



A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR OUR TIMES

In which a card-carrying member of the East Coast cultural elite travels the length of the border in search of Donald Trump's America—and learns to stop worrying and love the Wall

BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON

T

RUMP IS RIGHT. We *must* build the Wall.

I say this as a classic liberal journalist, flanked by my awards from Planned Parenthood and the pro-labor Sidney Hillman Foundation. Like most liberals, my first reaction to the Wall was disgust. How un-American!

Then I went to the border.

For seven days and seven nights I wandered the desert, speaking to the people of the border towns. I crossed the international line and went to the places where the dead are found. All that time, the Wall was a prion in my brain.

Even in draft form, the Wall was already disrupting alliances and unsettling old assumptions. Was it sparked by globalism? Free trade? Capitalism? Racism? Prescription narcotics? Fox News? Would the Republican party survive? Would NATO survive? Would Breitbart survive? What were the blogs saying?

But the more I traveled, the less sense anything made.

And finally, on the seventh day, blasting down the 10 into Texas at 75 miles an hour with the windows open and Pat Benatar on the

WALL RENDERINGS BY EEVOLVER

radio, clarity and that kick-ass chorus arrived at the exact same moment:

Why don't you hit me with your best shot,
Hit me with your best shot,
Fire away!

And so I entered the Spirit of the Wall, and saw that the Wall is good.

BEGIN AT the border towns, approaching people at random to reduce the selectivity bias that blindfolds so many in these partisan times. Here's Mike Pommerenke, an old guy power walking on the shoulder of the road in Amado, Arizona, just thirty miles from the Mexican border. His answer bursts out of him like something under pressure:

"I say build the wall! They should not be checking them to see if they're criminals and then letting 'em go—that's bullshit. They're a criminal being here. I don't see what the discussion is. Put the wall up, send 'em all back."
"I'm a Trump man," Pommerenke adds unnecessarily. "If he don't win, I'm not voting."

The woman walking with him is his aunt, Kathy King-srud. She looks like a retired schoolteacher except for the Air Force bomber jacket. "We gotta stop this mess," she agrees. "I don't like them being on our welfare system and getting all the benefits that we have a hard time getting."

Two hundred and sixty miles east in Columbus, New Mexico, bitter feelings about the border go back to Pancho Villa's raid in 1916. At the old train depot, a grizzled man called Jack mans the counter of the local historical society, wisps of hair floating out from under his floppy Western hat. In the next room there is a safe with Mexican bullet holes and a diorama of the ruined town. "Am I in favor of Donald Trump? I am, all right. I'm a Trumper. I think he will be very good for the country."

The existing fence is a joke, Jack says. "The El Paso sector is an open door. I don't care what Rick Perry says, he's allowed it. They all have, same with Ted Cruz. There's places you can just walk across."

He goes on: Catch and release must end. Border crossers should be taken right back to the border, sanctuary cities should stop subverting the law, illegals should be denied medical care and education and food stamps. "They should be denied all of that. They're not citizens—they're not entitled to the benefit of being one."

But these are old white people. What about some-

ALONG THE BORDER, ANGLOS WERE MORE SYMPATHETIC TO THE BORDER CROSSERS AND OFTEN SPOKE OF COMPASSION, BUT SEVEN OUT OF TEN HISPANICS WANTED STRICT ENFORCEMENT. EVEN THE ONES WHO DIDN'T SPEAK ENGLISH.

one with deeper roots in the area? Perhaps even, who knows, someone brown?

I head to Nogales, Arizona, a cozy little town tumbling over the rolling desert hills at the border, where the road ends in an eighteen-foot fence and a gate that recalls the glory days of Soviet architecture in Africa. The fence climbs up and down the jagged hillsides like a Dr. Seuss drawing if Dr. Seuss were a sad morbid man who had been traumatized as a child by Stalin. And here's Chris Jimenez, who has lived on the American side all his life: born here, young, scruffy, and casual, a Bernie bro for sure. His opinion of the border crossers?

"They're taking our jobs," he says.

But, um, don't migrants just take the crappy jobs Americans don't want?

"Down here in Nogales, we have produce," Jimenez says. "And when they send the fruit or vegetables from across the border, they repack everything here. So there's a lot of people from across the border, and they get a visa but they don't have a permit to work, and the packers hire them. And they pay half, like four bucks an hour. So if I go there and I try to get a job, they're like, 'Oh, no, we don't need people right now.'"

People in his community are angry about it, for sure. "Like, everybody," he says. But surely Jimenez is an anomaly.

Here's another Hispanic dude just outside the border gate, Javier Velez. He's in his fifties and has also lived here his whole life, but he just became a naturalized citizen ten years ago. He must understand the plight of the undocumented. What does he think of Trump's Wall?

"It would be a good thing," he says. "You can divide both countries—you know where the United States is and where Mexico is."

The threat to jobs is real, Velez says. "It's not fair," he says. "I think it's not fair."

He even likes Trump, kind of. "I don't know, he speaks a lot of truth."

This was a constant theme all along the border. Anglos were more sympathetic to the border crossers and often spoke of compassion, but seven out of ten Hispanics wanted strict enforcement—even the ones who *didn't speak English*. Here's Arturo Vargas, a fifty-year-old American citizen who listens with a puzzled expression to my high school Spanish. Finally, he gets it. "*Sí, la barda.*"

Meaning "Yes, a wall."

"*Qué piensa usted?*"

With a gentle, musing expression on his face, Vargas says the idea does sound *un poco media racista* and

he certainly gets that, but the fact is you've got to stop the illegals. He's quite firm on that point. "*No me gusta que pasan sin papeles porque cuando nosotros estamos aquí bien con papeles, ellos vienen muchas veces y hacen cosas que no deben de hacer. Y por ellos la llevamos nosotros que somos de descendencia mexicana.*"

Which means, in rough translation, Fuck those people without papers—let 'em get in line.

WHAT KIND of wall could relieve these frustrations? As Javier Velez pointed out, the existing fence here in Nogales—which cost \$4.21 million a mile—is easy to climb. It's made out of metal tubes eighteen feet tall, so people can just grab the tubes and scoot up. There's five feet of cement underneath that's pretty easy to tunnel under—the Border Patrol has already discovered about fifty tunnels, some with roads and railroad tracks. In Tijuana, people cross in a vast complex of storm drains.

For decades, even this kind of fencing has been a struggle. They started in 1990 with fourteen miles along the California coast. That helped in California but pushed a 600 percent rise of migrants in the badlands of Arizona, causing an alarming increase in migrant deaths. George W. Bush promised seven hundred miles of super-duper double-layer fence in the Secure Fence Act of 2006, waiving the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Coastal Zone Management Act, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act—which gives a sense of the regulatory hurdles any serious waller faces. Bush ended up with just thirty-two miles of his fence by the time he left office, much of it around Yuma. Still the people stream through to work the vegetable fields, and some keep going.

For many people these days, even trying to imagine the Wall is morally wrong. When an architecture group called for a design competition recently, people protested, saying even rough sketches would get the site into Albert Speer territory. "It was just as if they were trying to design a guillotine, like in the French Revolution," one says. "We can't be your co-conspirators." The woman who built Trump Tower—Barbara Res, the first female skyscraper construction supervisor in New York—refused to even speculate. "The whole thing is foolish," she told me. "He knows it's ridiculous, it's environmentally impossible, but he still says it."

This is how Trump always worked, she said, selling the sizzle when he literally didn't have a steak—he got

THE WALL, BY THE NUMBERS

1,989 MILES

> The Border with Mexico.

1,000 MILES

> Length of Donald Trump's proposed wall.

35 FEET

> Height of the wall (except when he's said it'll be 90 feet high).

13.2 MILLION

> The wall would contain at least 13.2 million cubic yards of concrete. (By comparison, the Hoover Dam contains 4.4 million cubic yards of concrete.)

Trump Steaks from real meatpackers and rebranded them. When he was building the Trump SoHo, he blew so much smoke about how fabulous it was and how many thousands of buyers he had lined up, which pumped up the price even though it was not true, he ended up getting sued by his buyers for "fraudulent enticement."

But Trump has gotten pretty specific about the Wall. He said it would be made of concrete panels "probably thirty-five to forty feet," maybe as high as ninety, and he ruled out fencing altogether. "A wall is better than fencing, and it's much more powerful. It's more secure. It's taller." He said he would only build about a thousand miles of it because of the mountains and littoral areas. It's not clear whether he would tear down the existing fence, or try to wall the most difficult and remote areas.

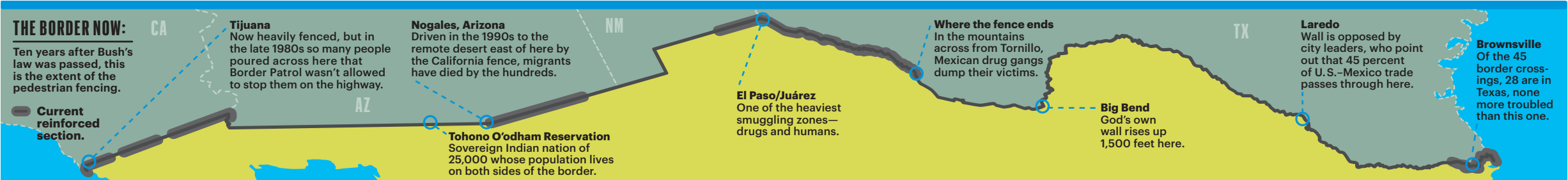
"Would it be thin?" Res asked. Concrete panels, like the ones they use as sound barriers on highways, are generally just a few inches thick. "They'd just put ladders over it. You'd have to have a road in the middle like the Great Wall of China."

That's the idea. The Great Wall—twenty-five feet high, thirteen thousand miles long—preserved the traditional Chinese way of life for five hundred years. These things have to be built on a massive scale—powerful enough, as Trump says, to deliver the proper message.

When Bush was building his fence in 2007, Mexicans attacked Border Patrol agents with guns and molotov cocktails. In some places, drug smugglers and coyotes have crashed one car after another into the fence, ten cars in one case, trying to open up a hole. In other areas, smugglers stand there brazenly in broad daylight and hacksaw through the metal tubes. By some estimates, the coyote business is the second-largest illegal business in Mexico.

This thing is going to have to have a lot of guard towers.

D RIVE EAST from El Paso, slide under the soaring bridges of the border gate and ten miles along on a four-lane highway with a no-man's-land of barbed wire and railroad tracks on the Mexican side. When it turns north, take local roads down a long stretch of muffler shops and daycare centers with names like Los Tres Mosqueteros. The towns are called Socorro, San Elizario, Tornillo. The emerald and vermilion houses across the border are echoed in the colors here too,



the Mexican culture bleeding across. The fence shutters through the trees and houses on the passenger-side window—until finally, across a grove of pecan trees, it just stops. Forty miles from El Paso, the only thing between Mexico and America is an irrigation ditch.

Out comes a kindly old gentleman named Marty Martinez. He’s had a little wood frame retreat in this cluster of houses for most of his life. “I myself caught a load of marijuana right there,” he says. “There’s three guys hauling bags, and I said, ‘Uh-oh, there’s a load coming across.’” What did he do?

“Call the Border Patrol.”

And if they came back looking for revenge?

“I wish they would. I’d blast the hell out of ’em.”

Martinez is a former combat Marine and former Customs agent. He owns a rifle and sleeps with a .45 auto under his pillow. But he doesn’t seem angry, just amused. For years, he says, the migrants would knock at his mother’s door for food or water. Sometimes he found them sleeping in his truck. They’d come up while he was sitting at a campfire—*Psst, psst*, could you share the fire? They had a rendezvous point over there by that salt cedar tree and they’d want to hide till their ride arrived. His mother would feed them, she’s a good soul.

What would he do? “Call the sheriff.”

Standing by the irrigation ditch in a floppy field hat, leaning on a hoe, Martinez glances over the rolling hills to the mountains that fade out in the distance in shades of blue—pausing, as Westerners often do, to take the vastness of the landscape into account. “This has been one of the favorite smuggling areas since time began. They used to smuggle, back in the thirties, *canela*—what’s *canela* called in English? Cinnamon. It was prohibited in Mexico. My grandfather was involved in that. And during Prohibition they brought liquor.”

Things have calmed down since last year, he says. That’s when they extended the fence and beefed up the Border Patrol. But the drug gangs still keep their product in warehouses right across those fields, and he hears automatic fire at night, AK-47’s and probably AR-15’s. They dump the bodies between those two mountains.

He shrugs off Trump’s more hostile comments about Mexicans. “The Mexican government won’t allow people to go in there and live wherever they want to. They’re more racist than we are, probably.”

And he’s all for the Wall—or, as he calls it, the Tortilla Curtain.

“Like Trump said, let’s make it fifty feet tall. Let’s go up as high as it can.”

YES! BUILD the Wall! Build the Wall! This guy has drug mules *in his yard!* Imagine living across a pecan grove from the killing fields of Juárez! A few days ago a Mexican TV crew caught smugglers going over the fence with drugs in backpacks and the smugglers were pissed that their daily routine had been disrupted by a damn TV crew—stop filming if you know what’s good for you, you media buffoons.

THE WALL, BY THE NUMBERS (CONT’D)

\$4 BILLION

> Trump’s initial cost estimate.

\$15–25 BILLION

> Actual cost. There is no infrastructure on our southern border, so construction costs will likely be much higher.

40,000

> Estimated workforce.

4 YEARS

> Estimated construction time.

But now peel back another layer. Drive down twenty miles of two-lane blacktop and past one checkpoint and you get to a speck of a town called Sasabe, Arizona. Ten houses? Twenty? All dusty brown stucco like windowed extrusions of the desert itself. Then there’s a ditch and a rise where there’s a border gate like a little police station straddling a road. The fence goes off into the rolling brown desert for about three miles in each direction. The guards say it’s quiet here now. A Border Patrol helicopter passes overhead, coming in from the Baboquivari Mountains, which rise up almost eight thousand jagged feet.

At the only store in town, an elegant straight-backed woman named Deborah Grider runs the register. She’s a fourth-generation Sasaban and wary of strangers. “If people come in here, I take their money,” she says. “I don’t ask questions.”

Is it dangerous?

“Do you feel danger?”

And the Wall?

“I don’t know what it means. What does he mean, exactly?”

She says she’s never had a problem “ever, ever.” People do come in looking for water. They get stranded out in the desert and they see the light, the only light for miles around. Sometimes they haven’t eaten for four or five days and they think they’re only three miles from Phoenix because the coyotes lied to them. By that time, they’re usually ready to give themselves up. She calls Border Patrol, calls their families to let them know they’re alive. She feeds them.

With a cool look, she nods to a tip jar on the counter. She’s collecting money for something. A button on it reads *NO MAS MUERTES*.

(Who knows what it means, something in Spanish.)

Grider is not alone. At least half the people along the border express sympathy for the migrants. Some are ideological liberals, naturally. “To me, the Republican party’s always looking for some distraction because the majority of the people benefit from the Democratic party’s agenda,” says Milan Plecas, a waiter in an upscale restaurant in El Paso. But even people who are for the Wall are sympathetic to the migrants—Kathy Kingsrud’s full comment the day she was power walking was “I say put the wall up, but I’m also compassionate for the people that are already here.” Meaning she doesn’t agree with the mass-deportation idea, which almost makes her a Democrat. Phrases like “hardworking people looking for a better life” and “fleeing a terrible situation” come up over and over.

And in Nogales, Chris Jimenez didn’t stop with his complaints about Mexicans stealing jobs and lowering wages. Unable to get one of the repacking jobs, he said, he took a position at a local funeral home. One of his tasks was going out to the desert to pick up the bodies of migrants. He did this about twenty-five times. “And that’s when I started like, ‘Oh, man, poor people, they tried to cross the fence to get a new life and they’re risking their lives and everything.’”

Even Marty Martinez is all for resettling illegals. “We displace a lot of their governments,” he points out.

This spirit is deep in the culture of the border, just as deep as the desire for the Wall. There are dozens of activist groups like the Border Patrol Victims Network as-



GOODBYE FRONTIER, HELLO WALL

FROM UPPER LEFT: > The border fence extends 300 feet into the Pacific Ocean between Tijuana and San Diego; 652 miles of the fence has been completed.

> The scale of natural barriers, such as Big Bend National Park, mocks even the largest possible wall.

> Networks of tunnels—this one was built to smuggle drugs between Tijuana and San Diego and is 2,600 feet long—will multiply should the border wall be built.

sisting migrants. This week’s theme at the Tucson alternative paper is the border and “resistance,” and it’s full of lines like “border dogs on leashes are snapping at your child’s shoulder in your own home.” The former mayor of Laredo said a wall would destroy his town, keeping out the Mexicans who make up 40 percent of the local economy. “Am I going to close the door on them and put up a wall?” Students at the University of Texas Brownsville protested a fence that would divide their campus. Even Ted Cruz released a statement that said we should help feed migrant children, “a compassionate response that embodies American values.” The ideal of a more welcoming America has also been part of the story of the West, and people down here are willing to fight for it.

So maybe the real problem isn’t sanctuary cities. It’s sanctuary *citizens*. We might have to ban them, too.

THE FARTHER you go, the more complicated things get, and there’s an overwhelming urge to leave out the people who don’t fit into boxes. Like Jeanine Whittaker, paused now along the highway a couple dozen miles from a Mexican town called Palomas. She’s collecting cans. It pays for gas and she has three discs out in her back, which is why she had to give up her job at Walmart. She’s lived here ten years, in Socorro before that, Michigan originally. She has a kind, wrinkled face and she is not a Trump supporter at all. He’s “a terrible thing for America,” she says. She has compassion for the migrants, who are mostly families and people looking for work. When she goes rock hunting up in the Three Sisters—that’s them right there in the distance—hunting

for carnelians and hematite, she sees them all the time, poor things, with their bundles of clothes and tired children. When they ask for water, she gives them water.

But the drug dealers are a problem. Car theft is high. So is burglary, especially being on a highway here, and you can tell when it’s illegals ’cause they’ll leave the guns. Even schoolkids get dragged into it. The local school buses Mexican kids from the border—it’s a tradition, they’ve done it for years—but recently some kid got caught with a brick of

pot in his backpack. “And a couple times, I think it was last year, illegals got on the school bus and the driver was too afraid to say anything, drove ’em all the way into town.” Worst off are the ranchers who have land along the border. “They’re petrified. Something has to be done.”

A Wall?

“Well, I think, probably, yeah.”

Then there’s this guy Bob Howger, a sixty-four-year-old white man in a McDonald’s parking lot in Nogales who says he’ll vote for Trump. “Politicians bullshit us all the time. I’m sick of it. Most people seem to be. Maybe we’re finally getting to where we don’t put up with this crap anymore.”

But Howger hates even the idea of a wall. “It should be an open border. Why do people need to have a fence to keep ’em out or keep ’em in? It’s ridiculous. I wanna go wherever I wanna go, I’m an earthling. Why do you gotta have the government tell you what you can and cannot do? Most of them are unqualified to run their own life. Just leave me alone.”

These people represent an ornery strain of American individualism that swings from left to right and casts a suspicious eye on all forms of external restraint, including conventional notions of law and order and the social contract itself. To them, borders are just another form of big government—a sentiment your reporter regards with some sympathy. He spent his high school years seventeen miles from the DMZ in Korea and came to associate border crossers with desperate refugees flinging themselves on barbed wire. At eighteen, he walked a Mexican hippie across the border and gave him a ride to L. A., which seemed like a friendly thing to do. For years, he employed a Guatemalan to cut his lawn and never asked for papers, which would have seemed rude—plus, minor point, the U. S. overthrew the gardener’s reform-minded leader and plunged his homeland into a nightmare of death.

“I’m more free in Mexico, my friend, than I am here,” Jack the historian continued. “I can go down there, sit in a bar, smoke a cigarette, and drink beer. Can’t do that here. I don’t have to put on a seat belt. Cops up here go out of their way to give tickets. I don’t like cops. I don’t like getting stopped thirty miles north of the border, and I’m offended by somebody asking what’s my citizenship.”

Gradually, a strange pattern emerges. Those who ignore the Jeanine Whittakers and Bob Howgers to focus on the partisans of either side will never see this pattern, but Trump sees it—or maybe he feels it, vibrating at him through the crowds. It’s one of the things that make him a visionary.

Here's a Border Patrol officer manning the crossing at Nogales. "I'm a citizen, I get to have an opinion—don't shoot me, but I like Trump."

But an actual wall, no way. "It's not gonna solve the problem. The only way to solve it is to station one of us every hundred feet from California to Brownsville."

Here's Jack, all for Trump except for that one little detail: "I'm bigger on aerial surveillance, drone surveillance, and obeying the laws that are on the books."

Here's Marty Martinez: "He thinks he's going to build it, but it takes too much money, and anything the president wants has to go through Congress, plus there's rivers and Indian reservations—too many mountains, too many snakes."

This is just a few weeks before the Border Patrol union board endorses Trump, and even *they* don't think Trump will build a wall—instead, he'll "embrace the ideas of rank-and-file Border Patrol agents rather than listening to the management yes-men who say whatever they are programmed to say."

According to more and more smart people, it seems, Trump himself doesn't really believe in the Wall. "Trump's statements are not intended to be 'true' or 'false,'" writes the *National Review*. "They're not intended to represent what he actually believes." According to Salon, Trump represents "the widespread acceptance of bullshit as the legitimate political discourse." After he endorsed torture, one of his own policy advisors dismissed his statement as mere politics. This pattern flows through all his proposals. The health care that was going to be better than Obamacare turned out to be warmed-over GOP boilerplate about gutting state insurance regulations. Sympathy for the worker ended with the usual tax cuts for the rich. And 50 percent of undocumented migrants in the U.S. overstay their visas, which a wall would do nothing to change. But those are details for people who grub after details, the same people who told us that macroeconomics meant that losing our factories didn't matter because we could now shop for less at Walmart.

Trump has blasted past all of that. He's gone full American. He's operating on the level of myth. In a beaten-down time of anxiety and depression, he's throwing out a bold new vision. His Wall is Marilyn on the grate, the hunt for Moby Dick, Marlon Brando on his motorcycle, a pure American image shot in CinemaScope by Cecil B. DeMille. It's a manifesto in a single word, a pure idea—and God knows it's been a long time since America has had a pure idea.

SO WHAT will Trump decide when he consults with the people who know best? What will the Wall look like in drab reality? I reach out and word comes back: Talk to Sam Sadler. He is the rank-and-file Border Patrol agent who, now that he's retired, says what the weenies in management are afraid to say. Nobody knows the border better than he does.

Now here's Sadler, sitting in his garage in Deming, New Mexico, surrounded by circular saws and drill presses

“
I WANNA
GO
WHEREVER
I WANNA
GO,
I’M AN
EARTHLING.
WHY
DO YOU
GOTTA
HAVE THE
GOVERNMENT
TELL YOU
WHAT YOU
CAN AND
CANNOT DO?
MOST OF
THEM ARE
UNQUALIFIED
TO RUN
THEIR
OWN LIFE.
”

and memorabilia from twenty-five years in the Border Patrol, his coffee cup perched on the end of a stepladder. He “bleeds green,” as they say—grew up in a Texas border town called Del Rio, learned Spanish at the knee of a Mexican nanny, filled out the application card at seventeen, mustered in at nineteen, and got sent straight to Chula Vista, California, the “war zone.” This was in ’87, when the Border Patrol had fewer than three thousand agents and hundreds of migrants would mass on the line for “banzai runs.” In Moody Canyon, at the Soccer Field, at Lalo’s Crossing and Memo Lane, they’d come down the cliffs by the hundreds, rocks falling around them, and when they hit bottom you blast the lights and it’s an explosion of bodies. One time, he arrested eighty people all by himself. You sat them down and called transport to get them out before the next wave hit. When Operation Gatekeeper slowed that down in the nineties, the hot spot moved to Deming. Forty agents covered forty-seven miles of border and there was nothing to stop the crossers, not even barbed wire. On the Mexican side, they were throwing up hotels for the migrants. Sadler moved there and rose to watch commander. In 2006, his team made 42,600 arrests.

All this leaves Sadler, like so many members of the Border Patrol, sympathetic to the idea of the Wall. “Good fences make good neighbors” is his instant response.

So yeah, he’s all for the Wall.

But not an *actual* wall—that makes no sense. “If it’s a thousand feet high,” he says, “they’ll go underneath it. If it’s a thousand feet deep, they’ll go around it. If it’s a thousand miles long, they’ll go through it. A wall by itself doesn’t work.”

He’s been thinking about this his whole life, so the answers burst out of him. Sure, there are places where a physical fence will be effective—in a high-traffic area with lots of houses butting up against the fence, use whatever works: fence, wall, landing mat, crushed cars, climb-proof chain-link, square tubing, horizontal railroad rails, concrete bollard barriers. But then they dig tunnels, so you’ve got to be able to detect the tunnels, too. It comes down to boots on the ground. And out in the more rural areas where you don’t have the infrastructure to support the electricity for cameras, or the littoral areas where you can’t build a fence along the river’s edge, you use drones or underground sensors or satellite imagery. “Persistent impedance” is the Border Patrol’s goal, not perfection.

What they need is enforcement, not letting people go and hoping they’ll show up in court. What they need is sophisticated radar systems like the one the Department of Defense once gave them to fight a plague of ultralight aircraft, or the long-range acquisition-systems optics that give actual geo-coordinates—that stuff would be a game changer, but the military won’t share. “I’ll be quite frank,” Sadler says. “They think this threat just isn’t big enough to justify bringing the resources to bear.”

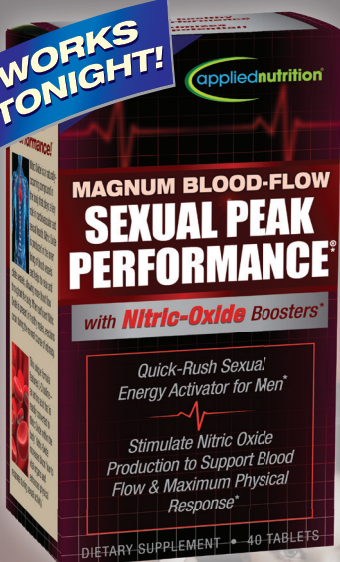
He’s right, of course. Until Trump, the default consensus among both conservatives and liberals was that zero tolerance cost too much. Liberals wanted amnesty, and conservatives, despite all their talk of securing the border, never wanted to spend the money.

All this bugs a guy like Sadler, the ultimate straight arrow. In his book, rules are rules. [continued on page 138]



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A Modest Proposal

[continued from page 127] Do not joke with him about letting only the hot Latinas in, because he will give you a dead-eye stare. "As a Border Patrol agent, the only hot woman is my wife."

But Sadler's thinking doesn't stop with the hard line of the law. Several times he says that the greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. When he tries to look at the big picture, he sounds almost pained. "When you have a draw that's based on folks' well-being—I mean, there are people that aren't eating three square meals a day down there—you're always gonna have those people who are willing to take the chance. The solution is Mexico. The government of Mexico becomes a government for the people. That's the solution. Then you won't need a wall."

With this, I venture a personal question. Should I have asked my Guatemalan gardener for papers?

"I don't know," Sadler says. "You're a private citizen. I don't ask the guy who's gonna work on my truck if he's got documents or not."

What about walking the Mexican hippie across the border?

There, Sadler draws the line. "That's alien smuggling. Title 8-U.S.C.-Section 1324. It's a felony."

"I was eighteen."

He controls a look of faint dismay. "You were eighteen," he says, "and ignorance of the law is no excuse."

A year and change after leaving the Border Patrol, he still grinds his teeth every night.

DRIVE ON, America, and the border will travel alongside you like a wound. Drive down the old Texas highway past Marfa, past Alpine, past Marathon, down to Big Bend National Park, where the naked mountains of West Texas tumble into the Rio Grande. No landscape in America is more remote and sublime. When the man who fought to make this a national park saw it for the first time, he said it was as close as he'd come to the mind of God. The vast scale feels eternal, unworldly. On the Mexican side, a massive cliff of orange stone rises fifteen hundred feet high and goes on for miles, monumental and forbidding. The river took millions of years to carve that cliff.

A sweet old park volunteer sighs. "People who support the wall have never been here."

In the eighties, she says, they used to joke about Sandinistas trying to climb down all that vertical stone. How out of touch the people back in the cities were with the scale of things down here! "SPACE," the poet Charles Olson said. "I spell it large because it comes large here." That's the essential fact about America, which people looking at screens tend to forget.

At the base of the cliff, the Rio Grande is just a glittering ribbon ten feet across. Skip

a stone and it lands in Mexico. Take a boat down this river through the Santa Elena Canyon and pitch a tent in the stretch where the cliff goes up on both sides, fifteen hundred feet straight up. Look up from your sleeping bag and see a river of stars—Big Bend is also a dark sky preserve, one of the rare places in the world where a premodern starscape can still be seen. A wall on that cliff so far above would be a cosmic joke, a child's scribble on the face of creation. It would be the boot of big government on the neck of a swan, and the people who say they want it would be the first to start tearing it down. There will never be a wall here.

Which means there is only one alternative: Fill in Big Bend! Blast down the Baboquivari Mountains! Cede the littoral areas of Texas to Mexico! We cannot let our kind hearts and monistic yearnings dissuade us from the great task ahead. Build that Wall! Put a road down the middle and rotating turrets every hundred yards, buy the latest in motion detectors, put in gyms for the troops so they stay in shape, plate the whole thing in gold! How beautiful that we respond to troubled times with a great new project, a massive new dream! Goodbye Frontier, hello Wall! Let the migrants fear to approach! Let them tremble in awe! When the climate refugees start to come twenty or thirty years from now, imagine the heroic songs we'll sing of the Guardians of the Wall and their last great battles. *Hit me with your best shot!*

Trump has brought us the gift of clarity. To save the border, we must destroy it—or we must give up the beautiful dream of independence we once declared and bind ourselves ever closer to a world in deep trouble.

There is no other choice. ■

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