



## Members of Congress, Tear Down That Wall!

*Adding 700 miles of new fencing along the Mexican border would be a huge waste of money. Better to create a legal pathway through which Mexican workers can come and go.*

By: Jim McTague - July 13, 2013

---

Step aside, Lady Liberty. A new immigration policy for this great nation warrants a new symbol. Lawmakers wish to supplant you with a fence that would stretch for more than 1,000 miles of our 1,900-mile border with Mexico. In contrast, the heavily fortified 38th Parallel that separates the two Koreas is a mere 160 miles long.

Whether the fence would prevent unwanted Mexicans from sneaking into our country is debatable. What is certain, however, is that building it would cost precious American tax dollars.

The Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill on June 27. A provision added by Democrats to assuage xenophobic Republicans calls for building 700 miles of double fencing linked to some 350 miles of fence already in place. The barrier would be augmented by the addition of 19,000 border patrol agents to the 21,000 already on patrol, drones, helicopters, and high-tech surveillance gadgets. The estimated cost is \$46 billion over 10 years. The idea is to keep more illegals from joining an estimated 11 million illegal Mexican immigrants living in the U.S. The 11 million caught inside the wall would be provided with a path to citizenship.

The Senate further sweetened the bill by larding it with pork for the defense industry, which has cheerleaders on both sides of the aisle. As the Washington Post pointed out on July 1, the Senate dictated that the Department of Homeland Security ignore procurement protocol and buy specific pieces of equipment such as six Northrop Grumman airborne radar systems that cost \$9.3 million each; 15 Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopters that go for \$17 million apiece, and eight "light enforcement" helicopters made by American Eurocopter, which run about \$3 million each. In other words, by eliminating the need for competitive bidding, the Senate bill ensures that taxpayers would pay through the nose.

**THE SENATE BILL** is in the hands of the House of Representatives, which has a serious problem with it. President Obama likes the Senate product. The House GOP does not like President Obama. So intense is the House GOP's Obamanimosity that there's a high probability that they will allow the Senate's masterpiece of compromise to die in committee. Suppress your cheers: The House will try to pass bite-size pieces of immigration reform, including a fence bill.

Not only is the fence money ill-spent, it is an embarrassment, says Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration-policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

A better way to secure the border, Nowrasteh asserts, is by creating a larger, more efficient pathway through which Mexicans, including workers, can enter legally. Nowrasteh says that a similar approach -- the Bracero program from 1942 to 1964 -- reduced illegal Mexican immigration by about 90%. About four million workers -- mostly farm workers -- crossed from Mexico to the U.S. under the program. More importantly, most of them went home again after working for a few years. When immigration was tightened in 1986, illegal Mexican immigrants who came to work for a couple of years end up staying longer because it became more difficult to pass back and forth. "They were locked in," says Nowrasteh.

Economically, the fence makes little sense. We have a free flow of goods and capital between our nation and Mexico. Labor is the third leg of that stool. The fence makes little sense strategically either. "There's a Mexican joke: You build a 10-foot-high wall, and we will come with an 11-foot ladder," says Peter Laufer, author of the 2004 book, *Wetback Nation*, and journalism professor at the University of Oregon. Like Nowrasteh, he favors more-efficient legal portals. Then, he says, take those billions earmarked for the fence system and use them instead to develop systems to weed out the undesirable visitors. Canada weeds out undesirable U.S. visitors with a database that detects rap sheets. Convicted of drunk driving? You can't enter.

**IF THE FENCE IS BUILT**, it is unlikely to dim trade between the U.S. and Mexico -- our third-largest trading partner behind Canada and China.

"Believe it or not, Mexicans don't care about the fence," says J. Jesus Esquivel, Washington correspondent for *Proceso*, a political magazine published in Mexico City. The reaction there, he says, is, "So what if the Americans don't like us? They still need our labor."

Mexicans are accustomed to biliousness from the North. It won't damp demand for U.S. brands like Nike and Coca-Cola. On its face, the Mexican government also is not acting adversely. One lawmaker said the trade relationship between the two countries trumps the perceived insult of the fence.

Of course, Mexico can strike back in other ways. The country's new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, has reduced cooperation on drug investigations with the CIA and DEA. In the meantime, Mexico is courting a new trading partner, China, a country whose most famous wall is a tourist attraction, not a barrier.