Border: continued from previous page

Violence on the border has reached epidemic proportions. People attempting the dangerous illegal crossing from Mexico into the United States, pushed by deteriorating economic conditions and attracted by the promise of higher wages, are routinely robbed, beaten and raped. The situation has gotten so bad that U.S. President George Bush and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari have been forced to issue a joint statement of concern. Bandits on both sides of the border are responsible for some of the brutality, but an increasing number of incidents are the result of vigilante racists.

Last year, a teenage gang calling itself the "Metal Militia" dressed in camouflage and shot people thought to be undocumented immigrants, using mock-warfare paint guns. A sniper who killed two Mexican farmworkers near the border admitted at his trial that he killed them just because they were from Mexico. Less dangerous, but still a hazard, are the "Light Up the Border" folks who come out at night to shine their car headlights across the border, hoping to scare potential immigrants and embarrass the Border Patrol into arresting more people.

Encouraging the Bigots

The main danger to people trying to make the crossing, however, is not from civilian racists, according to some activists. "The ones to watch out for are the Border Patrol and the INS," says Arnoldo Garcia, program director at the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. "Not only do they do most of the killings and the beatings, but they egg on and encourage the border bigots."

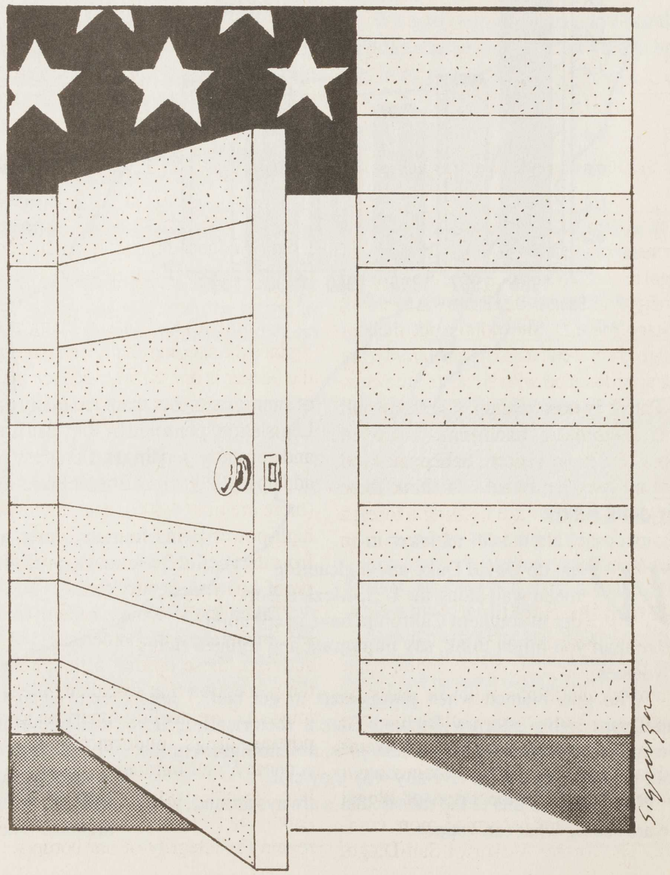
Since 1974, at least 33 people have been killed and another 48 wounded by the Border Patrol in the San Diego area alone. People who work with monitoring projects on the border say abuse is common; they have recorded hundreds of incidents of abuse in recent years, but point out that few undocumented immigrants are willing to report being harassed because they fear deportation. By some estimates, over 50 percent of the women picked up by Border Patrol agents have been sexually assaulted. First-timers are advised by experienced crossers to take birth control pills in case of rape; the FBI is currently investigating charges that some Border Patrol agents were among the rapists.

"These guys have a cowboy mentality about what they are doing out there," says Arnoldo Garcia. "They think they are in a war zone and the immigrants are the enemy, people who don't matter. They fire on vehicles carrying people if they don't stop, they chase people across the border into Mexico, they beat people up. Random incidents are one thing. This is a systematic pattern of violence."

> ***"The ones to watch out for are the Border Patrol and the INS. Not only do they do most of the killings and the beatings, but they egg on and encourage the border bigots."***

Roberto Martínez, who works with Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), believes that "there is a history of violence and conflict and racism on the border that has created a kind of culture of violence here in terms of how people perceive undocumented people (quoted in the *New York Times*)."

At least part of that culture of violence, says director of the AFSC project Maria Jimenez, is a result of the perception that illegal immigration has "become a national security question... that has to be met with military force." She points out that although very few of the immigrants are ever apprehended with firearms, the Border Patrol is now equipped with assault rifles, automatic handguns, infra-red scopes (for night vision), helicopters and other military hardware. "I think these people believe they are fighting a foreign invasion," she told the *Trendsletter* in an interview.



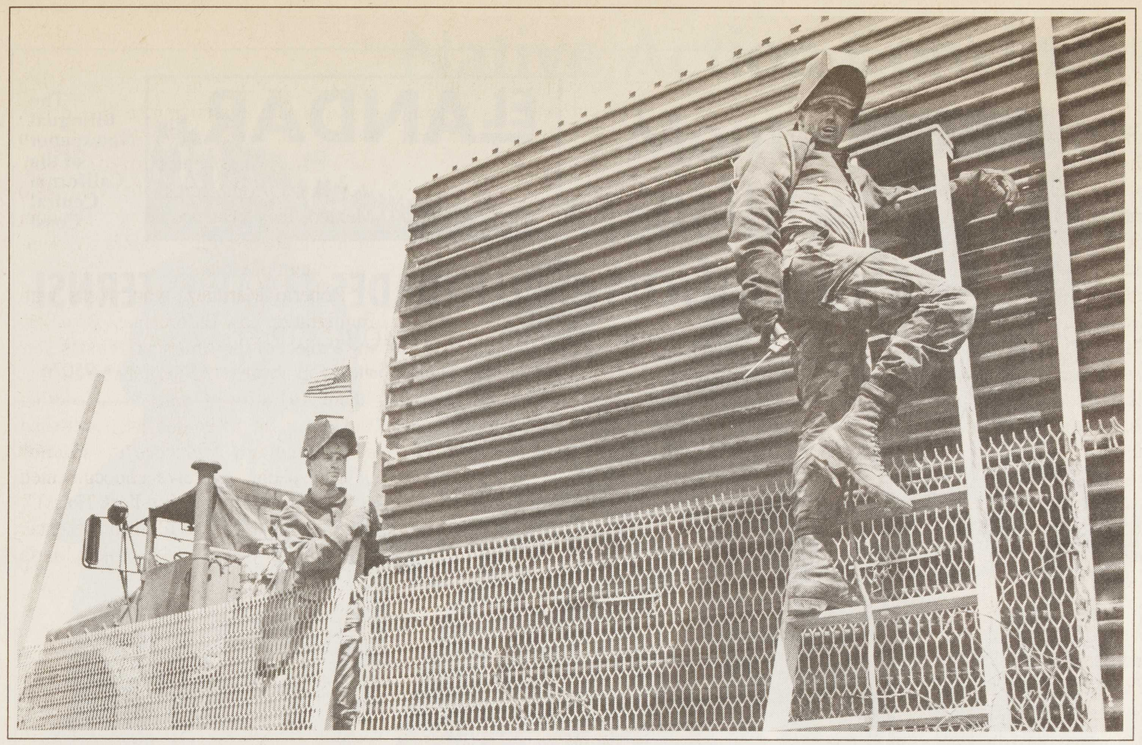


Photo: David Maung, Impact Visuals

Surplus military aircraft landing material is being welded into a solid wall separating Tijuana from San Diego in southern California.

Securing the Border

In fact, that perception extends far beyond the Border Patrol, into more mainstream organizations and the halls of Congress. Conferences such as the one held in San Diego the weekend of November 16 that ask "How can we maintain our quality of life with the flood of illegal immigration?" are becoming more common. The former Mayor of San Diego, Roger Hedgecock, uses his radio show to demand more official action to "secure the border."

The metal wall that is being built to replace the sagging chain-link fence along the border is one effort to reduce the flow of immigrants, but there are many others. Legislation sponsored by Rep. Bill Lowery and currently pending in Congress would add up to 2,200 more Border Patrol agents (there are now 4,400), construct a line of high-power lights fourteen miles inland from the Pacific Ocean and require a forge-proof national identity card.

Taken in the context of anti-Mexican sentiments along the border, say civil rights activists, these official actions reinforce the perception that so-called "illegal immigrants" are stealing American jobs, importing drugs, undermining the U.S. economy, and burdening the social welfare system. As Lowery puts it, "the American people are demanding that we regain the integrity of our borders. . . [to stop the flow of] illegal drugs, illegal immigration and illegal goods coming across from Mexico."

Lowery and anti-immigration groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) argue that high unemployment, overwhelmed social welfare systems, increasing drug use, higher crime rates and other social ills can be traced to high levels of undocumented immigration. Undocumented immigrants, says one of the "Light Up the Border" protesters, who is himself an immigrant from Canada, "get on welfare just by showing up at the office." The perception that millions of Mexicans are pouring across the border and heading straight for the welfare and food stamp offices is common along the border, although unsupported by the available evidence. Most of the studies of the economic effects of immigration conclude that immigrants — with or without documents — add far

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