**Guillermo Alonso Meneses¹

ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes the micro-history of the border wall, highlighting the Tijuana-San Diego area in the period 1991-2021 in relation to legislation, border surveillance, and deportations. The objective is to analyze its evolution and impact as an axis of border control and as a modeling factor for the surveillance strategy of the border with Mexico. From a qualitative approach and based on ethnographic experience, a discourse analysis oriented by fieldwork information is made. This thematic intersection and intertwining of methods and techniques is unprecedented. After reviewing the main events, former presidents Clinton, Bush Jr., and Obama were more decisive than Trump. Border walls only work in conjunction with the Border Patrol, ICE and deportations or the Southwest Border Wall System.

Keywords: 1. walls, 2. Operation Gatekeeper, 3. migrants, 4. U.S.-Mexico border.

RESUMEN

El artículo sintetiza una micro-historia del muro fronterizo, con énfasis en el área Tijuana-San Diego, cubriendo el periodo 1991-2021, en relación con la legislación, la vigilancia de la frontera y las deportaciones. El objetivo es analizar su evolución e impacto como eje del control fronterizo y como factor modelador de la estrategia de vigilancia de la frontera con México. Desde un enfoque cualitativo y basado en experiencia etnográfica, se hace un análisis del discurso orientado con información de campo. Esta intersección temática y entrelazamiento de métodos y técnicas con que se aborda es inédita. Se concluye que los ex presidentes Clinton, Bush junior y Obama fueron más determinantes que Trump. El muro fronterizo solo funciona junto con la Patrulla Fronteriza, el ICE y las deportaciones o el Border Wall System del suroeste.

Palabras clave: 1. muros, 2. Operación Guardián, 3. migrantes, 4. frontera México-Estados Unidos.

Received: April 23, 2021

Accepted: December 17, 2021

Available Online: July 15, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The construction of the first U.S.-Mexico border wall began under Bush senior by 1991, Bill Clinton carried on building it from 1993 to 2001, at once he promoted deportations. Bush Jr. extended the wall further and modernized it, moreover he multiplied deportations over 2001-2009. Barack Obama and his Vice President Joe Biden consolidated deportations and expanded the wall from 2009 to 2017. In January 2017, Donald Trump signed an executive order to build a border wall, while he built another, political and ideologic, as a public threat when he demanded Ford or Fiat-Chrysler to abort investments on the automotive industry in Mexico. He deported illegal aliens and repatriated capitals, investments, and industries outside the U.S. If over the first Obama's administration, 1 589 451 deportation events took place (unconceivable for a Nobel Prize winner who was accused of being deporter in chief), Trump intended to deport two million illegal aliens in four years, and did not manage to.

Bush Sr. and Jr., Clinton, Obama and Trump consolidated the border wall and deportations. However, Bush Jr. and Trump made them the emblems of their political propaganda and operative elements to *control* and manage irregular migration. Paradoxically, Clinton, a democrat, originally fostered such pair of instruments of aggressive immigration policy. Trump did not reach a million deportations (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2021). Finally, Joe Biden, already in office, on January 20, stopped the construction of the wall and ordered a revision of the migration and deportation policy.

This article summarizes the history of the border wall, with an emphasis on the Tijuana-San Diego area, authentic laboratory at the Mexico-U.S. border, where the first wall was tried and the prototypes of the U.S.-Mexico border wall were built, out of which Trump pretended to choose the most efficacious. The analysis addresses the period from 1991 to 2021, and focuses on the wall in relation to legislation, border surveillance and removals; four dimensions of migration and the same number of categories of analysis. The goal is to deconstruct the evolution and impact of the wall-fence as an axis of the surveillance and control strategy for the border with Mexico. Since a wall does not work on its own, one has to keep in mind that it is inseparable from the laws that created it.

The theoretical-conceptual framework comes from the paradigm that social sciences and humanities deal with human factors; human life located in time and space, privileging the dialectical relation between structure and occurrence; in which the latter, as defined by Cardín (1988), unfolds in chance and reflection (agency?). These factors underlie the nature of the social actors' capability for action and agency. Indeed, this proposal entails an ontological framework that defines the properties of structures and occurrences, of actors and factors privileged in the analysis; and an epistemological scaffolding in which qualities, or logos, prevail over quantities or measurements—which have to be inferred from the reading. Mine is not a nomothetic approach nor do I look for scientific laws, it is but idiographic: descriptive and interpretative.

The primary sources are supported on more than 20 years of work/field trips, revision of publications in and about the region, review of printed sources and official documents (data and reports from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) [National Migration Institute] and testimonies/fieldwork with ethnographic and micro-historic approaches. This enables us to resort to information triangulation from the observations in the field, oral testimonies and journalistic interviews. Likewise, photographs taken over the last 20 years are used as visual evidence. An instance of polyphonic micro-historic reconstruction, as a narrative summary, whose goal is to visualize the interweaving of factors such as border walls, control operations, the various laws that affected the process, as well as removals.

The main premise conceives the police-military control of borders and walls as a reflection of what Foucault (2008) called mechanisms, techniques and technologies of power. Democrats and Republicans, once in power in the United State, share a similar style of government: *governmentality* in the Foucauldian sense of biopolitical device. A strategy rooted on the structures of the State, focused on pragmatically managing migration problems, and modeled by Congress and Senate controls. At ontological and epistemological levels, *governmentality* defines and interweaves concepts such as security, territory, and sovereignty with the mentalities and modalities of governments of decisionmakers. In this way, the wall and deportations have modalities morally and ideologically defined by historic period (Lee, 2018), by democratic or republican support, or else, to reinforce the biopolitical mechanisms that discipline the behavior of irregular immigrants (Alonso Meneses, 2020).

The hypothesis to defend states that wall and removals—people uprooted or extirpated from their socio-familial group and ejected from the country—came to being as fortuitous components [random events] in U.S. politics. For 30 years, there was a continuous transformation and at present they have a relational and strategic role in the control and management of borders and irregular migration. A process that is inseparable from the impact of capitalist globalization and of new industries such as arms and digital-electronic technologies at the border region (Sandoval Palacios, 2017).

Background of the Early Walls and Operations

The Mexico-U.S. border is the northern one for Mexico and the southwest for the United States. There are authors that speak of a wall at the southern border of the U.S., disregarding it runs from Imperial Beach, in San Diego county, California, to Key West to the south of Miami, in Monroe county, Florida; and *de facto*, it extends to the jurisdictional waters of Puerto Rico, or Guantánamo, in Cuba. Historically, the Border Patrol or the Department of Homeland Security distinguish between the southwest half, that is, the one from Imperial Beach to the mouth of Rio Grande / Río Bravo, which correspond to the sectors of the Border Patrol in San Diego and Rio Grande Valley, respectively, and the southeast section, from the aforementioned mouth to Key West, between the sectors of Rio Grande Valley and Miami.

Furthermore, the extension of the border with Mexico is the result of adding one stretch of land and two stretches of rivers, i.e., Rio Grande and Colorado River; this way, it reaches 3 143 kilometers (1 954 miles). The land border is 1 085 km and accounts for 35%; while the river borders reach 2 018 km, that is, 65%. The 39-kilometer Colorado River stretch divides the current Mexican populations of the Miguel Alemán neighborhood in the south and Nuevo Algodones in the north; not leaving aside that the border extends 24 nautical miles into the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, comprising the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone. There is another limit, however, it is the strip of waters considered Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles.²

Juridically, these distances fit the international standard established by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Thereby, the Mexico-U.S. border does not end in the beaches of Tijuana or at the mouth of Rio Grande, maritime borders enter 24 nautical miles, that is 43 kilometers, into the sea (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2021; Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas entre México y Estados Unidos, 2017). In theory, Mexico also projects its border with the U.S. in an equivalent manner, only that in the Gulf, EEZ is broader than in the Pacific, where it is noticeably short. Moreover, irregular crossings of the maritime border in skiffs with migrants and drugs is documented in Tijuana.

As of the coming into force of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, and over most of the 20th century, the Mexico-U.S. border was an invisible line with short stretches signaled with international monuments and landmarks. The border became tangible and visual at urban stretches, at the ports of entry. Owing to this, the border crossing, when it was over Texas, was as a *mojado* / wetback crossing the river on small vessels called *patos* [ducks], operated by “*pateros*” [duck drivers] (Chuy-1, personal communication, November 10, 1999), or *jumped* the wall on the land stretches in California, Arizona, and New Mexico. The American literature referred to them as wetbacks and aerialists (Samora, 1971). The border defined by Rio Grande and Colorado River or by some stretches of fence started to change as of 1991.

The border, in 2021, reflects the historic process of the policy of frontal combat to irregular migration. However, the first turning point of interest took place in the 1970’s. In the middle of the Cold War between Communist and Capitalist worlds, when the Vietnam War pointed at a defeat of the U.S., and the oil crisis put an end to almost 30 years of economic prosperity after WWII, President Nixon declared a war on drugs and created the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in 1973. At once, an approach of low-intensity conflict and border militarization was taken regarding Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, where Colombian cocaine came through. DEA and the army started to collaborate, and during Reagan’s administration, in 1981, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Border Patrol are incorporated into drug trafficking combat (Dunn, 1996, 2001; Meyers, 2006). The policy of priority combat to drug and migration at the southwest border was a policy maintained by

² A nautical mile is different from a statute mile; the former is 1.8 km and the latter, 1.6, respectively.

the democratic and republican administrations of Carter, Reagan and Bush Sr. from 1976 to 1992, but also those of Clinton, Bush Jr., Obama, and Trump from 1993 to 2021 (Sandoval Palacios, 2017).

The concept of border control by means of a proto-wall has an exact date of birth, if we make an exception for the singularity of Tijuana. On September 19, 1993, *Operation Blockade* was set into motion in el Paso, Texas, eight months after Clinton's assumption of office. INS and the Border Patrol El Paso Sector deployed units at some hundred meters from each other over the border stretch from Sunland Park, New Mexico, to Fabens, Texas, in front of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Ortiz, 1994). This tactical deployment at the side of the border blocked for some weeks the traditional crossings of irregular migrants from the neighboring city of Ciudad Juárez, affecting local migrants, who crossed daily, and those from the south who would stay for some months (Chuy-1, personal communication, February 11, 2000). Such block disrupted daily practices and produced strong demonstrations (Vila, 2004).

In the face of such demonstrations, Operation Blockade was then “diplomatically renamed as Operation Hold-the-line” (Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernández-León and Bailey, 1999, p. 448). Curiously, there are Mexican researchers who still call it Operation Blockade, despite it only had that name for a few weeks. Conversely, the Border Patrol does not mention Blockade in the recounts of the operation: it erased the name. Washington and present-day extinguished INS soon discovered that Hold-the-line did not put an end to undocumented migration, though it did hinder irregular entrances over old routes. The operation moved the bulk of migrants *far* from the look of American voters.

In January 1994, the era of NAFTA began in the United States, which for them meant an agreement, while for Mexico it was a treaty (*tratado*) such as Guadalupe Hidalgo. But also, with the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and its *revolutionary* message—there was a declaration of war—that attracted global media attention, stirring the ghosts of the guerrillas that had created commotion in Central America in the 1970's and 80's decades. On March 23, that same year, the assassination of PRI's presidential candidate, L.D. Colosio took place in Tijuana. The year closed with a deep economic crisis, forcing Clinton to rescue president Zedillo's Mexico; alarming signs came from such country.

In parallel, republicans cynically accused Clinton of having lost border control after less than a year of being in office and when they, under Reagan and Bush Sr., were in power from 1981 to 1992. Reagan carried out a final migration regularization in 1986 with the *Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)*, in a historic milestone in American migration policy by means of which it was sought to *order* the migration disorder in the U.S. Finally, in 1994, California was immersed in an antiimmigrant debate around Proposition 187 pushed by Republican Governor Pete Wilson, who encouraged denouncing irregular migrants and thus restricting their access to public services and their use of Spanish. The law was passed, though it was immediately contested and was rendered void in 1998.

These were some of the historic circumstances faced by Clinton's administration, when in 1994 he boosted the *Southwest Border Strategy*, a doctrine of systematic and aggressive control for the southwest border that inaugurated a new stage in his border policy toward Mexico and control migration, mostly Mexican. However, in parallel to border problems, a number of terrorist events took place in 1993 and 1996, which propitiated laws that, by chance, ended up affecting migration.

*The Decantation of Factors to Define a Border
and Migration Control Model*

After Blockade and its rebranding as Hold-the-line, on October 1, 1994, Operation Gatekeeper was launched in San Diego, California, the hotspot of mass border crossings and local protests. This operation copied the concept of control essayed in El Paso months before, nevertheless it had its own components such as a steel fence working as a wall that existed since 1992. Gatekeeper was advised by the U.S. Department of Defense's Center for Low Intensity Conflicts (Smith, 2001; Dunn, 2001). Following, early in 1995, in Nogales, Arizona, the third operation commenced, Safeguard, in the Tucson area. While, as of August 1997, Operation Rio Grande began operations in Texas, at the east part of Rio Grande, between Brownsville and Laredo. The operations were territorially expanded each year and their infrastructures and actions became more complex in function of the specificities of each sector of the Border Patrol. For example, Safeguard did not extend over the entire Tucson border region toward Yuma, which borders with California up to the end of 1999.

In this way, despite that after Ciudad Juárez, the river is the main obstacle, walls and other blocking infrastructure started to modify the territory in the vicinity of the urban stretches of the border, namely: Tijuana/San Diego, Mexicali/Calexico, Nogales/Nogales, Agua Prieta/Douglas, Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, Ciudad Acuña/Del Río, Piedras Negras/Eagle Pass, Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, Reynosa/McAllen, or Matamoros/Brownsville. The landscape underwent a physical-territorial mutation at the southwest border, but also moral, ideological and sociocultural because security infrastructure as well as surveillance and patrolling operations are complemented, from a social standpoint, by centuries-old racist and antiimmigrant sentiments, while from the institutional side, by a policy of captures and removals (Verea Campos, 2012; Alonso Meneses, 2020).

In 1996, this process was *benefitted* from two legislative milestones that were nefarious for irregular migration and whose genesis is alien to migration itself. On April 24, the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA)* was passed as a reaction to the bomb against a federal building in Oklahoma City, in April 1995, and also the terrorist attack by Islamic radicals (technically immigrants) against the World Trade Center in February 1993. Likewise, in September the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA)* of 1996 was passed.

These acts impacted and transformed the migration legislation, for example, by fostering deportations. The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act considers the removal of terrorists and criminal aliens after serving previous sentences. As well, express removals, with no judicial revision, were facilitated so that the migrants signed to agree with the removal document. *IIRIRA* was created with these operations in mind and offered the legal framework to investigate, pursue, detain and remove undocumented migrants. These acts broadened the catalogue of crimes that affect migrants with a green card, i.e., legal permanent residents who, after being legally convicted and serving their sentences, are removed. As well, punishment for deportees' reentrances were hardened, while irregular migrants might be sentenced to penalties such as being banned from entering the U.S. for 10 years or for life.

Such historic context became more complex when the U.S. economy started to improve at an unforeseen rate under Clinton (between 1992 and 2000); more than 22 million job posts were created, and GDP grew more than 4% a year (Krugman, 2004). Evidently, the undocumented migration flow also increased, after a *request* from the expanding economy and a primary-sector labor market *addicted* to undocumented labor force. Mexican population in the U.S. doubled between 1980 and 1990, and again over the following decade (1990-2000) (Passel, Cohn, & González-Barrera, 2012).

The Construction of the Wall Between Tijuana and San Diego, 1991-2000

What was decided and materialized back then is better illustrated and magnified in the San Diego-Tijuana region. In 1994, irregular migration reached a critical point regarding stigmatization, while legal aliens in official and conservative U.S. media sources were conceived as problems to be controlled/combated (enforcement) more openly and harshly. This animosity and animadversion came, partly, from the obscene visibility given by the media to the image of agglomeration of hundreds of people waiting right next to the border for the opportunity to cross into the U.S. breaking laws, especially in certain areas of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez or Matamoros, before the powerless gaze of the Border Patrol.

Such distressing images of Mexican migrants in Tijuana waiting for the nightfall to cross the border through Alemán neighborhood, El Bordo or Zapata Canyon, typical of the 1980's, were an evidence of the control that had been lost, despite no negative impact on domestic U.S. interests, neither pressure on labor markets nor social altercations. In point of fact, the U.S. economy continued demanding migrant labor force over the period 1993-2008, year when the Global Financial Crisis exploded. The actually weighty factor in the discourse was the *image* of a chaotic border that was daily produced, or patriotic initiatives such as *Lights up*, which between 1989 and 1993 were boosted by organized groups of San Diego inhabitants.

Every day at dusk, groups of American citizens approached the border in front of Tijuana, in the usual areas for irregular crossing, they parked their cars in parallel and turned their cars' headlights on using the high beams: hence: *Lights up*. The action, a symbolic protest,

had veterans and retirees as protagonists; they intended to *protect* the border in the face of Washington's ineptitude and inaction. Those were years when certain rugged stretches of the border were patrolled on horseback, and *polleros* used black pepper to fend for themselves (Flor-2, personal communication, February 23, 2001). The response from the government, consequently, had to be efficacious and equally powerful from a symbolic standpoint. The idea of building a wall or fence was a project conceived decades ago, and the political conditions and sufficient pressure were created to start carrying it out. In 1991, the decision to place a metal wall was made, and in 1992, it started in front of Tijuana, between the beach and San Ysidro Port of Entry. Bush Sr. was the incumbent U.S. president.

Before *Gatekeeper*, the flow of unauthorized migrants who entered over California accounted for more than 50% of the total from the south. In the mid 1970's, 33% of the arrests in the entire southwest border were carried out in the small area of San Diego next to Tijuana; that is, 25% of all apprehensions in the U.S. (Villalpando, 1976). After a year of *Gatekeeper*, in 1995, the small area of San Diego reported more arrests of migrants than all the sectors integrated in Texas. However, San Diego ceased to be the most problematic area in the period from 1995-2000, detentions rapidly decreased from 524 231 a year to 96 869. The official declaration by INS and Washington was that Operation *Gatekeeper*—including the wall—had been a success (Alonso Meneses, 2013).

Back then, urban stretches in cities such as Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, and even Ciudad Juárez, where the river border begins, witnessed the placement of barriers and steel fences. Watchtowers with powerful reflectors were built, the number of officers increased, dirt roads were opened in order to facilitate the mobility of patrols alongside the border. Even if the centerpiece of the operations were the so-called walls, the most iconic was that in front of Tijuana.

The tactical and strategic importance of the wall was explained by Raúl Villarreal, the spokesperson of Border Patrol, with Bush Jr., in a journalistic interview (Lerner, 2004). In 2004, in parallel to *Avenida Internacional de Tijuana*, amidst the neighborhoods Alemán, Castillo, and Zona Norte, a short stretch of the border had a double wall for the first time—it was actually triple, according to my observations in the field—. Villarreal pointed out that the oldest was to prevent the crossing of vehicles with migrants; such first wall remained for more than 25 years up to its removal in the 2017-2019 period. It was built with metal sheets which vertically placed and welded reached a height of 8 feet (2.4 meters). It was reused military material—originally platforms for heliports and portable roads—which were horizontally assembled on the field, especially for helicopters in the Vietnam war (that concluded in 1975). Such material was stored in San Diego military bases near the border; namely: the Naval Outlying Landing Field Imperial Beach, an important base of war and transport helicopters, and the Imperial Beach Border Patrol Station.

The spokesperson of the Border Patrol pointed out that such first metal wall was thought to stop automobiles with people. Back then, a way to cross was in automobiles running at full speed across the open fields. In this regard, one of my informants (K-3, personal

communication, February 10, 2010) told me there was an organization of *polleros* in Tijuana known as the Kamikazes, who in the second half of the 1980's and the early 1990's, resorted to the modus operandi above: crossing the fields driving at full speed to enter into the U.S. They worked on drugs, hence the dangerous maneuvers and the name kamikazes. In the area —*Avenida Internacional* around Alemán and Castillo neighborhoods—in the late 1980's, individuals known as mules crossed heroin in one- or two-kilo shipments in a backpack delivered on the other side of the border, on American soil, after crossing the Tijuana River (Mike-9, personal communication, August 24, 2013). Curiously, such *wild* crossing modalities coexisted with other more *civilized* on cars driven by women as they raised less suspicion (Flor-7, personal communication, October 19, 2008; K-3, personal communication, February 2, 2005).

The other fence Villarreal told Lerner (2004) about, unlike the old one virtually at the border line, was built 150 feet away from the former, on American soil, by 2003-2004. It starts beside the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, built in 1996, and finishes at *El Bordo*, where the border crosses Tijuana river and its channeling finishes on the Mexican side. It is built with cylindrical concrete columns of 12 inches (30.4 centimeters) in diameter, 15 feet tall (4.5 meters) spaced each other at 25 centimeters, are joined and have a metallic mesh inclined at an 80-degree angle so as to prevent climbing. As declared by Villarreal: “This is the definitive one, the future of migration policy. This is capable of deterring people”. And: “With this wall, we leave the family, women and the elderly behind” (Lerner, 2004) (Photographs 1 and 2).

Photograph 1. Double wall on *Avenida Internacional*, built in 2004



Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2005.

Photograph 2. Double wall on *Avenida Internacional*, present day

Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2021.

This concrete-and-metal model, however, was discontinued because it is costly and the current metallic one was imposed, as it is easier to build and needs less investment. But, as stated, back then, there were stretches with triple wall actually, as a third stretch was built around the outlet mall of Las Americas (International Gateway of the Americas), which runs parallel to the river and then to *Camino de la Plaza Street*,³ in front of a residential area. And, to the other side of the shopping mall, it ran up to the car lanes of San Ysidro (Land Port of Entry).

The wall made with Vietnam-war material (Photographs 3 and 4) and the actions of Operation Gatekeeper, aimed at recovering border control. Evidently, traditional crossing sites close to Tijuana were closed; moreover, adding to those above, there were Zapata Canyon, next to *Libertad* neighborhood, in Otay, east of the city, and on the western side, Playas de Tijuana, Los Laureles canyon (Goat Canyon) and Del Muerto canyon (or Smugglers Gulch, *polleros?*). The tactical use of the first wall made surveillance, persecution and detention easy, hence it was deduced that the more impregnable the wall, the easier detentions would be and the more difficult to immigrate to the U.S. without a permit. Up to that moment, crossing was relatively affordable, according to two women who used to be *coyotes* for Central Americans (Flor-2, personal communication, February 23, 2001) or Mexicans (Flor-7, personal communication, September 16, 2016) in the 1980's and 1990's.

³ Original name in Spanish.

Photograph 3. The early wall: Playas de Tijuana



Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2004.

Photograph 4. The early wall: road to the airport



Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2004.

The wall collapsed the main routes of clandestine entrance into the U.S. close to the urban area of Tijuana, and *polleros* with migrants took a circumvention toward the east, firstly to the Otay, Tecate and Rumorosa mountains on the Mexican side. Owing to this, over Gatekeeper phase II, launched in 1996, more than 20 kilometers of wall were built to reach the beginning of the mountains, whose slope prevented wall from being built, though it went

beyond the city of Tijuana and reached Tecate. In October 1997, phase III extended the operation toward the El Centro Sector, in the desert county Imperial, bordering Arizona. The Mexicali area in front of Imperial county, is an old route that moved to San Diego after the fiscal year 1998; in this area of California, there was also a drop in the number of detentions after 1999-2000. Here, the All American Canal runs over some stretches parallel to the border, operating as an obstacle; dozens of migrants have drowned in its waters.

All in all, there was a continual effort to enforce irregular immigration. Operations such as Hold-the-line, Gatekeeper, Safeguard, or Rio Grande made the clandestine crossing of the border difficult. The idea of multiple obstacles parallel to the border line was imposed; and when we speak of a border wall, we do not mean an opaque, homogenous and unidimensional wall, but a multidimensional heterogeneous structure that interrelates various objects of material, techno-electronic and human nature: walls made of steel posts of various profiles and length, electronic surveillance and detectors, as well as border agents. This enabled reaching a sustained capacity to detain migrants and transformed the migration pattern, destroyed the circularity that characterized temporary Mexican migration (the migrants' traditional yearly coming and going) over the second half of the 20th century, and force the prolongation of stays in the United States.

The new and aggressive control strategy managed to accumulate 8 844 476 detention events at the border with Mexico from October 1, 1994 to September 30, 2000; figures never seen before within a six-year term. Up to the present, this number of detentions has not been reached in such time; however, the most tragic collateral effect was the displacement of crossing routes toward deserts and other dangerous areas which caused the death of at least 9 000 migrants at the border region from 1993 to 2013 (Eschbach et al., 1999; Alonso Meneses, 2013). By 2021, the figure might be about 11 500 deaths over 28 years.

The Border Wall, 2000-2020: Bush, Obama, and Trump

Clinton left power in 2000, the milestone year that opened a two-decade period with disconcerting migration patterns. It was the year with the most detention events of migrants in the history of the Mexico-U.S. border, reporting a figure of 1.6 million detentions, not necessarily different individuals, as the same could have been arrested four, five or more times. A record that was broken in 2021 with 1.7 million detentions. It is important to notice that the U.S. uses fiscal years (FY) to record statistics and run the official calendar; these range from October 1 to September 30 the following year (U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2022). The figure speaks of an abundant migration flow and of a well-oiled detention machinery. In 2000, Bush Jr. won the presidency and republicans were in power from 2001 to 2009. A year later, the fateful September 11, 2001, the attacks on New York and Virginia (against the Pentagon) took place; these events cannot be detached from those of the summer of 1998 against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, or Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania—the embassies are considered American soil—reasserted by Al Qaeda.

The demand for a *safe border* after such tragedy that changed the global geopolitics as well as the U.S.-Mexico border turned into a shielded and militarized border strip with high-security prison walls and low-intensity conflict actions. The new conditions had a new element alien to the region, adding to drug trafficking and clandestine migration: Al-Qaeda's Islamic and Jihadist terrorism. Drug trafficking at the Mexican border had a boost between 1986 and 2000, when the routes of Colombian cocaine over the Caribbean were blocked and moved through Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez or Nuevo Laredo.

The 9/11 attacks (2001) redefined the U.S. security and border policies. President Bush Jr. signed the Patriot Act on September 26, 2001, and created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In 2002, the *Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act* as well as *Homeland Security Act* were issued and restructured the various offices and agencies linked to the control of migration and borders. INS ceased operations in 2003 and its scope of action was taken up by ICE, CIS (Citizenship and Immigration Services) or CBP (Customs and Border Protection). These were accompanied by laws such as *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act* in 2004, *REAL ID Act*, 2005 (Meyers, 2006), or *Secure Fence Act*, 2006, with which infrastructures such as walls and complements for the operational control of U.S. international land and sea borders were devised.

Bush Jr., as of 2003, boosted the systematic placement of obstacles and *walls* (physical barriers and walls), the hiring of Border Patrol agents—which surpassed 20 000 elements in 2009—and the transference of technologies to identify and record the personal data of migrants and travelers (Meyers, 2006). Also, resorting to Section 287(g) of 1996 *IIRIRA*, which legitimizes the raids of local police forces, with a previous agreement to arrest migrants and their later removal. An instance of the consequences of the use of this section of the law were Joe Arpaio's excessive and illegal operations in Arizona, which was taken to court. In this way, a stage characterized by the construction of double walls, increase of homeland raids and intensification of removals was consolidated.

Removals started to grow noticeably with Clinton. If in the fiscal year 1996, the events of aliens removed were 69 680, two years after *IIRIRA* they doubled: 114 432 in 1997, and 173 146 in 1998 (Dougherty, Wilson, and Wu, 2006). Under Bush Jr., removals changed from 189 026 in the fiscal year 2001 to 369 221 in 2008. Figures for 2007 and 2008 display that ICE raids operated as an important migration control resource before Obama.

Together with the historic detentions of Border Patrol/CBP made at the border and the later removals, deportations appeared in the political and DHS agendas. Conceptually, the returns of migrants arrested at the border region are different from the orders of removal executed by ICE inside the country. After establishing a record of removals for a single year in 2012 with 409 000 events, Obama was reelected and rectified, propitiating a noticeable drop in removals, changing from 235 413 in 2015 to 240 255 in 2016 and 226 119 in 2017; nevertheless, Nobel Peace Prize Barack Obama beat the record of removals in his two terms, with more than 2.5 million, of which 1.8 million were Mexican (ICE, 2017). The worst datum

of his administrations, 2009-2017, was that 2 977 migrants died at the border with Mexico, most of them Mexican (U.S. Border Patrol, 2020).

Obama boosted another legislative milestone that affected border infrastructure: Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, approved in the summer of 2013 over his second term, which assumed that prior to migration regularization, border security had to be reinforced. Among its main endeavors one finds “the implementation of the Comprehensive Southern Border Security Strategy and the Southern Border Fencing Strategy” (Congress.Gov, 2013). This was a multidimensional security strategy indissociable from the construction of a fence with steel posts such as train rails, vertically placed keeping a minimum separation.

This strategy for the border with Mexico—the document refers a euphemistic southern border that would comprise New Orleans, Alabama, or Florida—implied technologic resources, building 700 miles of walls to stop migrants and replace antivehicle obstacles such as those in the desert. It considered to force the employers to use a verification system to prevent unauthorized workers from being hired. Moreover, it proposed a goal, presently unfulfilled: “at least 38 405 trained full-time active duty U.S. Border Patrol agents are deployed, stationed, and maintained along the Southern Border (by September 30, 2001)”. At the border with Mexico there were barely 16 731 elements in 2019. This illustrates the calculation errors of legislators.

The law stated the provision of funds for the creation of the Department of Homeland Security Border Oversight Task Force and the Southern Border Security Commission to monitor and make executive decisions. For example, supervising the construction of infrastructure focused on the ports of entry, or between checkpoints and that this infrastructure—700 miles of walls and technology—is able to deploy “surveillance technologies in the Yuma and Tucson, Arizona, sectors; San Diego and El Centro, California; El Paso, Big Bend, Del Rio, and Laredo, Texas; and the Rio Grande Valley, including air and marine surveillance” (Congress.Gov, 2013).

Finally, it implemented 130 000 annual hours of air and marine surveillance of land and sea borders. The equipment of CBP and Border Patrol agents has to include additional cellular phone and video, portable surveillance systems and ensure specialized education as well as suitable training for CBP agents, Border Patrol agents, ICE agents, the agents of Air and Marine Divisions and the specialists in agriculture deployed along the 100 miles of any land or marine border of the United States or at any port of entry of this country (Congress.Gov, 2013). It consolidated the use of unarmed drones for 24-hour surveillance at the southern border region. And it defined some guidelines for CBP to deal with underage migrants detained at the border—indeed a right choice—though it seems as though it was inoperative after the underage crisis at the border in 2014, 2016, 2019 and 2021, or the abuse over Trump’s administration, with children who died or disappeared during their detention.

From Fence to Wall or Trump's Media and Fetishist Wall

Donald Trump started his administration in 2017. During the campaign, he spoke of building *a beautiful wall* during his administration, and the wall catalyzed a widespread antiimmigrant xenophobic and racist sentiment. The first migration crisis he faced was that of the Haitians who arrived in Tijuana in 2016-2017; however, in 2017, detentions at the border dropped to 1970 figures. Several caravans of Central Americans arrived in 2018, the one in autumn gave rise to the assault to the border between San Diego and Tijuana by thousands of migrants that had to be dispersed with antiriot materials and provoked the closure of the border for more than five hours. Such crisis gradually scaled, and from December 22, 2018, to January 25, 2019, the longest government shutdown in American history took place for 35 days.

Democrats refused to authorize five billion USD to build the border wall. However, since crossings of Central Americans continued at levels and rates not seen before, between October and January almost 300 thousand detentions were carried out; on February 19, 2019, Trump declared a National Emergency at the border, which enabled him to use funds from the budget of the Department of Defense (the Pentagon) to fund the construction of the wall. Detentions at the border doubled in the first half of 2019 in relation to 2018—more than 450 000—most of them were Guatemalans and Hondurans, setting an unprecedented milestone.

On the Mexican side, measures taken by the government—in the Secretariat of Home Affairs and INM—were improvised and counterproductive because they caused a publicized pulling effect mainly for Central Americans, but also Brazilians, Cubans, Ecuadorans and various African or Asian countries. The avalanche was so large that it surpassed the inexperienced and inept Mexican migration authorities, particularly of the top executive of INM. Trump ended up threatening Mexico retaliating against an irresponsible policy and management of transit migration. He threatened to close the northern border, rejecting USCMA, the renewed NAFTA, imposing gradual tariffs of up to 25% for products exported from Mexico and gave a 40-day deadline. The unprecedented ultimatum in Mexico-U.S. foreign affairs was because never in the history of U.S. migration had there been so many Central Americans detained after crossing over Mexico.

In parallel, a migration strategy that had been visualized in episodes in 2014 and 2016 consolidated. After crossing the border, over areas with and without walls, groups of migrants turned themselves in to the border patrol with a view to later finding ways to regularize their stay. They did not try to enter in a clandestine manner into the U.S. and reach a city, which is only accomplished with the logistic of organizations of *polleros* or *coyotes*, or exceptionally, with the help of a friend or a relative. Such authentic migration tsunami was interrupted in the summer of 2019 by the rectification of the irresponsible transmigration policy fostered by some functionaries of the Mexican state; as previously mentioned, it was the case of the highest executive in *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (an inept in migration topics and academician in El Colegio de la Frontera Norte [El Colef]), who eventually resigned, accepting his inability to manage the gravest historic conflict between the governments of Mexico and the U.S. in the 21st century.

By the end of the physical year 2019, an exceptional record, probably unrepeatably, was set when the Border Patrol made a total of 851 508 detentions, largely Central Americans, at the border with Mexico. Out of them, 166 458 were Mexicans (19.5%) vs. 685 050 individuals with a nationality other than Mexican (OTM) (80.4%). Out of these, 75% came from Guatemala and Honduras. The sectors of the Border Patrol where the largest number of Central Americans were detained were Rio Grande Valley with 309 295 (45%) and El Paso with 166 960 (24%) (CBP, 2018). In the years 2018 and 2019, the figures of Mexicans detained at the border were the lowest in the last 40 years; and it was not because of the wall.

Months later, the Covid-19 pandemic declared in March 2020 collapsed daily life, trade, and human mobility at global level. The migration flows reduced their volume and intensity. Trump turned the wall and caravans into electoral propaganda; despite such ploy, he lost the presidential election. The new president, Joe Biden, cancelled the National Emergency declaration of 2019 and halted the construction of new stretches of the wall in 2021. Days before starting his administration, however, a caravan of Hondurans was repressed in Guatemala; in March and April, there was a crisis of unaccompanied underage migrants who arrived on their own to the U.S. in record numbers, and in June, Vice President Kamala Harris visited Guatemala and Mexico announcing a new plan. The Mexican government severely repressed some caravans in August and September. Mexico was sending zero tolerance signals to the free crossing of its southern border. A historic change that modified the transmigration panorama of the last decade.

The wall at the border operated as a centerpiece in the *new wall system*. Paradoxically, it has a dual role of political propaganda instrument and actual and crucial factor in the infrastructure of dissuasion and control; complemented with a series of measures that combine parallel highways and roads, infrared and night-vision cameras, motion detectors, surveillance drones of various sizes, communication equipment, means of transport (including horses, light utility vehicles, and jeeps), computing equipment and software (digital-electronic technology), a wide catalogue of surveillance technologies and the necessary human resources. In this way, the Border Patrol and CBP have air, land, and sea operational units and control operations in the states, from checkpoints on highways to stringent airport controls with various phases.

However, another transversal factor is the sociocultural atmosphere, which propitiates antiimmigrant and neo-racist sentiments and also builds the stereotype of the alleged irregular immigrant as a target for the police, a quite common panorama for some decades in occidental societies and the United States (Stolcke, 1995; Vereá Campos, 2012). In this way, border walls are related and combined with removals of irregular immigrants. Removals have been interpreted by De Genova (2002) as a regulatory mechanism for the reserve army of labor force of undocumented migrants, and as a polyvalent ethnic cleansing and demographic removal surgery mechanism (Alonso Meneses, 2014); that is to say, a practical way to dispose of illegal aliens. This xenophobic environment is historically and socioculturally

rooted, infiltrating politics and decision making, and thus materializing with discriminatory consequences.

The present triggered in 1993 reflects an old explanation by Andreas: “With the interruption of the traditional routes and methods of clandestine entry, the intensified border control campaign has transformed the illegal action, which once was relatively simple, of crossing the border into a more complex system of illegal practices” (2000, p. 95). Violations of human rights and deaths of migrants increased during those years (Smith, 2001; Nevins, 2002; Alonso Meneses, 2013). Breaking with the culture of clandestine crossing that had been consolidated for more than 60 years led to a train clash that affected the most vulnerable: migrant individuals. Wilson (2014) concurs with Andreas in his criticism to border militarization, pointing out that in North America and occidental Europe, far from alleviating dangers and threats, what it actually does is to trigger an escalation in the sophistication of the modus operandi of the actors and groups intended to be combated. Similar conclusions are drawn by Saddiki (2017), broadening his research to the world of current walls, including *virtual* (electronic) border walls, stressing their contradictions and counterproductive or detrimental effects.

Payán (2016) already visualized that the three wars at the border—drugs, immigration and national security—created a counterproductive synergy. It is also the case of Massey, Durand, and Pren (2016), for whom immigration control at U.S. borders failed as a strategy as it was the political answer to a problematic perception of the threat of Latin immigration to the U.S., with a biased narrative image promoted by bureaucrats, politicians, and experts. With this, what they accomplished was a large number of arrests and excessive border militarization that mainly transformed undocumented Mexican migration, which went from the historical annual circularity of men laborers mainly heading toward California, Texas, and Illinois, to accumulate 11 million people scattered across 50 U.S. states.

In like manner, it is surprising that collateral effects such as *human trafficking* are still current (Izcara Palacios & Andrade Rubio, 2016), or other violences that come from what the first author calls “post-structural violence”, when Central American labor migrants become dangerous criminals for fears of losing their life after being forcibly recruited by drug cartels (Izcara Palacios, 2016). In this sense, Orozco-Aleman and Gonzalez-Lozano (2018) conclude that violence in the places of origin, and the risk of violence over their mobility in migration, usually related to drug trafficking, are stronger factors than the potential dissuasion capacity of aggressive border control.

In any case, in September 2019, the famous wall at the border with Mexico was 654 miles long out of a total border length of 1 954; out them, 374 were a pedestrian primary barrier, while 280 miles, vehicle barriers. The second, which runs in parallel to the first, called pedestrian secondary barrier, as high as the first or even higher, was only 37 miles long, distributed as follows: California, 14; Arizona, 10; Texas, 13; no wall in New Mexico. The small border of California has one more mile than the entire state of Texas, which contains more than 60% of the border. For its part, the so-called pedestrian tertiary barrier, barely had

14 miles along the entire border. In reality, Bush Jr. and Obama build more kilometers of wall than Trump. A sizeable part of the kilometers recently built in the primary and secondary barriers are 10 meters in height, including the steel plate at the top; it is called a *30' steel bollard wall* (Photographs 5 and 6).

The official U.S. discourse under Trump advocated that walls work; however, by the end of its term, Obama's administration stated: "We have decided to treat migrants in a human way" and "Walls on their own cannot prevent illegal migration. Ultimately, the solution is long-term investment on Central America to approach the underlying pushing factors in the region" (Department of Homeland Security Press Office, 2016). Everything indicates that Biden's administration will retake this last approach: fewer walls and more investment on Central America; however, investments on economic improvement fail when security, liberty, and democracy are inexistent.

Photograph 5. Stretches with a double wall: *Avenida Internacional*



Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2021.

Photograph 6. Replacement of the old wall in Los Laureles canyon



Source: Personal file, Tijuana, 2018.

Finally, even though the wall was built to stop irregular Mexican migration, as of 2014, the presence of Central American migrants (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras) renewed the pressure and produced novel factors (Izcara Palacios, 2017a). For example, the irruption of a large unforeseen number of families and unaccompanied children who crossed Mexico's northern border and turned themselves in to the Border Police is a new strategy: firstly, asylum is sought, not work (Durand & Massey, 2019, p. 13). All of the above within an economic context that changed the logic of undocumented labor force demand, in which the need of contractors was no longer necessarily supplied by family and friend social networks (Izcara Palacios, 2017b).

In the face of this panorama, what are walls worth for if the new strategy emphasizes crossing the border, immediately turning in to the Border Patrol and looking for regularization as refugees or asylum seekers? And at present, we are in an exceptional year; 2020 was the year of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the physical year 2021 started with an unprecedented flow of underage migrants and closed with 1 734 686 detention events at the border with Mexico, with a new historic record, most of them Mexican citizens (CBP, 2022). Walls and obstacles did not work for stopping these migration neo-mobilities.

CONCLUSIONS

The Campoamor Law, as a homage to the poet Ramón de Campoamor, states that there may be subjective interpretations, different perceptions for "*todo es según el color/del cristal con que se mira*" [everything is according to the color / of the glass you look at]. If we place the border wall in a balance that measures its need and impact, there will be opposing opinions

unavoidably. The history of border control between Mexico and the U.S. for the last 30 years is inseparable from the very well-known wall, which has been changing in material form over the years along the entire border, at present it is conceived as the Southwest Border Wall System. However, this border surveillance and protection account for a historic machinery, which in addition to walls, is supported on laws, Border Patrol and removals. And when we say machinery, it also refers to a process with multiple factors activated more than once by the chance of circumstances and serendipity.

A democrat president, Bill Clinton, hardened laws and policies for migration control at the border, increasing detentions, deaths, and removals of migrants, setting the bases to operate the quantitative and qualitative change that took place after Bush Jr. Nobody thought that Clinton would carry on building the border walls started by Bush Sr. in 1991. None visualized that the laws that came as a reaction to the bomb in Oklahoma City—against a federal building in 1995—and the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, incorporated articles that make removals of irregular immigrants or tried by crimes easy, and that they ended up being harmful for migrants.

Moreover, we know that most of the laws with an effect on migration, removals or borders during the administrations of Clinton, Bush or Obama—each one of them was eight years in office—were approved with broad support from Democrats and Republicans in the Congress and Senate. The result is that in urban areas such as those in front of Tijuana, Tecate, Mexicali or Nogales, in particular, there are zones with a hyper-surveilled space; an inexpugnable infrastructure-landscape.

What took place from 2000 to 2020 is as complex and brutal that it is only explained by governing styles and ideologies—including *governmentality*—sensible to political and electoral campaigns in the core of U.S. society. Even if the northern Mexican border, marked by the wall and militarization of surveillance, is still the destination for powerful migration movements, most of them Mexican migrants.

Thirty years have been lost, but in geopolitics that is a trifle, despite that ever since 1989 we know how border walls end up, or that recent experience demonstrates that regarding migration, *walls on their own do not work*. The border wall only works *temporarily* together with the Border Patrol, ICE and removals, creating a synergy that is difficult to sustain over time, and with harmful side effects such as deaths after crossing the border, trafficking in migrant women, forced recruitment of migrants over Mexico by drug cartels and violence against them, changes in the behavior of migrations at the destinations, or the increase in removals.

Translation: Luis Cejudo-Espinosa.

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