

Border Battles: Scapegoating Immigrants Isn't New

By [Greg Guma](#)

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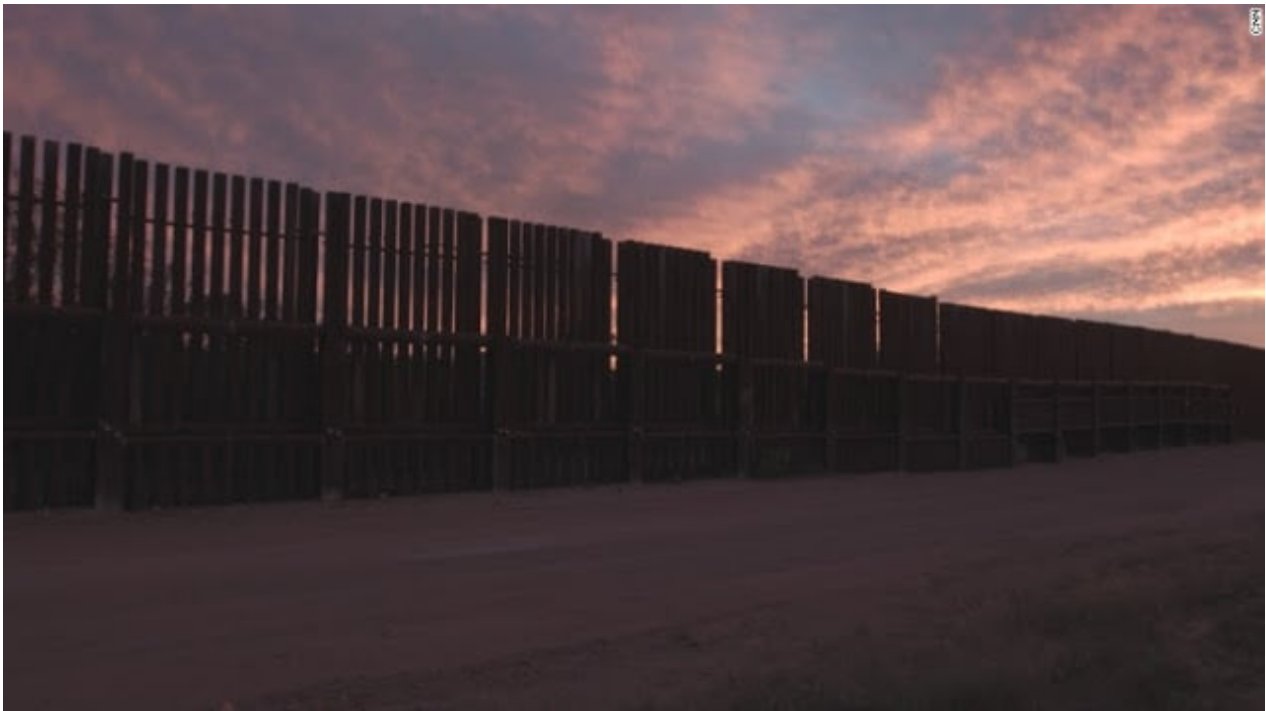
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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*This isn't the first time that the US has been in the grip of an anti-immigrant fever. Twenty year ago, for example, then-California Gov. **Pete Wilson** announced that undocumented pregnant women should be denied prenatal care. His underlying message then was clear, brutal and similar to what we're hearing today: If you're "illegal," get out of our country!*

That was also a dangerous time for immigrants, marked by resurgent racism, increased police brutality, vigilante violence, and rationalization of virtually any attack. In other words, we've been here before.



Anti-immigrant activists predictably deny charges of racism. But the facts tell a different story. Almost unlimited numbers of immigrants from mostly white, European countries are allowed into the US, while Latin Americans and Africans rarely even get tourist visas. And although sweatshops that employ undocumented workers are condemned, they aren't often shut down. They're merely raided, resulting in deportations. The owners may be fined but they still come out ahead. After all, deported workers can't collect back wages.

In the early 1980s, low intensity conflict (LIC) theorists constructed a Los Angeles insurrection scenario requiring a military response and sealing the nearby border. A decade later, the Border Patrol played a key role in the L.A. riots of 1992, deployed in Latino communities and arresting more than 1,000 people. Afterward, the INS began work with the Pentagon's Center for Low-Intensity Conflict. The line between civilian and military

operations was largely erased.

Throughout the 1990s, Human Rights Watch accused the US Border Patrol of routinely abusing people, citing a pattern of beatings, shootings, rapes, and deaths. In response, INS detainees in a private jail rioted in June 1995 after being tortured by guards. After 9/11, the federal government considered placing US soldiers along the Mexican border.

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But efforts to curtail immigration through tighter security did little but redirect the flow into the most desolate areas of the border, increasing the mortality rate of those crossing. Between 1998 and 2004, at least 1,900 people died trying to cross the US-Mexico border. Arizona became the main entry point for undocumented immigrants and an estimated 460,000 lived in the state. Since then, however, that total has dropped by at least 100,000.

Since the 2007-2009 Great Recession, more Mexican immigrants have returned to their homeland than have migrated to the US, according to the Pew Research Center. The decline results from factors including weakened job opportunities, tougher border enforcement, a long-term decline in Mexico's birth rates, and an improving Mexican economy.

More than 150 years ago, at the end of a two-year war between Mexico and the US, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Many Latinos still feel that the treaty, accepted under pressure by a corrupt dictator, was an act of theft violating international law. Mexico surrendered half its territory — now the Southwestern US — and most of the Mexicans who stayed in the ceded region ultimately lost their land.

In a sense, that war never ended. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, US officials, working closely with white settlers and elites, used often-violent means to subdue Mexicans in the region.

Once the region was “pacified,” border enforcement became a tool to regulate the flow of labor into the US. With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, the Border Patrol emerged as gatekeeper of a “revolving door,” sometimes processing immigrant labor, sometimes cracking down. The Bracero Program, which brought in Mexican agricultural laborers, was followed (and overlapped by) Operation Wetback, an INS-run military offensive against immigrant workers.

The border is still a battlefield. During recent decades, government strategies for combating undocumented immigration and drug trafficking have re-militarized the region. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) meshed neatly with more obvious aspects of low-intensity conflict doctrine. The definition of immigration and drug trafficking as “national security” issues brought state-of-the-art military approaches into domestic affairs.

But just as the projection of a “communist menace” was a smokescreen for post-war expansionism, a “Brown wave,” the “Drug War,” and “radical Islamic” terrorism have been used as pretexts for military-industrial penetration.

LIC doctrine uses diverse tactics — from the subtle and psychological (“winning hearts and minds”) to the obvious and brutal. Such flexibility requires the most sophisticated tools available, and the integration of police, paramilitary, and military forces. It also requires a plausible “enemy” — in this case, immigrants who can be accused of almost anything.

In this kind of war, borders are ultimately unimportant. Battles are waged everywhere, even in communities far from a frontier. This blurs the line between police and the military, and further threatens basic rights.

Nevertheless, Latinos will soon be the largest minority group in the US, according to Census Bureau predictions: at least 44 million, or 15 percent of the nation’s population. Although the biggest expansion will occur in states that draw the most immigrants — California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey — the spill-over will reach from Atlanta to Minneapolis and Washington state. California is expected to undergo the most dramatic transformation — to at least 50 percent Latino and possibly only 32 percent white by 2040.

Overall, immigration is fueling US population growth, and the Census Bureau predicts a tripling of the Hispanic and Asian populations in less than 50 years. While the number of whites may increase by seven percent, the three largest minorities — Hispanic, Black, and Asian — are expected to rise by 188, 71, and 213 percent respectively. The bottom line is that these three groups are expected to constitute at least 47 percent of total US population by 2050. While such forecasts certainly have much to do with the current anti-immigrant climate, the trend won’t be reversed by race-motivated legislation or even a wall.

Low-intensity war against non-white immigrants is expanding, especially along the US-Mexico border, and takes many forms: militarization, criminalizing the undocumented, repressive legislation, human rights violations, and cruel, discriminatory attacks on children and the poor.

With the rise of Donald Trump and a renewed anti-immigrant movement, the choice facing

the nation has become stark, between what Mexican author Jose Vasconcelos once called *Universopolis* – a place in which all the peoples of the world are melded into a “cosmic race” – and the *Blade Runner* scenario.

In *Blade Runner*, a prescient 1982 film, Los Angeles in the 21st century has become an ominous “world city” marked by cultural fusion and economic stratification, a sunless and polluted place, overcrowded with Asian and Latino drones who barely look up at the metal fortresses of the rich. That option is basically an advanced imperialist state.

Like Vasconcelos, author Salman Rushdie envisions a more optimistic, multicultural alternative. Immigrants may not so much assimilate as leak into one another, he suggests, “like flavors when you cook.”

Of course, this is precisely what frightens many Trump supporters. For them the USA is hot dogs and apple pie, and they show little interest in expanding their diets.

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