Trump's Border Wall: It Should Never Happen

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Donald Trump has promoted a xenophobic immigration policy from the outset of his presidential campaign. He declared that Mexico was exporting "criminals," "killers," "rapists," and "drug deals" to the United States. To deal with this situation, Trump announced he would build a wall along the Mexican-United States border, for which he would force Mexico to pay costs.

As with most Trump proposals to "make America great again," he has been long on promises and short on details. In the months since the official launch of his campaign on June 17, 2015, however, journalists have forced him into giving some details of the wall he envisions, and most recently the *Washington Post* pushed him to provide a general explanation of how he was going to get Mexico to pay for the wall.

Trump's wall typifies his governing ideas and tactics. He has simply tossed out a thought without carefully thinking it through. As a result, it is unrealistic and unworkable. It would likely cause more harm than good. No informed person with whom I have spoken believes any good could come from such a wall, although there is no shortage of bad things that could occur.

Nor is there public clamor for such a draconian sealing of our southern border. According to the latest Pew Research Poll only about a third of Americans support the idea of a wall, with Republicans predominately favoring it. Pew reports, "By nearly two-to-one (63% to 33%), Republicans and GOP leaners favor building a wall along the entire U.S.-Mexico border. By contrast, just 13% of Democrats favor building a border wall, while 84% are opposed."

This hair-brained idea should never come to fruition because even if it could be built, it would be a monument to isolationism and nativism Donald Trump espouses, and hardly be worth the expense for it is not a solution to our nation's immigration problems.

Trump's Mexican Border Wall

The border between the U.S. and Mexico runs through four American states: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The border is a highly diverse terrain from ocean waters (Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico) to urban areas (e.g., from San Diego and Tijuana to Brownsville and Matamoros) dominated by arid deserts. Yet two major rivers (Colorado and Rio Grande) cross

the border from the U.S. to Mexico, which also have farm lands, deltas, and rugged mountain areas. The border runs 1,989 miles and every year no fewer than 350 million people cross it—legally! There are 35 border cities, with 45 crossing points and 330 ports of entry, not to mention that over 12 million people reside along the border.

Designing and building a "beautiful and massive" wall on this complex terrain would be a major engineering challenge, and Trump has been anything but consistent in describing the wall he envisions. For example, Trump says his wall will have "a big, beautiful door" so the "good ones" can come back in, but how will that door handle 350 million people who cross the border each year, many doing it daily? Trump has described his wall as low as 25 feet tall and at other times as high as 55 feet. Sometimes he has his wall running the entire border, other times only 1,000 miles, plus the 670 miles of high steel fencing Republicans spent $2.4 billion to keep illegal immigrants out of the U.S.

Clearly, Trump is promoting a concept, not an actual proposal. When you look closely at implementing his idea, difficult, if not impossible, problems abound. To build such a wall the Mexico-U.S. Boundary Treaty would have to be renegotiated. Even more difficult would be acquiring the necessary privately owned real estate (with widely-unpopular eminent domain proceedings requiring years of litigation). Much of the border runs though the public lands held by National Parks, yet with 84 percent of Democrats opposed to a wall, it is not likely Congress would approve this ecological, environmental and political disruption of prime American wilderness, the home to countless endangered and protected species. The seasonal ebbing and flowing Colorado and Rio Grande rivers will require a wall designed to allow the water out without letting people in.

Trump, of course, brushes aside all problems, and while he resists being pinned down with specifics, *The Washington Post* recently got him to explain how he would pay for this project. His explanation, however, further documents that this is Trump campaign blather for those gullible enough to buy into his fantasy policies.

The Cost of Trump's Wall

Trump's claim that he will force the Mexicans to pay for his wall raises two fundamental issues: How much will it cost? And how will he make the Mexicans pay for a wall for which they have said—at least a current and past president of Mexico—Mexico will not pay?

When Trump discussed the cost of his wall on MSNBC, in early February 2016, he said we only need 1,000 miles because of natural barriers, and that would cost $8 billion. He explained the wall would be made of precast cement, "*probably 35 to 40 feet up in the air. That's high; that's a real wall. It will actually look good. It'll look, you know, as good as a wall is going to look.*" A few weeks later, Trump upped the cost to $10 to 12 billion. But none of these cost numbers could be verified by a Washington Post fact checker. *The Post estimated the cost would be more like $25 billion.*

The Post also quizzed Trump on his claim that Mexico would pay for his wall. Trump explained his funding scheme to *Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. Envisioning a 1,000 mile wall, Trump provided a two-page memo explaining that he was only looking for "a one-time payment of $5-10 billion" from Mexico, which Trump said Mexico would be happy to pay because if they did not, as president he would use his executive powers to cut of the flow of billions of dollars in payment immigrants send home to Mexico, a cut off that would decimate the Mexican economy. The *Post* reported that almost "$25 million was sent home by Mexicans," and Trump claims "the majority of that amount comes from illegal aliens."

Initially, Trump said would use the USA Patriot Act's antiterrorism provisions to prevent money transfers from the United States to Mexico, making poor Mexicans the equivalent of terrorists to block their remittances, which would hobble the Mexican economy. Like all Trump policies, when glitches arise, he amends his thinking. Trump recognizes that his interpretation of the USA Patriot Act might not pass judicial muster, so he has added a few other broad fee schemes to pay for the wall such as increasing fees on "all temporary visas issued to Mexican CEOs and diplomats," "increase fees on all border crossing cards—of which we issue about 1 million to Mexican nationals each year," "increase fees on all NAFTA worker visas from Mexico," "and increase fees at ports of entry to the United States from Mexico." In other words, it will be the Mexican people—not the government—who will pay for Trump's wall.

The Absurdity of It All

Of course, Trump's wall is connected to his plan to deport some 11 million illegal aliens in the United States. Once he rounds them up—another impossibly complex proposal he has never fully explained—he wants to keep out "the bad ones," thus the wall.

Border security is a real issue that Democrats have recognized as well. Hillary Clinton agrees we need to better secure our borders, but she views Trump's wall for what it is—all talk and no solution. Right-wing websites, like the Daily Caller, have posted charts showing the impact of walls built in Europe in halting immigration. But the porous borders of Europe are very different than ours, and fences no doubt do keep women and children out, but not the "bad ones," who Trump says are his target.

Brendan Lenihan, a former U.S. Border Patrol officer now attending law school, looks at the politicization of border security when he addresses related environmental issues along the Arizona-Mexico border. Lenihan says that every Border Patrol agent with whom he has spoken about border security understands there can never be total control of a border. Lenihan cites studies by the Cato Institute that looked at the Cold War border between East and West Germany, "the most heavily fortified in modern history," yet it "was successfully breached a thousand or so times each year." The Cato study found:

There is simply no way for a large, open and democratic country like the United States to construct and maintain perfect border defenses. It is hard to think of another issue where the public debate is so utterly at odds with what the government can realistically achieve.

Building Trump's wall would be expensive folly. It will not keep out "the bad ones." But it will wreck the ecology of the southwestern United States. Such a wall would certainly serve as a monument to Trump's ugly-American thinking. So before any such project is started, President Trump should order the Park Service to cover the Statue of Liberty in black, for her symbolic welcoming to immigrants can be declared dead when he starts building a massive Trump wall.