



Porous Borders Invite Terrorist Infiltration

PAWEL STYRNA

April 5, 2021

Whenever anyone dares to suggest that foreign terrorists who wish to hurt Americans might be crossing our southwestern border – whether it was President Trump in 2019, or House Republicans more recently in the midst of Joe Biden’s migrant crisis – they are met with an almost immediate backlash. The common response is denial, ridicule, or simply downplaying the danger.

However, as Todd Bensman, Senior National Security Fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, points out in his latest book, *America’s Covert Border War: The Untold Story of the Nation’s Battle to Prevent Jihadist Infiltration*, the threat of terrorists penetrating the U.S.-Mexico border is very real. Moreover, the U.S. government has been waging a clandestine struggle against it for two decades. And the author – having been in charge of counterterrorism intelligence for the Texas Department of Public Safety’s Intelligence and Counterterrorism Division in its multi-agency fusion center – is a veteran of this covert border war.

“Throughout the 1990s,” Bensman says, “national border control policy centered mainly on managing illegal Mexican migration and drug running.” The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks by radical Islamists served as a wake-up call, however. As the U.S. made it harder for terrorists to enter via our airports, it was necessary to ensure that bad actors would not get into our country by other means, such as sneaking in illegally or using asylum fraud.

But why the focus on the southwestern border? As Bensman explains, “in Canada, thousands of complete SIA [Special Interest Alien] strangers, violent jihadists hiding among them, therefore, would not be able to show up entirely unannounced or uninvited for a clandestine trip into Montana (...). By contrast, the overland pathway through a notoriously indifferent Mexico to the US southern border runs through some two-dozen contiguous, equally porous, and indifferent nations in Latin America, each open to just about anyone from any country of national security concern.”

Thus, the almost 2,000-mile-long U.S.-Mexico border became a major line of defense as our intelligence and counterterrorism professionals worked to vet individuals from hotbeds of terror and Islamist extremism who showed up at our southwestern frontier. Bensman calls this the “near war.” Another part of the covert border war (the “far war”) was also waged throughout Latin America as the U.S. attempted to close down smuggling rings and intercept potentially dangerous individuals.

Given his extensive practical experience with the southwestern border counterterrorism enterprise, the author is frustrated by those in the open-borders/pro-mass-migration lobby who

hubristically minimize the threat. He reminds us that relatively small numbers can have a huge impact – not only in terms of the number of victims, but also economically, politically, and socially. For instance, “the 9/11 attacks required a mere nineteen al-Qaeda hijackers to kill some 3,000 people.” Across the Atlantic, “between 100 and 150 terrorists and their helpers and acolytes were among the three million migrants who stole over European borders during the 2014—2017 migrant crisis,” not only resulted in innocent people being ran over, stabbed, decapitated, or shot, but also cost the European economies approximately 90 billion Euros between 2013 and 2016.

The Cato Institute frequently likes to point out that “zero people have been killed or injured in attacks on U.S. soil committed by terrorists who illegally crossed the Southwest border.” Bensman, of course, realizes that such claims are deeply misleading. Not only do they ignore the cautionary tale of Europe’s recent experience, but also complacently disregard two decades of hard work by our homeland security apparatus. And, as demonstrated by the case of Abdulahi Hasan Sharif, who committed a terrorist attack in neighboring Canada, the threat is always there. Sharif, a Somali man, snuck into the U.S. illegally in 2011, later received asylum in Canada, and, in 2017, struck – while waving an ISIS flag – in a stabbing and vehicle-ramming attack injuring five people in Edmonton. That is why the covert counterterrorist border war must continue.

Then there is also the danger of MS-13 and similar brutal and violent gangs entering through our southwestern border. A case can indeed be made to classify them as de facto terrorist organizations. Although they are not waging political, ideological, or religious war, gangs such as MS-13 – whose motto is “kill, steal, rape, control” – have certainly killed and terrorized many people on U.S. soil.

So, if the threat of infiltration by terrorists (and other “bad guys”) via the southwestern border is real, why the pushback from the usual suspects every time it is mentioned? As Bensman explains, “this predictable cycle of claim-rebuttal testifies to the notion’s sheer latent political power. Were the assertion ever to be decided as true, it would unleash tougher national immigration policy that would negatively impact a broad diversity of stakeholders that *want* illegal Hispanic immigration, even need it—agribusiness, the non-profit migrant advocacy industry, foreign governments dependent on remittance money, and US politicians interested in the Latino vote, not to mention the immigrants themselves.”

While *America’s Covert Border War* was written before Joe Biden unleashed a migrant crisis on our southwestern border – by essentially opening up the floodgates – it is important for Americans to see beyond the self-interested chatter of pro-mass-migration advocates. That’s because de facto open borders, “catch and release,” and an overwhelmed border security system are viewed as an invitation and an opportunity not only by economic migrants, but also bad actors ranging from criminals to terrorists.