

Borderline policy: U.S. officials acknowledge that the fence was never designed to halt illegal immigration—just slow it down.

How Not to Build a Fence

The United States may soon fortify its border with Mexico. But what about the fence that is already there? A close look at the disjointed, makeshift barrier reveals America's ambivalent and conflicted attitudes toward immigration. | **By Peter Skerry**

The United States is in the midst of an intense debate over its borders. Immigration is approaching historic levels, and an all-time high of 12 million people—one third of the foreign-born population—are in the United States illegally. Fifty percent of them are from Mexico, and another 30 percent are from elsewhere in Central and South America. Most have entered across the 1,950-mile U.S.-Mexican

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border. In recent months, the two houses of the U.S. Congress have each passed immigration reform bills. The differences between the two versions are yet to be resolved, but they do have at least one important thing in common: Both mandate that hundreds of miles of new physical barriers be added to the existing 125 miles of fence along the border.

That remote, often forbidding border has now become the focus of a symbolic struggle over how Americans see themselves in the world. But symbols are open to interpretation. To many Americans, border barriers promote national security. To others, they

smack of fortification and militarization by empire-building Washington bureaucrats. Meanwhile, market-oriented conservatives at the *Wall Street Journal* and human rights activists at the American Civil Liberties Union have both denounced the border fence as a new “Berlin Wall”—though its purpose is to keep foreign nationals out, not citizens in.

In this controversy, few have bothered to consider the mundane, physical details of the border fence itself. But when one looks at it closely, one encounters neither a particularly imposing structure nor a gold-plated military project. Instead, it is a jerry-rigged example of American ingenuity that reflects not merely ambivalence about immigration but also the competing objectives and compromises characteristic of America’s decentralized and fragmented political system. Moreover, immigration control alone was never the driving force behind the building of the barriers. Instead, border-control policies have had to piggyback on other overriding national concerns. The result is a fence that is neither as draconian and militarized as critics claim, nor as effective as supporters would like.

The oldest section of the existing border fence begins at the Pacific Ocean and continues inland for 42 miles. When construction began in 1990, this densely populated area was the busiest site of illegal entry into the United States. This “primary fence” averages only 10 feet high, and is made of corrugated steel panels about 20 inches wide and 12 feet long, welded onto upright posts. But because the corrugations run horizontally, they form a kind of ladder that makes scaling the fence easy for young and old. And because there is no continuous concrete footing, this fence is easy to dig under, especially given the region’s gravelly, erosion-prone soil. Contrast that with Israel’s security fence on the West Bank, which in some places is a daunting, 25-foot-high, smooth concrete wall.

Why build such a user-friendly structure? Well, the corrugated steel panels—military surplus used to build emergency landing strips in Vietnam—were plentiful and free. And making the fence higher and harder to climb would have required placing the panels vertically instead of horizontally, a far more complicated and costly undertaking. This project also had to be approved by a welter of state and federal agencies, including Native American tribal jurisdictions. Then there were the nongovernmental organizations: immigrant rights advocates and well-organized environmentalists

concerned about protecting plant and wildlife habitats. Faced with so many parties capable of delaying or even stopping construction, the fence’s political sponsors were determined to drive stakes into the ground as quickly as possible. Finally, there was the Border Patrol itself. As scores of interviews reveal, this agency did not

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want a fence so difficult to climb that there would be injuries, taking up the valuable time of its agents and resulting in a mountain of liability claims.

Set back about 130 feet from the primary fence is a more intimidating “secondary fence,” which begins a few miles from the Pacific and continues east for 10.5 miles through the most heavily populated part of the border in San Diego County, California. This barrier has a continuous, deeply sunk concrete footing and rises up to 15 feet. Constructed of tight, heavy-gauge steel mesh, it affords very little toehold. The mesh also allows the Border Patrol to see the other side—a safety priority for its agents. With a well-graded road, high-intensity lights, and 24-hour surveillance cameras, this precision-crafted fence has far more infrastructure than one finds on most of the border. It also cost about twice as much per mile as the primary fence.

Yet, despite all the trappings, Border Patrol agents report that individuals routinely manage to scramble over both the primary and secondary fences in less than one minute. Officials now acknowledge that the fence was never designed to stop illegal immigrants cold, just slow them down so they could be apprehended. “The fences were never meant to be more than a filter,” one Border Patrol officer explained.

Perhaps most revealing about both fences is what they lack. For example, nowhere on the primary fence, sitting directly at the border, is there a south-facing flange—out of concern that it would offend Mexico. Nor is there any barbed or razor wire on either fence. Again, the contrast with Israel’s security fence is striking. Although most of that structure is a chain-link fence outfitted with sophisticated electronics, the Israeli Ministry of Defense still relies on razor wire to stop potential terrorists from making the climb. Or, compare America’s fences to the two razor-wire-topped

The No-Offense Fence

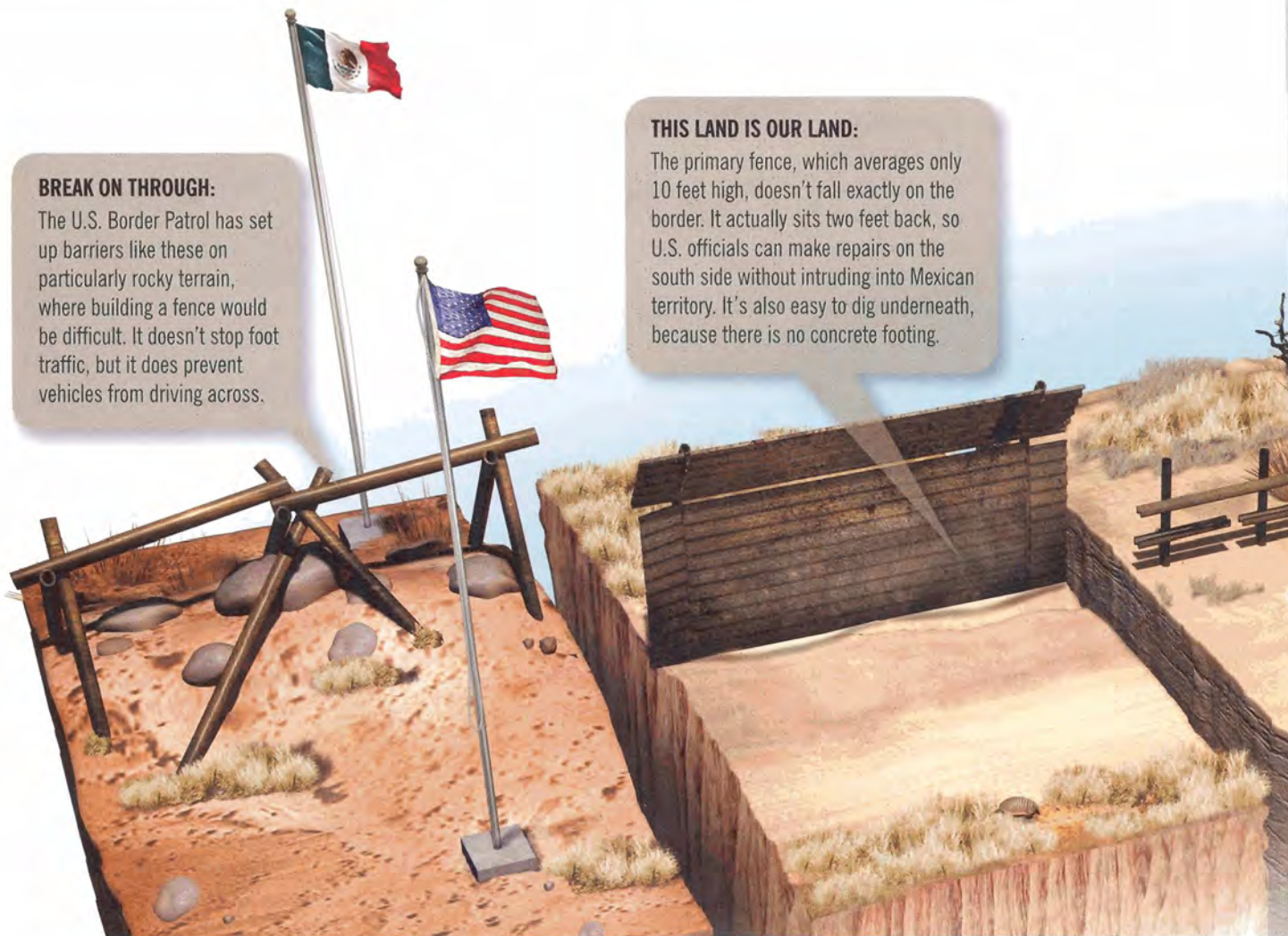
America's border with Mexico isn't marked by a monolithic barrier. Rather, it was built in sections to fill different needs in different places. The result? Fences that can be climbed in less than a minute.

BREAK ON THROUGH:

The U.S. Border Patrol has set up barriers like these on particularly rocky terrain, where building a fence would be difficult. It doesn't stop foot traffic, but it does prevent vehicles from driving across.

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND:

The primary fence, which averages only 10 feet high, doesn't fall exactly on the border. It actually sits two feet back, so U.S. officials can make repairs on the south side without intruding into Mexican territory. It's also easy to dig underneath, because there is no concrete footing.

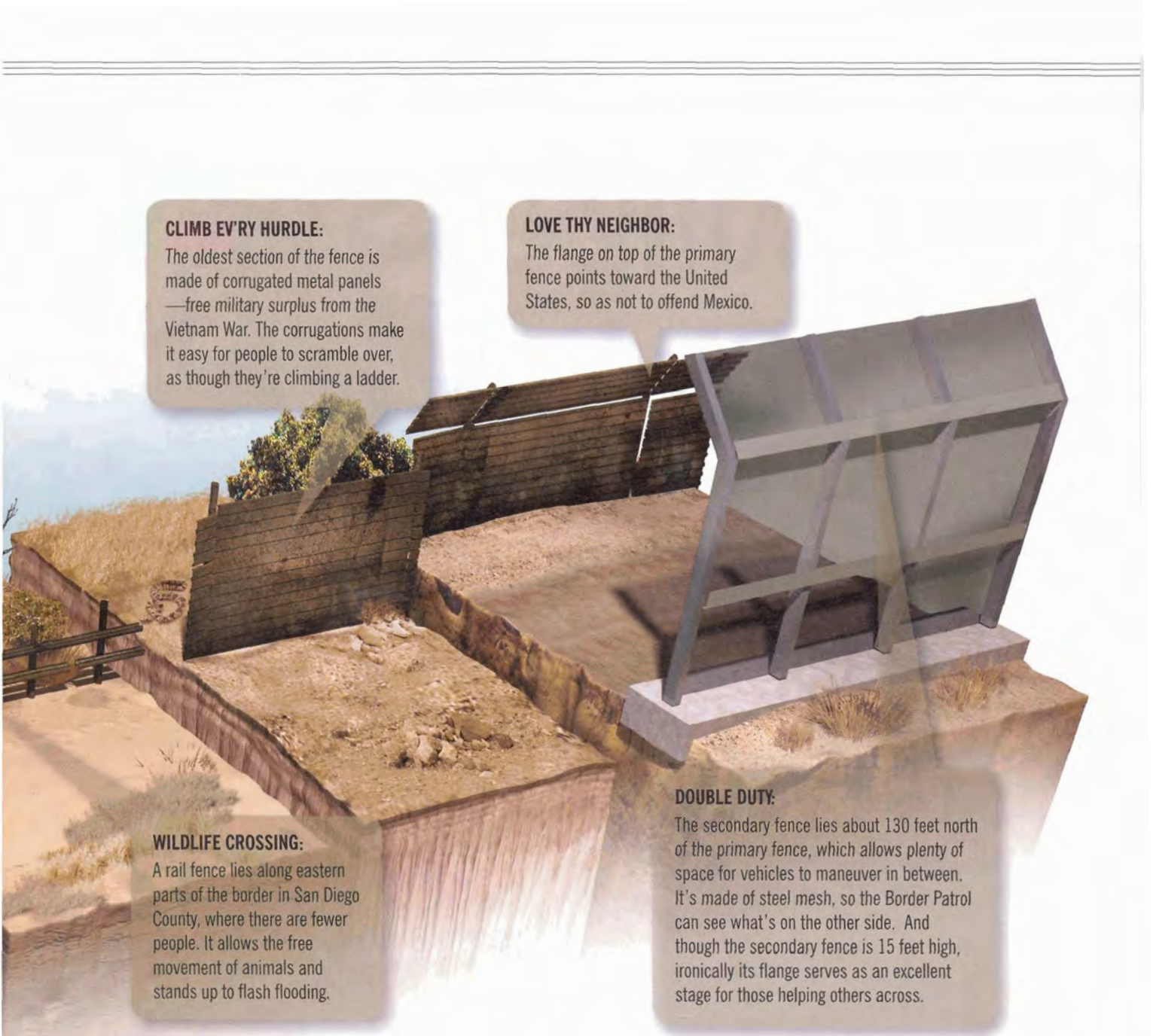


fences that Spain has placed on the boundary between its North African territories and Morocco, on which scores of people have been injured and at least 17 have died. True, hundreds have perished along the U.S.-Mexican border, but that is because of heat and exposure, not because of a fence that maims and kills.

There is even less of a “filter” in more remote areas. In the sparsely populated eastern half of San Diego County, there is no secondary fence, only the primary fence. For several miles, it runs only 5 feet high. Further east, close to the Imperial Desert, the fence is not even constructed of steel panels, but of two metal rails, welded to vertical posts. The Border Patrol prefers a low fence for the same reason it prefers wire mesh: Its agents can see what they're up against on the

other side. Then, too, stopping illegal immigrants directly at the border is less critical in remote, unpopulated areas than in densely settled neighborhoods where they can quickly disappear. As for the rail fence, it was designed to accommodate flash flooding that would knock down a more substantial structure, and in a few stretches, it is preferred because it permits the free movement of protected wildlife.

Obviously, a rail fence does little to stop the free movement of illegal immigrants. Does this mean that the whole reason for building the fence was forgotten amid all the bureaucratic jockeying? No, because as it turns out, the primary rationale for building the entire border fence was never about stopping illegal immigrants. It had more to do with the interdiction of



CLIMB EV'RY HURDLE:

The oldest section of the fence is made of corrugated metal panels—free military surplus from the Vietnam War. The corrugations make it easy for people to scramble over, as though they're climbing a ladder.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR:

The flange on top of the primary fence points toward the United States, so as not to offend Mexico.

WILDLIFE CROSSING:

A rail fence lies along eastern parts of the border in San Diego County, where there are fewer people. It allows the free movement of animals and stands up to flash flooding.

DOUBLE DUTY:

The secondary fence lies about 130 feet north of the primary fence, which allows plenty of space for vehicles to maneuver in between. It's made of steel mesh, so the Border Patrol can see what's on the other side. And though the secondary fence is 15 feet high, ironically its flange serves as an excellent stage for those helping others across.

illegal drugs, a policy goal for which there was much more political consensus. As one congressional staffer directly involved with the fence bluntly stated, "Drugs is the money train." To be sure, illegal immigration and drug traffic overlap at the border, allowing policy entrepreneurs to blur the distinction. But when the primary fence was first built in the early 1990s, choices had to be made. The result was a rail barrier in eastern San Diego County that can stop a drug smuggler's 4 x 4 vehicle, but not illegal aliens on foot.

Today, the counter-drug rationale has been superseded by counterterrorism. In 2005, the U.S. Congress granted Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff the authority to waive all laws necessary to

achieve border security. Last September, he invoked that authority to end a decade-long court battle by environmentalists who were lobbying against completion of the final segment of the secondary fence, near the Pacific. As U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Robert C. Bonner put it, "Maybe this [kind of protracted dispute] was acceptable in the pre-9/11 days... But in the era of global terrorism, we just can't wait around forever to get these things done." Once again, immigration control comes in second. But if public outrage over illegal immigration continues to grow, it could overcome the constraints built into the American political system. At that point, immigration control may itself become the top priority at the border. **FP**