

# **Designed to Kill**

**Border Policy and How to Change It**

**CrimethInc.**

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*for everyone who didn't make it, and for everyone who did*

For a number of years now I've worked in the desert on the Mexican-American border with a group that provides humanitarian aid to migrants who are attempting to enter the United States—a journey that claims hundreds of lives every year. We've spent years mapping the trails that cross this desert. We walk the trails, find places to leave food and water along them, look for people in distress, and provide medical care when we run into someone who needs it. If the situation is bad enough, we can get an ambulance or helicopter to bring people to the hospital. We strive to act in accordance with the migrants' wishes at all times, and we never call the Border Patrol on people who don't want to turn themselves in.

During this time I've been a part of many extraordinary situations and I've heard about many more. Some of the things I've seen have been truly heartwarming, and some of them have been deeply sad and wrong. I've seen people who were too weak to stand, too sick to hold down water, hurt too badly to continue, too scared to sleep, too sad for words, hopelessly lost, desperately hungry, literally dying of thirst, never going to be able to see their children again, vomiting blood, penniless in torn shoes two thousand miles from home, suffering from heat stroke, kidney damage, terrible blisters, wounds, hypothermia, post-traumatic stress, and just about every other tribulation you could possibly think of. I've been to places where people were robbed and raped and murdered; my friends have found bodies. In addition to bearing witness to others' suffering, I myself have fallen off of cliffs, torn my face open on barbed wire, run out of water, had guns pointed at me, been charged by bulls and circled by vultures, jumped over rattlesnakes, pulled pieces of cactus out of many different parts of my body with pliers, had to tear off my pants because they were full of fire ants, gotten gray hairs, and in general poured no small amount of my own sweat, blood, and tears into the thirsty desert.

There is nowhere on earth like the place where we work. It is beautiful beyond telling: harsh, vast, mountainous, remote, rugged, unforgiving, every cliché you can think of and more. I have been humbled countless times by the incredible selflessness and courage of the people that I have met there, and I have been driven nearly out of my head with rage at the utterly heartless economic and political system that drives people to such lengths in order to provide for their families. Doing this work has given me a great deal of opportunity to observe how the border is managed on a day-to-day basis, and hopefully some insight into the functions that it performs within global capitalism—the real objectives that it serves. I offer this essay as ammunition to anyone who still cares enough about anything to intervene when people around them are being treated like pieces of meat.

“Answer the question of who benefits or profits  
most directly from an action, event, or outcome

and you always have the starting point for your analysis or investigation, and sometimes it will also give you the end point.”

-Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The first thing that I want to make clear is that the atrocious suffering that happens on the border every day is not an accident. It is not a mistake and it is not the result of a misunderstanding. It is the predictable and intentional result of policies implemented at every level of government on both sides of the border. These policies have rational objectives and directly benefit identifiable sectors of the population of both countries. It may be evil, but it's not stupid. If this sounds a little shrill, let me tell you how I've seen this play out on the ground.

When I started working in the desert I began to notice some very peculiar things about the Border Patrol's operations there. They would do a lot of enforcement in some areas and very little in others, and this would not necessarily correspond to which areas were busy and which areas were slow. In fact, very often the enforcement would clearly be done in such a way that it would push traffic *into* rather than out of the busiest areas, where Border Patrol would keep a low profile until the very northern end of the route. At that point there would be a moderate amount of enforcement again, but not really what you would expect given the numbers of people that were moving through.

Then they started building lots of surveillance towers. But once again, the towers were not really built in the places where the traffic was heaviest—they were built on the edges of them. If anything, they seemed to be intent on forcing traffic into the busiest routes rather than out of them. What was happening?

Meanwhile, I was constantly meeting migrants whose groups had been split up by helicopters. The Border Patrol would fly over them a few feet off the ground, everybody would run in different directions, and soon there would be thirty people wandering lost across the desert in groups of two or three. What seemed particularly odd was that the Border Patrol often made no effort to actually apprehend these groups after breaking them up—they just flew away. Why?

And then there's this. Over the last few years, the organization I work for has developed a pretty comprehensive understanding of the area we cover, which at times has been one of the most heavily traveled sections of the entire border. We've formed a fairly clear picture of where traffic starts, where it goes, how it gets there, where it's busy and where it's slow at any given time, where the pinch points are, and so on. I honestly believe that if I worked for the Border Patrol I could basically point at a map and tell them how to shut down the whole sector. It's really not rocket science. Keep in mind that all of our work has been done by untrained civil-

ian volunteers, armed with low-end GPS units, a few old trucks, run-of-the-mill mapping software, cheap cell phones with spotty service, and a very limited budget. Does it seem logical that we could figure this stuff out while the government of the United States of America cannot, despite access to helicopters, unmanned drones, electronic sensors, fleets of well-maintained trucks, night vision systems, state-of-the-art communications and surveillance and mapping technology, tens of thousands of paid employees, and a limitless supply of money to shovel down the hole at every possible opportunity? I don't think it does. So what's going on?

If you accept the stated objectives of the border at face value, then none of this makes any sense at all. If you accept that the actual objectives may not be the stated ones, things start to come together fast. The task of the Border Patrol—and the actual objective of the policies it is there to enforce—is not in any sense to STOP ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. It is to manage and control that migration. Trust me on this.

But to what end? To whose benefit? Settle in, because it's complicated.

First of all, it's as plain as day that the economy of the United States of America is dependent in no small part on the hyper-exploitation of undocumented labor. You know it's true, I know it's true, the Guatemalans that shovel the shit out of Lou Dobbs' horses' barn know it's true, but it is considered extremely taboo to mention this fact in public. Excuse me, but anyone with a modicum of common sense should be able to see that if the government were to actually build a two-thousand-mile-long Berlin Wall tonight and then somehow round up and deport every undocumented person in the country tomorrow, there would be massive and immediate disruption in the agriculture and animal exploitation industries, not to mention in everything related to construction—quite possibly leading to a serious breakdown in the national food distribution network and conceivably even famine. I'm not exaggerating. The people that write border policies are not fools. They understand this perfectly, even if your racist co-workers evidently do not. Regardless of what any politician or pundit says, I don't believe anyone is going to put a stop to illegal immigration as long as undocumented labor is needed to maintain the stability of the economic system. But this isn't good news to those of you who dislike seeing people treated like shit and then discarded like diapers, because what's more important is that this migration will continue to be managed and controlled.

The border is a sick farce with a deadly conclusion. The goal is to make entering the country without papers extremely dangerous, traumatizing, and expensive, but possible. The point isn't to deter people from coming—far from it. It is to ensure that when they do come, the threat of deportation will mean something very serious. It means spending a ton of money. It means risking your life to return. It means that you may never see your family again. This is supposed to provide American

employers with a vast and disposable pool of labor that is kept vulnerable and therefore easy to exploit—and this in turn drives down wages for workers with American citizenship, which is why the old saw about the “illegals coming to our country and taking our jobs” is so convincing. Like many good lies, it’s powerful because it omits the most important part of the truth.

Those who believe that immigration and border enforcement protect the jobs or wages of American workers are seriously misinterpreting the situation. Even if you limit the scope of your analysis to market-based behavior, it seems clear that if undocumented workers were not subjected to such extraordinary risks and pressures they would act like anybody else and obtain the highest price for their labor that the market would bear. In fact, these same workers have proven themselves able time and again to struggle successfully for higher wages, despite having to overcome obstacles other workers do not face. But border and immigration enforcement drives down wages across the board—that’s *the point of it*.

Here’s another lead that is easy to follow: the recent wave of anti-immigrant hysteria sounded very similar to the anti-Muslim fear-mongering of five to ten years ago. It’s easy to trace this to the mid-term elections. With the war in Iraq winding down, and in lieu of any recent successful domestic Al Qaeda attacks, the so-called immigration debate became the de facto national security issue for politicians to talk about.

The Republican strategy was pretty straightforward. They hoped to regain power by appealing to white fear, anxiety, guilt, and racism. The Democratic strategy was more nuanced. First, they blamed Republicans for lack of progress on immigration issues. They hoped that this would maintain the support of voters from immigrant communities. Second, they did not actually try to push any pro-immigrant measures. They hoped that this would avoid alienating anti-immigrant voters. Third, they ramped up deportations. The Obama administration deported almost 400,000 people in 2010, the most in a single year ever. Now they can use those numbers to emphasize their toughness on immigration. With these law and order credentials, the Democrats hoped to woo conservative voters before the last elections and in the next ones. Expect to see some version of this charade play out again in 2012, unless it’s trumped by another war or major terrorist attack.

Here’s one last clue: much of the legislation that becomes government policy is written by the corporations that stand to profit from it. Arizona’s State Bill 1070, which among other things would require police to lock up anyone they stop who cannot show proof of having entered the country legally, was drafted in December 2009 at the Grand Hyatt hotel in Washington D.C. by officials of the billion-dollar Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest private prison company in the country. This took place at a meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a membership organization of state legislators and powerful cor-

porations. The law, which was partially overturned but may still go into effect, could send hundreds of thousands of immigrants to prison, which would mean hundreds of millions of dollars in profits for the companies such as CCA that would be responsible for housing them. It almost goes without saying that it is not in this industry's interest to completely stop illegal immigration from happening; it is in their interest to let in enough people to fill their jails.

So who benefits from the death in the desert? In a broad sense, the entire ruling class does. That's pretty ugly. But that's not the whole story, not by any means. To tell that story we're going to need to back up a bit.

To start with, permit me to subject you to an extremely abbreviated history lesson, beginning with some very inconvenient truths. Like the rest of the Western Hemisphere, the land that is currently called the United States of America was stolen from its rightful inhabitants by European colonists through a well-documented orgy of bloodshed, massacre, treachery, and genocide of proportions so epic that they are arguably unprecedented in the thousands of often gruesome years of human history preceding them and unsurpassed in the hardly tranquil ones that followed. This monstrous crime has been in progress for over five hundred years, has never been atoned for in any meaningful way, and continues to be perpetrated to this day.

Everybody knows this, but nobody really likes to think too much about what it means. What it means is this: unless you're honest enough to admit that you think that might makes right as long as you're on the winning side, you have to acknowledge that the federal, local, and state governments of the United States of America, along with all of the agencies such as the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement contained therein, are illegitimate institutions with no claim to legitimate authority whatsoever over the territory they currently govern. If anyone can show me an ethically, logically, or even legally sound way to disprove this statement, they're welcome to let me know, but I'm not going to lose any sleep waiting for this to happen.

It's important to start by framing the matter this way. Who are these people that claim to have jurisdiction over native land? What right do they have to be telling anybody where to go and when? If anyone has a right to decide who can and cannot pass through the territory that currently constitutes the Mexican-American border, it's the people whose ancestors have inhabited that land since time immemorial, not the descendants or institutions of the ones who colonized it. Most so-called illegal immigrants are closer to having a defensible claim to the continent they're traversing than most of the hypocrites who condemn and pursue them.

Now fast forward, for the sake of brevity, to January 1, 1994, the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, and thousands of indigenous people in southeastern Mexico famously rose up in arms in response. Calling

themselves Zapatistas after the Mexican revolutionary, these people predicted that this agreement would mark a final deathblow to their way of life if they failed to resist. Their analysis of the situation quickly proved exceedingly cogent, their ensuing project of indigenous autonomy has yet to be defeated, and their actions sparked an entire generation of resistance to global capitalism: a whole different story that is thankfully not over yet.

In addition to its ruinous effects on American industrial communities, NAFTA's aftermath in Mexican agricultural communities was truly catastrophic. As part of its preparation for the agreement, the Mexican government amended Article 27 of its own constitution to allow for the privatization of communally-held campesino and indigenous land. NAFTA then permitted heavily-subsidized American agribusiness giants like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland to flood the Mexican market with cheap imports of corn and other agricultural products, undercutting nearly all small-scale Mexican farmers. Exactly as the Zapatistas predicted, this drove millions of rural Mexicans, many of whom were already living in desperate poverty, off the land and straight into the abyss. This in turn set off a massive wave of migration as millions and millions of people left their homes to find work in Mexican cities, in sweatshops primarily owned by American corporations in northern Mexico, and in the United States.

Within the year, the Clinton administration launched Operation Gatekeeper, a program that massively increased funding for Border Patrol operations in the San Diego sector of the border in California. The federal government greatly stepped up enforcement in this sector and built a fourteen-mile wall between San Diego and Tijuana. Operation Gatekeeper roughly marks the beginning of a two-decade-running process of ever-increasing border militarization that has continued steadily throughout the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. This has meant that every year there are more Border Patrol agents, National Guardsmen, helicopters, fences, towers, checkpoints, sensors, guns, and dogs along the border. Understanding the nature of this militarization will go a long way towards clarifying what's actually happening and why.

By all accounts I've ever heard, it used to be much easier to cross the border than it is now. Most people crossed into relatively safer urbanized areas such as San Diego, El Paso, or the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Starting with Operation Gatekeeper, the Border Patrol made it much more difficult to enter the country in these places; over the years, it has methodically pushed the traffic into the increasingly remote mountains and deserts beyond. Many thousands of people have died from heat, cold, sickness, injuries, hunger, and thirst as a direct result. At this point, I think, the game is reaching a bit of an endpoint. The government has pushed the traffic into the very deepest and deadliest pockets of the entire border, which is where they want it. This does not mean that the situation is completely



static—the Border Patrol will clamp down on some of these pockets sometimes and ease up on others—but on the large scale, I think that it is more or less stable.

There have been several interesting byproducts of these changes. Many people used to come to work for a season, go back home, and return the next year. That's much less common now that getting into the country is such an ordeal. People come and generally stay as long as they can. Also, most people who crossed used to be men with families south of the border. There are many more women and children crossing now that it's no longer possible for many men in this position to work in the north without leaving their families behind for good. Finally, with the increase in internal deportations, there are many more people crossing now who have lived here for long periods of time and are returning to their homes in the United States. This latter group faces a particularly fiendish dilemma if they run into trouble on the way. I have often heard people whose children live south of the border say things like "I thought I was going to die and all I could think about was my babies. It's better for me to go back home than to risk dying again." I have often heard people whose children live north of the border say things like "If I have to risk dying to get home to my babies, then I will."

As I hope I have made clear, a policy of pushing migrant traffic into extremely dangerous areas does not at all imply an actual intention to stop or even deter people from entering the country illegally. This complex and slightly perverse strategy has numerous compelling advantages. It allows politicians to look tough for the cameras while still providing the American economy with the farmworkers and meatpackers it depends on. It provides ample opportunities to swing huge government contracts to giant corporations: for example, to Wackenhut to transport migrants, to Corrections Corporation of America to detain them, to Boeing to build surveillance infrastructure. It justifies the hefty salaries of the 20,000 people who work for the Border Patrol. And it has other beneficiaries, who I will get to momentarily. On the whole, border militarization is best seen as a massive government pork and corporate welfare project that is possibly only surpassed in the last twenty years by the war in Iraq.

The outcome of this policy of has been most educational. Just as it used to be easier to cross the border, it also used to be a lot cheaper. This won't be surprising to anyone familiar with the laws of supply and demand. Any service will become more expensive if it becomes more difficult to provide, and the service of being smuggled across the border has certainly been a case study in this law. Prices rose and rose as the Border Patrol pushed people further and further from the cities and established more and more checkpoints that made the journey longer and longer, until at a certain point there was as much money to be made in moving people as there was in moving drugs. At that point, the cartels that already controlled the drug trade recognized an excellent business opportunity, muscled out the compe-

tition, and took over the game entirely. This dramatically transformed what had been a relatively low-key affair into a lucrative, highly centralized, and increasingly brutal industry with tens of billions of dollars at stake. There is no doubt that these cartels are among the primary beneficiaries of American and Mexican drug, trade, and immigration policies since the end of the Cold War.

The rise of the cartels to a position of absolute dominance within a booming industry led, unsurprisingly, to a mass-based approach and an extraordinarily inhumane methodology. I have commonly heard them referred to as *pollero* networks, which means something like “meat herders” since *pollo* is the word for a dead chicken rather than a live one. This should offer some indication of the degree of care that these organizations tend to invest in each individual human life throughout the process of bringing people into the United States. I have seen groups of as many as fifty people—and heard about groups as large as a hundred—being driven quite literally like cattle across the desert, with the sick and wounded straggling behind and trying desperately to keep up. I have met people who were told that what is always at best an extremely demanding four to five day journey would take as little as twelve hours on foot, and countless more who were left behind to die by their guides without hesitation when they were for any reason no longer able to keep up.

As a result of border militarization, prices have risen now to the point that it costs around five thousand dollars for a Guatemalan to be brought into the United States through the networks, and about six thousand for Salvadorans. Fees for Mexicans vary widely, but they are far from cheap. You won’t be surprised to hear that many people who wish to migrate do not actually have six thousand dollars lying around. The cartels have developed a variety of inventive solutions to this problem, often involving kidnapping and indentured servitude. I’ve met people who spent years working in the United States simply to pay off their initial fee, some while held in conditions of outright bonded labor. I’ve met others who made it through the desert and were immediately held for ransom by the same groups that brought them in. The ones who were able to raise a few thousand dollars more were allowed to go. The ones who weren’t able to were beaten for days and then driven back out to be left in the desert, where within minutes they were picked up for deportation by Border Patrol agents who clearly had some sort of working arrangement with the kidnapers. I’m not kidding. It’s scandalous.

As bad as all this is, it still doesn’t fully convey the depth of the cruelty that has characterized this era of government-sponsored cartel control. Rape and sexual assault of female migrants is absolutely endemic at every step of the process of migration. This has been greatly exacerbated by the actions of the government: by pushing the traffic out into the middle of nowhere, they have basically guaranteed that in order to enter the country women have to place themselves in situations

where rape and sexual assault are extremely likely. In addition, the trails are frequented by groups of armed bandits who make their living targeting migrants. I believe that some of the bandits are employed by the cartels themselves, who are simply robbing their own clients, while others are freelancers taking advantage of an easy opportunity to prey on defenseless people who are often carrying their life savings in their pockets. Again, it is primarily because the government has pushed the traffic into the ends of the earth that these fuckers have been blessed with such favorable circumstances in which to ply their trade.

To be fair, I've also heard stories of low-level cartel members acting decently, compassionately, and even occasionally heroically. It's worth pointing out that the *guias*—the people who actually walk the groups through the desert to the other side of the checkpoints—are at the very bottom of the pecking order within the networks. Their lives are considered nearly as expendable as those of the migrants. Working in the desert has given me some appreciation for the fact that being a *guia* would be very stressful. They're supposed to bring large groups of people through harsh terrain where there is no potable water, usually either in the dark or in brutal heat, while being hunted by military types with guns and helicopters. Their bosses are probably not the kind of people you want to piss off. It's hardly surprising that *guias* are often unwilling to risk losing their whole group because one or two people can't keep up. The whole situation is just guaranteed to bring out the worst in someone. This is not to make excuses for them, or to absolve relatively powerless people of their personal responsibility for doing indefensible things. It is simply to say that most of the guilt has to be assigned to the powerful people whose actions have created this nightmare and who profit most directly from it.

Toward that end, it's important to understand the relationship between the governments and the cartels. Basically it is this: they need each other. They share similar interests. Perhaps it is most precise to say that in the United States the cartels need the government, while the government makes great use of the cartels. The cartels rely on the US government to keep the prices of their goods and services artificially high. The government uses the cartels to justify funneling billions of dollars to the corporations whose interests they represent. On the Mexican side, meanwhile, it isn't realistic to talk about the government and the cartels as if they are separate entities. There, the government and the various cartels are fighting for control of the multi-billion dollar American drug and migration market. This ten-sided bloodbath has gotten progressively uglier since the Mexican federal government got involved in December of 2006, ending what had been a longstanding policy of non-engagement in intra-cartel violence and leading to tens of thousands of deaths.

Analysts sometime use term "Colombianization" to point out that the state of affairs in Mexico is starting to look a lot like that in Colombia. Perhaps the most

striking similarity is in the increasingly sophisticated collusion between elements of the government and the cartels with which they are nominally at war. These connections run deep, and the influence runs in both directions. Los Zetas, arguably the most violent cartel in the country, was founded by members of the Airmobile Special Forces Group (GAFE), an elite division of the Mexican military established in 1994 to combat Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. Around that time, about 500 GAFE personnel received training by the United States Army's 7th Special Forces Group in Fort Bragg, NC for this purpose. Somewhere between 30 and 200 of these operatives then defected from the Mexican military to become hired guns, went on to provide security for the Gulf cartel—a well-established trafficking organization—and eventually split to form a cartel in their own right.

On a local and state level, bribery of police, mayors, judges, and other government officials by the cartels is extremely widespread. On the national level, there is strong evidence to suggest that the Mexican Army and federal government are favoring the Sinaloa cartel—the largest and richest in the nation—in hopes that they will eventually defeat their rivals and enter into a stable agreement with the government such as the ones enjoyed by their counterparts in Colombia.

So there is indeed a great deal of cartel infiltration of the Mexican security forces. This is common, although less widespread, on the American side as well. For instance, a large percentage of the drugs that are brought into the United States are driven into the ports of entry where they are waved through by corrupt Customs and Border Protection agents who know what vehicles to look for. In general, however, the arrangement on both sides of the border is not so crude that there always or even usually has to be direct personnel overlap between, say, the Corrections Corporation of America, the Border Patrol, the Gulf Cartel, and the Mexican Army. What's most important is that all of these organizations have interlocking interests, benefit from each other's activities, and generally act in a way that keeps the others in business. This unholy trinity of government, corporations, and organized crime—three ways of saying the same thing—is a formidable opponent to anyone who hopes to see the death in the desert end any time soon.

“You haven't heard our thunder yet!”

-slogan at a protest against SB1070

The corporate, governmental, and criminal elites that benefit from the suffering on the border are ruthless and powerful, but they are not gods. They aren't the only actors in this drama, and they don't have the situation completely under control. People make it through the desert because they are brave and resourceful, not just because the Border Patrol lets them. The trails themselves are extraordinary testaments to human ingenuity, weaving gracefully through canyons and over mountains with an unerring eye for direction and cover.

There are somewhere around twelve million undocumented people in this country. One thing that working in the desert has shown me is that they are not all the same. The migrants are not all angels, or devils, or victims. They are not passive objects that are acted upon by the world without acting in return. They are complex individuals who have chosen to take their lives into their own hands, and I have chosen to take their side as best I can. Sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you beat the man and sometimes the man beats you.

The border doesn't end at the border, and the hardships that undocumented people face don't stop there either. The border cuts through every city and state; it cuts through many of our bodies. The line in the sand is neither the first twist nor the last of the meat grinder that global capitalism has prepared for people without papers. After making it across the border undocumented people enter a world in which they cannot legally earn money; they have compelling reasons not to call the ambulance, go to the hospital, get health or auto insurance, drive a vehicle, open a bank account, use a credit card, apply for a mortgage, sign a lease, or rely on any number of other options that people with citizenship can fall back on. If for any reason you have made it a practice to live a portion of your life off the books, you might be able to appreciate how hard it is to do this full-time in this society.

Illegal immigration is a legitimate form of resistance to the iniquities of global capitalism for millions of people worldwide. It may be indirect resistance, but it gets the goods. This functions in two principal ways. First, remittances from immigrant workers in the United States—many of them undocumented—to their families in Mexico totaled more than 21 billion dollars in 2010 alone. If you add up all the remittances from immigrant workers in the entire global north to all of their families in the entire global south, the total starts to look pretty significant. Even though it's filtered through a fine screen of work and exploitation, this money probably represents one of the largest redistributions of wealth from the rich to the poor in the entire course of human history. Second, south-to-north immigration, much of it illegal, is bringing about real demographic shifts in parts of the global north and particularly in the United States. This shift may eventually lead to meaningful social changes within this country, which could contribute to a somewhat more equitable restructuring of the global economic system, which would mitigate the tremendous disparity in wealth between the global north and south, which is what drives the migration in the first place.

It's certainly not a given that this latter hope will pan out. Generations of immigrants have moved from the margins into the mainstream of American society without radically changing its course. In fact this is exactly how settlers took control of the land to begin with. Nonetheless, a distinctive feature of American history is that this pathway has generally been reserved for immigrants of European

ancestry. It has not yet been proven that this country can assimilate or segregate the current influx of non-European immigrants without eventually undermining the foundation of white supremacy upon which it has been built.

This impending demographic change is a cause of real anxiety for some powerful Americans, as well as many less powerful ones who have not managed to think all the way through its ramifications. My opinion is the sooner the better—because I believe that even a partial erosion of white supremacy in the United States is actually in the long-term self-interest of most “white” Americans such as myself. You can build a throne out of bayonets, but you can’t sit on it long. Aside from the fact that subjugating other people is a rotten thing to do, it’s not a very safe way to live. It’s extraordinarily impressive that black people in the United States managed to break free from both slavery and Jim Crow without resorting to indiscriminate slaughter of white people on a grand scale. It certainly would have been understandable to do so, and it arguably would have been justified. I suspect that things would have been much uglier if there had not been at least a few white people who were willing to do the right thing. I don’t know if I want to bet that the billions of people that are being pushed around the world today will be so restrained when it comes time to pay the piper on a global level. It seems better to get on the winning side while there still may be time.

In any case, the wheels are coming off the bus. We live on the same small planet as everybody else. The way of life we inherited has proven disastrous for the biosphere and for the long-term prospects of human survival within it. As others have pointed out before me, my generation is perhaps the first group of white Americans that not only have an ethical mandate to turn away from this path but also an urgent self-interest in doing so. Left unchecked the current arrangement is guaranteed to cannibalize what is left of our land base within our lifetimes and leave our children with nothing but the bones.

Admittedly, this is complicated. Groups of humans have subjugated other groups of humans and destroyed their own land bases since long before the social construct of whiteness ever existed, and it is clearly not only people of European ancestry who are capable of doing either of these things. White supremacy is not the only lynchpin holding this all together, but it is a significant one. At this point in time, I don’t think we can hope to stop the devastation of our planet without contesting the structures of white supremacy—or vice versa.

So the answer is not for white Americans to continue to defend the indefensible at the price of our souls, or to crawl into a hole and die. It is for those of us who fit that description to think carefully about where our allegiance really lies, and to find ways to act on it in materially meaningful ways. Believe it or not, there are examples throughout history of people who did just this—members of oppressor and colonizer groups who decided to throw in their lot with the colonized and

oppressed. You can point to white people involved in the Underground Railroad during slavery, gentiles who sheltered Jews during the Holocaust, white Americans who took part in the civil rights movement, white South Africans who resisted Apartheid, Americans involved in the Sanctuary movement during the wars in Central America in the 1980s, and Israelis resisting the occupation of Palestine today, among others. It's a good story to be part of. Those of us who are positioned to do so should embrace it and be proud of it.

Our opponents will call us traitors, as if we support another government. In fact we have pledged our allegiance to something older and wiser than anything that any nation-state has to offer, and it is the apologists for the current order who have turned their backs and lost their way.

Working on the border has shown me time and again that you can't really extricate one part of the equation from all the other parts. Once you start untangling one thread you start to see how it's tied into the rest of the noose. The killings in Juarez will not end without structural change throughout Mexico, which will not happen without structural change in Colombia and the other cocaine-producing countries, which will not happen without structural change in the United States, and so on. You can reverse the order of these statements or add others and they will still be true. Fighting internal deportations and fighting border militarization are not two different things. This ultimately has global implications, but it is especially true in the case of Mexico, the United States, and their devil-child The Border. Nothing will get better on the border without things changing in both countries, and the problems in one country will not be solved without addressing the problems in the other.

Once, I asked this Oaxacan guy what he thought it would take to end the death in the desert. "Una revolucion binacional," he answered without hesitating. We laughed and laughed, because of course that is impossible. It was probably impossible for the Egyptians and Tunisians, also.

New volunteers sometimes ask me what I think a just border policy would look like. I tell them that there is no such thing; it is a contradiction in terms. I am not interested in helping the authorities figure out how to fix the mess they've created. Ultimately the only hope for a solution to the border crisis lies in bringing about worldwide systemic change that ensures freedom of movement for all people, rejects the practice of state control over territory, honors indigenous autonomy and sovereignty, addresses the legacies of slavery and colonization, equalizes access to resources between the global north and the global south, and fundamentally changes human beings' relationship to the planet and all of the other forms of life that inhabit it. That's a tall order! Where to start?

The desert is not the only place, but it is one. The strength of our work is that there is no doubt we are having a tangible effect on the lives of individual people

who find our water, our food, or us. I know a number of people I am certain would have died were it not for the resources that we had to offer, and a number more who made it back to their families that never would have been able to do so without meeting us. I don't say this to pat myself on the back, but to say that it is possible to start somewhere.

People sometimes lament the fact that it can feel like we are just serving as a band-aid. This word always aggravates me, because the stakes are too high and the metaphor is not strong enough. One life means a lot to the person that lives it. "Tourniquet," I tell them, "you mean you don't want us to just serve as a tourniquet." Nevertheless, the weakness of our work is that we are always dealing with the symptoms and never the cause. I'm not certain that anything we're doing is having much of an effect on the larger factors that cause so many people to end up in the desert in the first place. It can feel like we're always cleaning up a mess we didn't create, like we're always mending the damage the abusive drunken stepfather has done to the rest of the family. It's better than nothing, but what really needs to happen is for the abuse to be stopped.

Many of the most effective types of direct action can end up looking like some version of damage control. The problem is that it's easier to make attainable goals and quantify success when dealing with individuals than when dealing with a system. I can visualize the steps from A to Z of how to drop twenty-five gallons of water on a trail. When I wake up in the morning there is something that I can do that will move me towards that goal. I have a much harder time visualizing how to get Border Patrol out of the desert, and a harder time still imagining how to effectuate structural economic change on a global scale. It can be tempting to say that it's better to succeed at what we can do than fail at what we can't, but that's just defeatism. I really don't want to be doing these same water drops twenty-five years from now. So what should we do?

Thankfully, none of us have to do everything. It's not my job to act like Moses and set the people free. That's not how meaningful social change happens. I can do my best to help, but if the people are going to get free they are going to do it themselves. I not only don't have to—I simply can't call the shots in other people's struggles for liberation. I trust that the millions of people who are most directly affected by immigration and border enforcement will keep finding ways to combat it. There will almost certainly be things that white American citizens can do if we keep our ears to the ground. If my efforts in the desert are in any way contributing to 21 billion dollars moving from the rich to the poor, I'm happy.

With that caveat, dear reader, please allow me to address you directly. The death in the desert is not the only messed up thing in the world. But it is pretty bad, and it is very close to my heart. I would really like to see it end. I encourage you to find a way to get involved. I can't tell you exactly how to do this. Coming to work in the



desert is one way. There are many others. There are communities of undocumented people in nearly every part of the country. What is the situation in your area, and what might you have to offer? There are corporations that benefit from this whole catastrophe in nearly every part of the country, as well. What might you be able to do?

It has been suggested that in order to link systemic change with tangible goals we must find points of intervention in the system where we can apply power to leverage transformation. These points of intervention have been described as the point of production, the point of destruction, the point of consumption, the point of decision, and the point of assumption. It's not perfect, but it's as good a framework as any to use when thinking about how to intervene in this particular situation.

What might direct action at the point of production look like? Stalling the construction of new CCA facilities? What about at the point of destruction? Finding ways to interfere with BP/ICE operations or intervene in deportations? What about the point of consumption? Pressuring businesses to commit to non-compliance with anti-immigrant laws and organizing boycotts of ones that refuse? The point of decision? Interrupting meetings or legislative processes? What might direct action at the point of assumption look like? What lies and assumptions are used to justify dehumanizing immigrants? How might you be able to counter them? Do you have other ideas?

Direct action in the context of humanitarian aid in the desert is a relatively new field, all things considered. There are many tactics yet to be developed, and many others that have yet to exhaust their effectiveness. There is still much to learn and much that new people can offer. Most promisingly, the bi-national, cross-cultural, and inter-generational alliances that have been forged in the crucible of the border have yet to approach their full potential. Our ability to realize this potential will determine the extent of the success of our campaign to end migrant deaths in the desert, as well as whether that campaign ever develops into a deeper resistance to the systems at the root of the problem. They haven't heard our thunder yet.

The desert is full of places that are sacred to me. There is the last place I saw Esteban, the place I found Alberto, the places where Claudia and Jose and Susana and Roberto died, Jamie's rock, Yolanda's hill and Alfredo's tree. It is overwhelming for me to think that as many of the stories as I know—as many as anyone will ever know—it is just a drop in the bucket of all that has happened there. The objects that people leave behind are a constant reminder of this to me, a physical manifestation of all of the best and worst that human beings have to offer. I am not a particularly spiritual person, but the weight of these remnants is immense and often oppressive. I love the desert. It breaks my heart that it has played host to such terrible suffering. It gives me some solace to know that someday—even if it is only because there are no more human beings left on the planet—there will be no more United States, no

more Mexico, no more helicopters, no more walls, no Border Patrol and no border. The plastic will break down, the memory of these things will fade, and the land will finally have a chance to heal under the blue sky and the merciless sun.

“Las paredes vueltas de lado son puentes.”

Walls turned sideways are bridges.

-graffiti on the south side of the Border Wall, Nogales, Sonora

## **Appendix: The Border Patrol**

Allow me to add a couple of words about the Border Patrol. There is no government job that can be attained without a high school diploma that pays more than that of a Border Patrol agent. They are generally paid about \$45,000 a year their first year, \$55,000 their next two, and \$70,000 and up after that. They are not going around hungry.

I don't know how to convey the extent of the abuse that I have heard migrants report at the hands of these jokers. I have heard of agents beating, sexually abusing, and shooting people as well as throwing them into cactus, stealing their money, denying detainees food and water, deporting unaccompanied minors, driving around wildly with migrants chained in the back of trucks that look unmistakably like dogcatchers, and on and on. I've also heard numerous reports of Border Patrol seizing fifty pound bales of marijuana from drug smugglers and then either letting them go or processing them as regular migrants without drugs. What happened to the weed? Who knows!

Border Patrol is a lucrative business in and of itself, and part of that business entails exaggerating the danger of the job in order to milk taxpayers for more money. In my experience law enforcement personnel generally think that their work is really perilous, and that the world owes them a sincere debt of gratitude and a fat paycheck. It's interesting to note that since the organization's inception in 1904 there have been 111 Border Patrol agents who died in action, of which 40 were due to homicides. In 2010, out of 20,000 agents, two were killed and one died in a car accident. It is impossible to know how many migrants die crossing the border every year, but somewhere from the mid hundreds to the low thousands is probably a good bet. If you actually crunch the numbers you will find that Border Patrol agents are also much safer than roofers, sanitation workers, truck drivers, sex workers, and any number of other people whose jobs are actually dangerous.

The other thing that any self-respecting Border Patrol agent will tell you is that they are protecting us from terrorists. This begs the question of who "us" is. More human beings have lost their lives in the desert as a direct result of Border Patrol

activity than in every Al-Qaeda attack on American soil combined—quite possibly more than would have died if every attack that the Border Patrol has had a hand in thwarting had been successful. The more important point is that as long as there is such outrageous global inequality Americans are never really going to be safe.

Many Border Patrol agents come from working class backgrounds and many are Hispanic. To be fair I will say that I have met some who treated migrants with respect. I will also say that in fact they do find people sometimes, that some of those people would surely have died otherwise, and that some agents can be nice enough people. The fact of the matter, though, is that it is rank-and-file Border Patrol agents that enforce the policies that cause all of the problems that I have wasted so many words trying to diagnose. No matter what they do individually, they will never be a part of the solution as long as they wear a uniform and carry a gun. They could put the cartels out of business and end the death in the desert tomorrow by simply going home.

I've heard too many apologies for the Border Patrol—that they are not the enemy and that they are subject to the same economic forces as the migrants and so on. I don't buy it. History is replete with examples of people who were willing to sell out their own people to save themselves. There were black slave drivers on the plantations, Jewish police in the ghetto, native scouts leading the Army after Crazy Horse, and now there are Hispanic Border Patrol agents in the desert. I'm sorry but I'm not impressed. I think that when people become willing accomplices in atrocities, they just don't deserve much sympathy.

Recently a friend of mine found the body of a woman who died of some combination of dehydration, sickness, exposure, and exhaustion within a quarter of a mile of reaching one of our largest supply drops—a place that I have personally serviced several hundred times in my life. She had passed through an area where for months a few particularly hostile Border Patrol agents have consistently slashed our water bottles, popped the tops off our cans of beans so that they go rancid, and removed the blankets that we leave on the trails. As a result of these activities, we have had to move these drops around constantly, and stop dropping at what would otherwise be excellent locations because the supplies will almost surely be vandalized. I believe that more likely than not, before this woman died she either passed a drop that had been vandalized or a place where there would have been a drop if it were not for the actions of these agents. I believe that it is very likely that had she found our supplies she would have survived long enough for us to find her. As far as I am concerned, the pieces of shit who are doing this are murderers and her blood is on their hands.

Border Patrol agents really are scared, even if right now they don't actually have much to worry about. You can see it in them. I guess fucking over other people every day of your life must do that to you. Personally it gives me great pleasure

to be able to go unarmed daily to places that people with automatic weapons and body armor are terrified to set foot in. I have not made myself an enemy of the people—and in the long run that is going to keep me safer than them.

## For Further Investigation

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[www.blackmesais.org](http://www.blackmesais.org)  
[www.nomoredeaths.org](http://www.nomoredeaths.org)

## Four Stories from the Border

We were walking up a small canyon. One of my companions was doing very loud and rather florid call outs: “!COMPANERAS! ¡COMPANEROS! ¡NO TENGAN MIEDO! ¡TENEMOS AGUA, COMIDA, Y MEDICAMIENTOS! ¡SOMOS AMIGOS! ¡NO SOMOS LA MIGRA! ¡ESTAMOS AQUI PARA AYUDARLES! ¡SI NECESITAN CUALQUIER COSA: GRITENOS!” The great majority of the time no one is there to hear these call outs.

We turned a corner in the canyon, and there were about thirty five people: men, women, children, and teenagers, dressed in all blacks, browns, and desert tans, dead silent and taking up a very small amount of space. “Holy shit, um, did you hear us coming?”

“Yes, we heard you coming.” It was very hot. We gave them lots of water, food, socks, and treated a number of blisters and sprained ankles. They were all from Guatemala. They said they had been together every step of the way. As we prepared to part ways, one of them handed us a large sack of money—pesos and dollars.

“Um, no, you don’t understand, you don’t have to give us any money, this is why we are here.”

“No, you don’t understand,” he said. “We found this money at a shrine in the desert. We decided that it was not doing anybody any good there, so we took it. If the migra catches us they will take it from us, and it will never do anybody any

good. We want you to take this money, and to use it to help other migrants.” We carried out their wishes.

We got a call from the Mexican consulate. A man’s family had contacted them. He had been missing for nine days. The last time anybody had seen him he was somewhere near a small body of water with a fractured rib. They thought that he was in our area somewhere. For about a week we searched and searched, but we never found him. His brother had papers. He came up, with a horse. He combed the desert on horseback for another week, and eventually found his brother’s body.

Two weeks later a man came walking into camp. He was carrying an almost empty gallon jug of water with our markings on it in one hand, and a white shirt tied to a long stick in the other. He stuck the jug under my nose: “This water saved my life! I was praying to Jesus for water! I was sure I was going to die, and I found this water in the desert! I think Border Patrol leaves it on the trails for people!”

“No, man,” I said, “Border Patrol couldn’t give a shit if people live or die. We left that water.”

“Those bastards,” he said. “I’ve been waving this flag at their helicopters for three days. They just fly on. When you want them they’re nowhere to be seen, and when you don’t—there they are.” I checked the markings on the bottle. It had been dropped two weeks earlier, at an unusual location we had only gone to because we were looking for the man who died.

One day my colleague and I drove way out into the middle of nowhere to drop water in the desert. Four days later it was time to check on it. On our way out to the spot we saw a man sitting by the side of the little dirt road. He had a ripped up piece of blanket tied around one knee. “How are you doing?” I asked him.

“Badly,” he answered. “Look at this.” He pulled up his pant leg to reveal a black, swollen, thoroughly broken ankle.

“That’s bad,” I said. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“Yes,” he said. “Look at this.” He pulled his shirt aside.

“OH SHIT!” my colleague and I shouted in unison. He had a large open chest wound, bloody, half scabbed over and oozing pus. “You need to go to the hospital right NOW! What happened?”

“Four nights ago I was walking with three other men through those mountains over there. I took a blind fall, ten or twelve feet over a cliff. I broke my ankle and sliced my chest open on a rock. They carried me down from there all through the night. In the morning we saw you drive by, but we were still too high, we couldn’t get to the road in time. When we got here they left and said they were going to find help. I haven’t seen them or anybody else since then.”

“You’ve been here four days?” It had been well over a hundred degrees every day. “Have you had any food or water?”

“Food, no. A couple times a day I crawled over to that pond. I didn’t want to get very far from the road in case someone drove by.”

A hundred yards from the road there was a dried up cattle pond, at best an inch deep, mostly manure and sludge. There were about a dozen sets of drag marks where he had crawled between the pond and the road. We drove him to the ambulance. He was remarkably stoic about everything. I asked him if the bumpy road was hurting his ankle. “No.”

“Your chest?”

“No.”

“You didn’t get sick from the bad water?” I was sure that he would have died if he had.

“No.” The ambulance took him to the hospital and I never heard from him again.

We got a call from our neighbors. A man had crawled up to their door. He was in terrible shape. He could barely stand or talk. He had not eaten or drunk water for three days, and he hadn’t urinated for a day and a half. It had been deadly hot. We tried to give him fluids, but he would vomit immediately every time.

“This is really bad,” I told him. “You need an IV. We don’t have one here. You may have kidney damage. We can’t treat that. You need to go to the hospital. They will deport you after they treat you, but if you don’t I am really afraid that you might die.”

“No,” he said. “Don’t call them.”

“Please, I understand, but—”

“No. Don’t call them.”

“But—”

“No.” We laid him down. After several hours he managed to keep down a tiny amount of water. We nursed him through the night as best we could, giving him water every hour or so. By the morning he was able to hold it down without vomiting, and he finally urinated a little bit. He could barely sit up, but he was able to talk again.

“I’ve never seen anyone so sick refuse to go to the hospital,” I said. “What happened to you?”

“I’ve lived in the states for eighteen years,” he told us. “I’ve never been in any trouble. I’ve never even gotten a parking ticket. My wife and I finally paid off our house. All my children are here. So are my grandchildren. For work I take care of elderly people. Six months ago I had an accident and I broke my back. I was in bed for nearly four months. I was working again, and I got pulled over. The policeman said that I didn’t use my turn signal. I’ve been here eighteen years and I never got pulled over once. I’ve always been very careful. They sent me to a detention facility. They kept me there for fifteen days, with chains on my hands and feet. They fed us peanut butter and crackers three times a day. I was shackled the whole time.

They dropped me off across the border with nothing. I had nowhere to go. I hadn't been there in so long. I left with a group that night. They drove us way out into the desert. We walked for three days. I couldn't keep up any longer. I'm not a young man any more. They left me out there with no food or water. I was by myself for three more days. I had no idea where I was. I drank dirty water from a cattle pond, and it made me even sicker. I was hearing voices and seeing things. When I saw that house up there I didn't know if it was real or not. I kept walking towards it. I thought that I might have already died. I can't do this again. My whole life is here. There is nothing for me in this world if I can't make it back. If I die I die. This is my only chance. I have to keep trying."

He recovered slowly. He called us a week after he left, from his house. A month later he and his wife sent down a huge package of shoes and food and clothing to give to other migrants. "I almost always stay inside," he said. "I can't afford to risk being sent back again. I suffered so much out there. I'm still healing. I know that I could never make it another time."

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