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WHEN WALLS COLLIDE

Ideological quarrels drown out straight talk about border security



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Before moving on, try to identify the authors of these quotes. Click on the links to check your answers. If you're right, you get bragging rights! And if not, don't fret. You'll be in great company.

"I voted numerous times when I was a senator to spend money to build a barrier to try to prevent illegal immigrants from coming in. And I do think you have to control your borders." ([article](#) [video](#))

"We simply cannot allow people to pour into the United States undetected, undocumented, unchecked, and circumventing the line of people who are waiting patiently, diligently, and lawfully to become immigrants in this country." ([article](#) [video](#))

Were you surprised? So was your blogger. Yet when it comes to immigration and its control, the tenor of these times is decidedly different. On January 20, 2017, President Trump issued [Executive Order 13767](#), directing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to "take all appropriate steps to immediately plan, design, and construct a physical wall along the southern border, using appropriate materials and technology to most effectively achieve complete operational control of the southern border."

Two years later, having run smack dab into another wall (a Democratic House), the President's "five-billion dollar" dream remains unfunded, hobbling the Government and leaving reasoned discussion about border security for another day. But like our hero Sergeant Joe Friday, Police Issues is all about the facts. So, what are they?

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According to [historical U.S. Border Patrol data](#) there has been a decades-long increase in illegal crossing along the southwest border. In 1960 arrests totaled 21,022. After a protracted climb, apprehensions peaked at 1,615,844 in 1986 and at 1,643,679 in 2000. Counts have since dropped to the levels of the early 70s, with 303,916 apprehensions in 2017 and [396,579 in 2018](#).

Arrests, of course, represent only a fraction of unauthorized entries. [A comprehensive February 2017 report](#) by Congress' General Accounting Office (this essay's main data source) estimates that during FY 2013-2015 (October 1, 2012 - September 30, 2015) more than one million persons illegally entered the U.S. through the southwest border.

Physical security has not been ignored. A 1996 law ordered the installation of fencing in areas highly impacted by illegal entry, including a "triple-layer fence" near San Diego. Subsequent amendments upped the game so that by 2015 miles of fencing along the southwest border had increased more than five-fold. Its quality was also enhanced, with pedestrian (left photo) and vehicle barriers (right photo) transitioning to a hardy



"bollard" style made up of closely spaced, large-diameter vertical posts. Our nearly 2,000 mile long southwest border (696 miles land and 1295 miles of river) is now secured by 354 miles of primary pedestrian fencing, 82 percent (290 miles) of bollard design, and by 300 miles of primary vehicle fencing (225 miles of a more impervious, modern design.)

During FY 2007-2015 \$2.3 billion was spent to improve and extend barriers. Routine maintenance came in at about \$450 million. With average costs of \$6.5 million per mile for primary pedestrian fencing and \$1.8 million per mile for primary vehicular barriers, the enhancements didn't come cheap. For example, replacing 14.1 miles of legacy pedestrian fencing with bollard-style in Tucson and Yuma cost \$68 million, or \$4.9 million per mile. Other recent projects include \$13.4 million to replace 1.4 miles of

pedestrian fencing in New Mexico and \$45 million for a similar 7.5 mile project in Naco, Arizona.

What was the payoff? According to Customs and Border Protection (CBP), an agency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), bollard-style fencing is pricey but superior, keeping illegal immigrants from gaining ready access to populated areas and forcing the more determined to travel to remote, unguarded locations where they cannot quickly blend in. CBP recorded nine-thousand-plus breaches of pedestrian fencing during 2010-2015, with legacy barriers suffering nearly six times as many incursions per mile (82 v. 14) as their bollard counterparts. In Nogales, bollard fencing reportedly reduced assaults on agents by 81 percent, while bollard-style vehicle barriers slashed “drive-throughs” in Tucson by 73 percent. Many “degraded” sections of pedestrian and vehicle fencing remain to be addressed.

Even the most modern barriers, though, aren’t foolproof. Bollard fences can be climbed and, as illustrated by the photograph at the top, forcibly breached. That’s where the President’s obsession comes in. A solid, sturdy wall that prevents drive-overs and drive-throughs, is of sufficient height to discourage climbing and rock-throwing, and has a foundation that obstructs ready tunneling, would be by far the most effective. Still, even those who disagree with Speaker Pelosi ([she said a wall would be “immoral”](#)) might find its prison-like ambience off-putting. And the cost of building a continuous wall, and doing it right, would be astronomical. Five billion seems just a down payment.

But we’re ahead of ourselves. If Congress’ number-crunchers have anything to say about it, the wall’s prospects are dim for another reason. You see, the document we’ve been filching from is entitled “SOUTHWEST BORDER SECURITY: Additional Actions Needed to Better Assess Fencing’s Contributions to Operations and Provide Guidance for Identifying Capability Gaps.” Before passing judgment, the GAO’s nitpickers are demanding the facts, just like Sergeant Joe. Here’s an extract from their ultimately disparaging assessment:

CBP has not developed metrics that systematically use these, among other data it collects, to assess the contributions of border fencing to its mission. For example, CBP could potentially use these data to determine the extent to which border fencing diverts illegal entrants into more rural and remote environments, and border fencing’s impact, if any, on apprehension rates over time. Developing metrics to assess the contributions of fencing to border security operations could better position CBP to make resource allocation decisions with the best information available to inform competing mission priorities and investments.

Bottom line: tell us how many illegal border-crossings your proposals would prevent, and we'll decide if it's worth it.

A copy of Homeland Security's response appears on pp. 67-68 of the [GAO report](#). Echoing its antagonist's often impenetrable verse, DHS promises to supply appropriate "metrics" by March 31, 2018. Well, that date came and went. Then in July 2018 the GAO issued [a second report](#). It's entitled "SOUTHWEST BORDER SECURITY: CBP Is Evaluating Designs and Locations for Border Barriers but Is Proceeding Without Key Information." Its assessment focused on a request to expend \$1.6 *billion* in the 2019 fiscal year to build 65 miles of wall in Rio Grande Valley (page 11.) However, in GAO's not-so-humble opinion, the "metrics" still didn't – no pun intended – measure up:

DHS plans to spend billions of dollars developing and deploying new barriers along the southwest border. However, by proceeding without key information on cost, acquisition baselines, and the contributions of previous barrier and technology deployments, DHS faces an increased risk that the Border Wall System Program will cost more than projected, take longer than planned, or not fully perform as expected. Without assessing costs when prioritizing locations for future barriers, CBP does not have complete information to determine whether it is using its limited resources in the most cost-effective manner and does not have important cost information that would help it develop future budget requests.

These comments might seem perfectly reasonable, but in the context of law enforcement – that, after all, is what CBP does – our nation's auditors are asking for an awful lot. Measurement is simple and arguably accurate when variables are readily quantifiable; say, profit and loss in business, crimes committed and cleared by arrest in everyday policing. But demanding that DHS produce a cost-benefit analysis for each border-hardening proposal would require it to attach numbers – *accurate* numbers, not just guesses – to the illegal crossings and, even more importantly, other crimes the expenditures would prevent. That seems a bit much. After all, had proof of such effects been a condition for funding ATF, your blogger wouldn't have a retired special agent's badge to display on his bookshelf.

So why the obstinacy? While GAO enjoys a reputation for impartiality, its employees may not appreciate the President's "my way or the highway" approach. (Incidentally, GAO's report about the costs of [the President's excursions to Mar-a-Lago](#) are yet to be made public. One can only hope they will reflect the same tenacity and attention to detail that characterizes the agency's more mundane work.)

Of course, Congress gets the final say. GAO is only there to inform. In this case, though, their joint efforts have aligned in a way, intentionally or not, that can only

frustrate the President's ambitions. From that perspective his perhaps regrettable tantrums make perfect sense. Meanwhile, the nation still pines for a comprehensive, truly objective assessment of what (and how much) ought to be done to safeguard its borders. Alas, in this ideologically fraught, hopelessly divided climate, that prospect seems no more likely than building the wall.