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An Analysis of the Objectives and Effectiveness of Militarization at the US-Mexican Border

On May 15, 2006, US President George W. Bush announced a plan on US national television to send 6,000 National Guard troops to the US-Mexico border stating "The US must secure its borders. This is the basic requirement of a sovereign nation. It is also an urgent requirement of our national security" (BBC May 16, 2006). Despite the fact that the president stated that he "is not going to militarize the southern border", the plan has called for a number of long term military style actions to "secure" this border. The number of border guards is scheduled to increase "by 6,000 to 18,000, and new hi-tech detection measures including hi-tech fences, new border patrol roads, and motion sensors [are scheduled to] be installed along the 2,000-mile southern border" (BBC May 16, 2006). Whether or not one chooses to call such a plan "border militarization" is a purely political discussion of semantics and not the objective of this inquiry. For the purposes of this study, measures such as installation of guards, troops, fences, motion detectors and the like will, however, be referred to as militarization of the border.

This analysis will focus on whether or not the militarization of the US-Mexican border will achieve its stated and/or its intended objectives. In order to discover the effectiveness of militarization at the US-Mexican border, an analysis of the stated and intended objectives must first be undertaken, as the stated and intended objectives may

not be the same. To do this an analysis of the President's statements as well as some of the relevant socio-scientific literature on the topic will be consulted. Following an evaluation of these objectives, it will be necessary to explore the degree of effectiveness that border militarization might provide to achieve such objectives. This can be investigated by exploring the effects of the militarization of other borders. Finally, this inquiry will also suggest ways in which this issue can be better served by a variety of anthropological and socio-scientific research, theories and actions.

The stated objective of President Bush is that "the [US-Mexico] border should be open to trade and lawful immigration, and shut to illegal immigration as well as criminals, drug dealers and terrorists" (BBC May 16, 2006). If this stated objective is the intended objective, one would assume that a similar militarization project would be occurring at the US-Canadian border. Despite the lack of significant illegal immigration on this northern US border, drugs and terrorists – including the majority of the 9-11 hijackers – do and have crossed this border. Similar measures for such a project at this northern border have not been debated publicly nor do any plans appear to exist on implementing such a project. Given the fact that both terrorists and drugs cross both borders it can be more or less safely stated that militarizing the US-Mexican border will not prevent drugs or terrorists from entering the United States, even if militarization proves effective to achieving these stated objectives at the southern border. Thus, it would appear far more likely that the border is being militarized solely to prevent the migration of the poor from Mexico and nations further south into the US.

In order to better understand the reasons as to why a debate on the US-Canadian border has not taken place and why no plan to militarize the northern border

has been stated, anthropological research needs to take place in the highest echelons of the US government – preferably in both the executive and legislative branches. The researcher/s would need to gain access to these subjects covertly, despite the ethical dilemma this presents by not informing the subjects of the research, as these particular subjects would be highly unlikely to allow unfettered access otherwise. The researcher/s would then need to discover the mindset and reasoning of these national and world leaders. Is their intended objective to secure the US and prevent drugs, terrorism and “illegal” immigration, or are their other reasons to militarize only the southern US border – such as pandering to xenophobic and/or exploitative constituencies? Such research would likely yield many other insights outside the scope of this analysis.

The intended objectives of the militarization of the US border exclusively on its southern edge has been researched in numerous publications by hundreds of social scientists – anthropologists and others – over a period of many years (see references for a fraction of these). Michael Kearney offers one of the best explanations of the intended objectives. He and others note that by classifying undocumented migrants from Mexico and elsewhere as illegal labor, employers in the United States receive an undervalued labor force to enhance their profits. “Migration and process must be examined in conjunction with the larger structure controlling the ebb and flow of commodity (labor) distribution between Mexico and the United States” (Alvarez 1995:458). The desire for cheap labor and higher profits creates economic incentive for elites to maintain an illegal status for these economic migrants. Kearney notes that Mexican migrants “run scared all the time and are desperate to get work before they are apprehended and sent back to Mexico” therefore,

they accept whatever wage is offered and they work like fiends... the surveillance activities of the Border Patrol are not intended to prevent their entry into the United States to work, but instead are part of a number of ways of disciplining them to work hard and accept low wages (Kearney 1992[?]:128).

Thus, according to many social scientists, there is an undeniable economic incentive for those in power to militarize the US-Mexican border to maintain and control an inexpensive "illegal" workforce. If this is indeed the intended objective, then further militarization will continue to be effective in the exploitation of an undocumented workforce to the benefit of US employers and elites. This is also to the detriment of the native US workforce in that they may be replaced with below minimum wage workers. This generally causes resentment and xenophobia toward the migrants, which furthers calls for more militarization by the native workforce, thus further aiding elites in their exploitation.

Contrary to such an analysis, President Bush notes in his speech that undocumented workers often obtain forged documents that make it difficult for employers to tell that they are not legally employable. Thus the employers are not responsible for creating and/or perpetuating the perceived problems of undocumented migration, as they are in much of the prior socio-scientific analysis, because they are allegedly unaware of the lack of documentation. This is an area ripe for research. To find quantifiable data of the numbers of workers who are using falsified or stolen documents would require merely the attainment of IRS and Social Security data. If a worker had forged documents, employers would have filed tax returns with the stolen or falsified social security numbers. The IRS data could then be crosschecked using the employers' information and personal tax returns. Forged and stolen social security

numbers should be relatively easy to find. Despite the fact that a few of these cases might be from workers who would rather not be identified for other reasons, a reasonable estimate of the numbers of undocumented migrants using falsified documents could be derived from this data. It seems odd that such research hasn't taken place within the IRS as the issue of undocumented migration has gained national prominence. Accordingly, the openness of the IRS or the Social Security Administration to such research from outsiders is unlikely and again the research would likely have to be carried out covertly.

Assuming President Bush is correct, and that millions of undocumented migrants are actually being paid the federally mandated minimum wage as required by the law using falsified documents, another of the President's statements may be unlikely to hold true. President Bush also addresses in his speech the strain illegal immigration puts on hospitals and other social services. If these workers are utilizing falsified documents, then they are contributing payroll and social security taxes through their employers. With falsified documents, these workers are not enjoying any of the minimal benefits these taxes provide US citizens, and any strain they may be putting on social services is likely to be offset by these payroll taxes - although such funds may perhaps be diverted toward other purposes, in which case the strain would be due to a misappropriation of funds, rather than due to the migrants. An audit of US government spending may reveal insights as to where such funds might be diverted.

What may be more likely is that the President is overestimating the numbers of migrant workers using falsified documents to attain employment at minimum wage jobs while contributing payroll taxes. If the likely misappropriation of funds are discounted

and the strain on social services is significant, and it would be necessary to gather such data from hospitals and other institutions providing social services to discover the extent of the strain, then it is more likely that the majority of undocumented migrants work without any documentation. Without documentation, these workers are probably not receiving minimum wage – though likely still more than they would receive in their region of origin - and are not contributing payroll or Social Security taxes. As this puts the onus of undocumented immigration on employers and elites who know they are engaging in unlawful labor practices, thus verifying the claims of many social scientists, the President is unlikely to acknowledge the existence of such a process.

Locating and quantifying the number of workers who are entirely without documentation directly would be extremely difficult as these workers would probably be very reluctant to participate in any study that might identify them. Likewise, those who employ them would assuredly be equally hesitant to admit to the extent to which they had violated labor laws. However, the extent of undocumented below minimum wage employment could be quantified by the data gathered previously from the IRS study and using the government statistics often cited – an estimated 11.5 million illegal immigrants half of whom are Mexican (BBC May 16, 2006). One could then subtract the IRS numbers from the estimated number of illegal immigrants and gain a rough estimate of the number of undocumented migrants who are employed in illegal below minimum wage labor, adjusting the data for an assumed number who might be unemployed. Depending on the outcome of this data, the statements of either President Bush or of many social scientists would prove unlikely, as the extent of the wage exploitation of undocumented workers would be somewhat quantified.

If the President's stated intention of securing the US-Mexican border from illegal immigration is to be believed, already discounting statements on drugs and terrorism prevention previously, how effective have militarized borders been elsewhere in preventing illegal immigration? The land borders between Spain and Morocco on the coast of North Africa provide an excellent comparison as to how effective a militarized border is in preventing illegal immigration. This border shares a number of similarities with the US-Mexican border and is easier to control due its much smaller size. The Spanish maintain two city sized enclaves on the North African coast in Ceuta and Melilla and have fortified their borders in recent years by increasing the number of guards, making the fences higher, and adding a third barrier of mesh steel wire to prevent people from trying to scale the fences (Bailey 2005: BBC). Like Mexicans into the US, many Moroccans have been migrating to Spain and other parts of Europe to do low-wage labor – often undocumented, often agricultural – since the end of World War II. Laura Huntoon notes that “in the past the Spanish need for seasonal immigrant labor dovetailed nicely with a soft border with ally Morocco” (1998:439). Spain needed Moroccan agricultural labor and having a soft border that allowed some migrants to cross facilitated their need for the labor, while maintaining their status as illegal kept that labor inexpensive - a near mirror image of much of the socio-scientific analyses at the US-Mexican border. There has been a change in policy toward migrants at the Spanish-Moroccan border recently due to the sheer volume of economic refugees from the African continent. For many years the migration through the Spanish enclaves was a purely Moroccan one. However, a relatively recent phenomenon has begun – a pan-African migration through Morocco to Europe.

As economic conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa have worsened, people are willing to take great risks out of desperation. This often involves crossing the Sahara Desert, frequently from West Africa, and camping in Moroccan forests while waiting to attempt the dangerous crossing. Moussa Sakho from Mali left his Moroccan forest camp, headed toward the border and he:

took a ladder fashioned from branches and whatever else he could get his hands on and tried to get over the imposing double fence topped with razor-wire which separates Morocco from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. (BBC September 29, 2005).

Moussa and others from Sub-Saharan Africa undertake such endeavors because they feel they have no future in their home countries. Moussa “dreamt of being able to find a job where he could earn enough to support his family and maybe buy a few luxuries, like a television or even a car. And he thought he could only do this in Europe - or ‘Eldorado’” (Winter 2005: BBC September 29). As times have grown increasingly difficult in countries throughout Africa, migrants have risked everything to get to Europe where they believe they can find decent wages to feed their families. Since Morocco is the only African country with a European land border and the closest African nation to the European continent, it is the primary passageway to the EU for Africans. With the new influx of excess labor from other countries through Morocco, the border has been made more impermeable through militarization to prevent mass migration. Visa requirements for Moroccans began in 1991 and the flow of Moroccans was reduced as well (Bodega et al. 1995:807-808). Despite these attempts on the part of the Spanish to prevent migration, an increasing number of the desperate and poor attempt the crossing. On October 6, 2005, the governor of Morocco's northern Nador province,

Abdellah Bendhiba, said that six men “died during an assault of rare violence by some 400 immigrants trying to enter” the Spanish town of Mellilla on the North African coast overnight (BBC). As these land borders have become more militarized, thousands more attempt a more dangerous crossing over the Atlantic to Spain’s Canary Islands in makeshift rafts, often dying en route (BBC February 7, 2005).

Militarization projects have occurred at points along the US-Mexican border as well and supporters note that a “fence in San Diego County, approved by Congress in 1996, has dramatically reduced people [crossing] and narcotics trafficking there” (CS Monitor March 14, 2006). But detractors state:

All fencing has done in recent years is shift the routes that illegal immigrants use to enter the United States — often with deadly results. Border Patrol spokesman Jose Garza told the Star in January that at least 217 illegal entrants died in the Tucson sector in the fiscal year that ended September 30. (Arizona Star March 13, 2006).

Thus it becomes clear that no amount of militarization will prevent the economically desperate from finding ways around or through military barricades. By preventing and/or restricting the migration of the desperate, both Europe and the United States are engaging in “clearly discriminatory measures taken against economic immigrants who...involuntarily become illegals” due to the poverty into which they were born (Bodega et al. 1995:807). These discriminatory measures appear to be designed mainly to facilitate the exploitative labor practices of US and European elites to lower labor costs and enhance profits.

What is clearly lacking in these instances of border militarization is an effective policy for economic equity. Undocumented migrants from the impoverished regions of the world will continue to cross militarized borders into the wealthy nations of the world

despite the risks involved until they are given an economic incentive not to. Such an economic incentive cannot occur with aid alone, but rather a policy shift. What is necessary, if humanity is to stubbornly cling to a capitalist economy, is an international minimum wage law to provide economic equity to the world's citizens. This however cannot be a flat rate minimum wage at first, as the world's major businesses will not invest in places with little or no infrastructure without an economic incentive. Thus international minimum wages could be based on a percentage of a nation's Gross Domestic Product. This will entice companies to invest in regions where infrastructure is lacking but labor costs are lower, while still providing an acceptable standard of living to workers in these areas – as opposed to the grossly substandard wages they often provide today. Such a policy will likely encounter extreme resistance on the part of the world's elite, as it will drastically cut corporate profits in the short term. However, they may be enticed with the prospect of new markets for their goods and services in the long term. If the world's current poor have a level of income allowing them to engage in some conspicuous consumption, businesses will benefit from an increased number of consumers. If such a project is rejected, then more effort needs to be expended in the creation of an international union to demand the implementation of such a policy.

Such a project would require collaboration amongst not only anthropologists, but economists, political scientists, other social scientists and labor organizations worldwide. If social scientists work together to generate a proposal to convince policy makers that such a plan will benefit all of international society, with a few economic sacrifices to corporate profits at least in the short term, then perhaps the world's wealthy nations can stop squandering valuable resources and tax dollars on militarized borders

that do little but murder poor people by preventing them from attaining a better standard of living. A policy shift requiring a minimum wage in all nations could allow all the world's citizens to enjoy the benefits of the life enjoyed in the world's wealthy nations without having to leave their families and friends in the lands they were born in. This might eliminate the economic need for undocumented migration and subsequently, militarized borders.

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