



Border Security

The Border Wall and Policies as Simulacrum and Spectacle: Transborderisms and Security before and after COVID-19 in the Rio Grande Valley

Terence M. Garrett (United States)

Utilizing French Situationist theorists, this piece analyzes and examines border policies and the wall. Jean Baudrillard's *simulacrum* may help us come to a fuller understanding of the meaning of the border wall and the security apparatus utilized by the United States. Briefly put, a simulacrum is an image that has multiple meanings for people encountering the phenomenon: in this case, the border wall. The simulacrum of the border wall as a representation of security is promoted by the US government through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its agencies as well as by elected officials, interest groups promoting the security apparatus for financial reasons, and news media. Additionally, this is an analysis of Debord's *spectacle* concept and how it applies to Biden border security policies. COVID-19, the border wall, and affective policies have effectively stopped migration along the US-Mexico border because of the border security *apparatus* (based on Agamben 2009). In contrast, Iglesias-Prieto's *transborderisms* are images of overcoming the militarization of border walls and associated policies. It is within our power to transcend the oppression of the border wall simulacrum and border spectacles

OPPOSITE: Dog sleeping under a Border Patrol nit in the Southmost area of Brownsville, Texas.

through borderlander empowerment, and to advocate for openness and ending the division of communities. In this piece I examine the struggle of openness for borderlanders (transborderism) versus the border security apparatus during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Border Wall as Simulacrum: Security before and after COVID-19

Garrett and Storbeck (2011) first applied the simulacrum concept that will be further explained below. The simulacrum of the border wall as a representation of security is promoted by the US government (US presidents, members of Congress, etc.), state governments, interest groups promoting the security apparatus for financial reasons (government contracts), and news media. It is also prominently promoted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its constitutive agencies—for our discussion, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and US Border Patrol (USBP), who are also known as the paramilitaries for the security apparatus.

The simulacrum of the border wall has gone through change since 2011. The US was at that time under the presidency of Barack Obama and Mexico under the presidency of Felipe Calderón. Obama won a second term and left office in 2017 (succeeded by Donald Trump), while Mexico had the subsequent presidencies of Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Presidents Trump and López Obrador agreed to halt the increased migration, particularly of children and families from Central America that were fleeing economic and political calamities. In so doing, AMLO built up the border infrastructure between Guatemala and Mexico. Policies in the US pre-COVID-19 (under the Trump administration) were directed at these

refugee seekers and migrants primarily from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and included the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), Zero Tolerance Policy (ZTP), and Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACA)—all designed to halt or discourage migrants from coming to the United States. The number of migrants allowed to enter the United States was restricted under these policies and led to an increasing number of them that made it through Mexico to the US border, only to remain in northern Mexico cities living in squalid conditions. When allowed to cross the border, refugees were placed in detention centers in the US, often with families being separated.

This situation lasted until November 2018—when a pilot project of ZTP was conducted in El Paso, Texas, by the Trump administration, with the MPP being fully implemented by DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in January 2018. By early April 2018, ZTP became the official stance of the Trump administration whereby children were separated from their parents when entering the border without going through designated border crossing checkpoints. This policy resulted in children being sent through the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, then to various detention centers operated by private enterprise and nonprofit vendors throughout the United States. The parents under MPP/ZTP were mostly expelled from the United States, and several thousand migrants were deported without their children. The ZTP “ended” on June 20, 2018, when human rights groups organized resistance, and lawsuits by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) were successful stopping the ZTP on an official basis. But in 2020, Title 42 gave the Trump administration an excuse to completely halt migration under the declaration of a state of emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic. However, the ZTP continued covertly during the final years of the Trump administration until the Biden administration took office on January 20, 2021. The new president ended ZTP by executive order on January 27, 2021 (Narea, 2021), and halted the construction of the border wall, which was being built with funds taken from the Department of Defense and other agencies. Biden announced the termination of “the national

emergency declared by Proclamation 9844, and continued on February 13, 2020 (85 Fed. Reg. 8715), and January 15, 2021.” He also declared that the authorities invoked in that proclamation would “no longer be used to construct a wall at the southern border.” MPP and ACA were subsequently suspended as well. The border wall simulacrum and the security apparatus were altered and affected by these policy changes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The border wall as *simulacrum*. Perceptual constructions of images: Trump administration through COVID19 to Biden

1. *It [the image] is the reflection of a profound reality; (the image is a good appearance)*
 - The border fence is the image of homeland security. (Calling the border structure a “wall” or a “fence” is a signifier as to how the person views *it* as an image). *Migrants and Asylum Seekers view the border wall as a beacon—meaning the wall in Texas represents a marker that is in US territory, where asylum claims may be made.*
2. *It masks and denatures a profound reality; (it is an evil appearance)*
 - The border wall is the image of oppression: *Borderlanders lose commerce and land for more walls, and are unable to traverse the border: Border Crossers are stopped completely, deported immediately, and/or have children taken from them.*
3. *It masks the absence of a profound reality:* The border fence/wall gives the impression of a sense of security at the expense of those victimized by its presence in the lower Rio Grande Valley/Río Bravo, leading to a loss of their security.
4. *It has no relation to any reality whatsoever:* The border fence in its eighteen- or thirty-foot-high physical construction does not lead to real security (if it is at all

completely possible). Agents on the ground, electronic surveillance methods, better international immigration and national security policies have proven more effective.

5. *It is its own pure simulacrum.* The simulacrum or “hyperreal” becomes real. The border fence/wall becomes a manifestation of “security” based on the fears of another “9/11” or more migrant caravans by placing a physical structure to impede or stop “illegal immigration”/terrorism. In reality, it represents a porous and temporary barrier to delay crossing into the United States by border crossers. Combined with Title 42 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the border wall is used as an instrument attracting asylum seekers but which the CBP and USBP utilize to expel border crossers under the Trump administration, and ACA flights continued after suspension. With the Biden administration, unaccompanied minors are allowed into US territory. *Source:* (Originally based on Figure 2, Garrett and Storbeck, 2011; Garrett, 2018; Garrett, 2020b). Adapted by the authors from (Baudrillard, 2006; Noe, 2002). Adapted and updated by Garrett in 2021 for this book.

The simulacrum of the border wall has been reinforced most recently since the inauguration of President Biden by various spectacles. These have truncated the rights and livelihoods of borderlanders along the Rio Grande all the way to the Pacific in California.

Spectacles during the Biden Administration: Refugee “Surge,” Ted’s Cruise, Chatty Coyotes, and Kamala Harris to the Rescue

In the first one hundred days of his administration, President Joe Biden had to deal with national security crises in the form of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the problem of an increased number of refugees and asylum seekers,

mostly from the northern triangle countries and southern Mexico (Garrett, 2020a). The border security apparatus appears to be in peril, with a developing narrative that the US is about to be overrun and that Biden’s policies are to be blamed. We analyze and assess the border media spectacle and other spectacles as they pertain to US migration and security policies post-Trump and during the current Biden administration.

Spectacles

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. – Source: Guy Debord, 1967, Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Black & Red, 1977.

The Spectacle of the Surge

There is a recent uptick in terms of the numbers of border crossers making their way primarily from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (the Northern Triangle countries) and southern Mexico. However, political scientists from the University of California at San Diego who track border crossers on the US-Mexico border have made the case that there are two major reasons for the increase: 1. Pent up demand after Title 42 restrictions (because of COVID 19), MPP, ZTP, etc., as holdover restrictive and expulsion policies from Biden’s predecessor; and 2. Global climate change, as there were two hurricanes hitting Central America—Eta and Iota—within two weeks in November 2022, with 7 million people in need of assistance (Beaubien, 2020), causing political and economic upheaval—creating refugees. *The Washington Post* reported :

In fiscal year 2021, it appears that migrants are continuing to enter the United States in the same numbers as in fiscal year 2019—plus the pent-up demand from people who would have come in fiscal year 2020,

but for the pandemic. . . . The blue trend line for the five months of data available for fiscal year 2021 (October, November, December, January, and February) neatly reflects the trend line for fiscal year 2019—plus the difference between fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2019. . . . This suggests that Title 42 expulsions delayed prospective migrants rather than deterred them—and they’re arriving now (Wong, deRoche, Venzor March 25, 2021, para. 10-11).

These factors are contributing to the increase of refugees and asylum seekers—not because Biden is president and more “permissive,” as these problems were already causing an influx of border crossers on their way to the US-Mexico border. The other aspect of the “surge crisis” is that human smugglers are using social media, mostly Facebook and WhatsApp, to recruit border crossers with the allegation that Biden will essentially welcome them (Ainsley and Martinez, 2021).

Ted’s cruise spectacle

In the following section, we see another media spectacle taking place involving Texas senators and their Republican colleagues in the US Senate. By all appearances, the spectacle was designed to evoke outrage against the Biden administration in an attempt to show that President Biden is weak on border security and uncaring about the plight of the border crossers in the midst of a “humanitarian crisis.”

In order to gin up excitement for the Trumpian-GOP base by demonstrating how dangerous the Rio Grande is during the current migrant surge, Senator Rafael “Ted” Cruz organized a riverboat “cruise” for eighteen US Senators. The spectacle was designed to invoke fear of the migrant hordes crossing into Texas. This is indicated in part by a tweet from @SenateGOP on March 26, 2021:

Senate Republicans
@SenateGOP
1:00AM on our southern border.
18 Senators are here with Border Patrol on their night shift.
We saw the massive influx of migrant crossings.

Countless women + children.
We were heckled by cartels.
This is a humanitarian crisis.
And Joe Biden needs to address it immediately.

As shown in this tweet, the spectacle of the border “crisis” is used by Biden’s opponents as political fodder to embarrass him and his administration. The senators were also apparently heckled by cartels and supported by the US Border Patrol in their endeavor. Here is yet another example of the society of the spectacle, whereby migrants are commodified and fetishized to score political points against an adversary.

The spectacle of the chatty coyote

In one of the more bizarre spectacles that’s taken place recently at the Rio Grande, CNN’s reporter, Ed Lavandera, takes a boat loaded with film crew along a heavily manned and panopticed section of the Rio Grande on March 13, 2021. Lavandera begins his narrative with “On the banks of the Rio Grande near the south Texas city of Hidalgo, dozens of undocumented migrants—mostly women and young children—descended a hill on the Mexican side of the border in an orderly procession” (para. 1). Lavandera and his crew show a human smuggler, also known as a coyote, ferrying dozens of mostly Hondurans and a few other Central Americans to the Texas side of the river from Mexico at least six times during the time they were filming them (Lavandera, et al., 2021). Lavandera et al. further noted that in the video clip, there was a very indiscreet, noisy coyote paddling the raft loaded with border crossers, speaking with familiarity to others greeting the raft on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. This transpired in broad daylight near where the US Border Patrol and Customs and Border Protection were located. Neither the USBP nor CBP ever appeared on the scene.

In essence, a fairly large human smuggling operation was taking place in an area heavily patrolled by CBP/USBP. Also involved in the CNN video was US Border Patrol Council (USBPC) representative Mr. Chris Cabrera, who was interviewed by Lavandera. USBPC and the National

Immigration and Customs Enforcement Council (NICE) were the only two unions in the US federal government who endorsed Trump in 2016 and 2020 for president. Cabrera noted, “We’re overcrowded. We don’t have anywhere to put people.... We have them in our custody and the system has bogged down and there’s no place for us to send them” (para. 17). It looks as if the CNN reporters worked to show the refugee spectacle in full view of the USBP, and that a single spokesman from the border patrol union had an opportunity to criticize the Biden administration.

The Spectacle of Doing Something about the Refugee Situation: Tapping VP Kamala Harris

Due to perceived public pressure, the news media and social media led by partisans began a movement condemning the Biden administration immediately after he rescinded his predecessor’s Migrant Protection Protocols, Zero Tolerance Policy, Asylum Cooperative Agreements, and Title 42 restrictions primarily aimed at the US-Mexico border. The tenuous circumstances for invoking Title 42 by the Trump administration were dubious, in that the time they were put into effect in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was virtually nonexistent in the Northern Triangle region of Central America. The facts at the time were such that CBP/DHS officers were airlifting back to Guatemala Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans who were infected while housed in US detention centers (Garrett, 2020a). Vice President Harris’s experience as a former senator on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and former attorney general and prosecutor in California were deemed appropriate by the Biden administration to lead migration policy under the present “politically perilous” circumstances. The White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, recently stated “The vice president’s role is really focused on the Northern Triangle” (Sullivan and Wootson, 2021, para. 14). Harris is quoted directly as saying “We all know most people like being at home. They like being where they grew up,” Harris said, “They leave because there is a lack of opportunity or it is just not safe” (para. 12). How VP Harris accomplishes this task remains to be seen.



ABOVE: Migrants are fed at a Catholic shelter in Hermosillo, Sonora.

It is difficult for US policymakers to get directly involved in the domestic politics of the Northern Triangle countries largely because there have been so many failures in the past. Dan Restrepo, senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council and former principal adviser to President Obama on issues related to Latin America, offers advice in *The Hill* (March 29, 2021). His “5 immediate migration management steps for Kamala Harris” is an attempt to “[adopt] policies that understand that given the levels of despair migrants are fleeing, it is impossible to dissuade migration. Instead, the United States must urgently address the reasons people are on the move in the first place” (para. 4). The following sums up the advice Restrepo gives VP Harris:

1. The United States must marshal and deploy immediate, large-scale food assistance to those suffering the impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota—two “once-a-century storms” that made landfall fifteen miles and two weeks apart in November 2020.
2. Those suffering from [the hurricanes] are also in need of immediate employment opportunities...[based] on fast disbursing, cash-based programs.

3. The people of the Americas cannot wait for COVID-19 vaccines—and certainly should not wait behind more geographically distant partners. [Mexico and Canada are prioritized] Central America (and the Caribbean) must be next.

4. Potential migrants from the region—people in need of immediate protection, people seeking family reunification and people willing to fill gaps in the US labor market—need alternatives to the dangerous, disordered journey north. Regional protection mechanisms; robust family reunification parole programs; and enhanced temporary labor mechanisms are all within reach but need US leadership to open the way.

5. A strategy of hope requires sending unmistakable signals to the people of northern Central America that the United States stands with them and not with the region's corrupt, predatory elites that treat their fellow citizens as export commodities. [Note: He mentions Honduras's President Juan Orlando Hernandez, in particular, who should be sanctioned] (para. 7-12).

While these may not be the strategies the Biden administration follows, the approach pattern is on a path that Democratic presidential administrations might take.

Recommendations 1-4 above may have a short-term impact beneficial to Central America. Recommendation 5 appears to be typical US foreign policy practice.

Security, Borderlanders and “Transborderism” in the Rio Grande Valley: What Has Been Done, and What Can Be Done?

“Transborderism” is a means for coping with oppressive policies and structures such as the increasing militarization of the US-Mexico border and the subjectification of border crossers and borderlanders by state security apparatuses. This concept was developed by Iglesias-Prieto (2017, 25) to analyze community resistance to the border

industrial complex as she notes, for example, that “we, the thousands of people who cross the border regularly, know from experience that the more interaction there is, the greater the benefits. . . . Transborder dynamics prove daily, and in many ways, that the crossing of people, goods, ideas, languages, and cultures empowers human capabilities. The history of border cities between Mexico and the United States has shown that one can live actively and peacefully without walls.” Human-caring capabilities persist on both sides of the border. Panter-Brick (2021, 1) makes the case for the efficacy of religious organizations—whether Catholic, Quaker, Lutheran, or other denominations—and other nonreligious social justice organizations that make provisions that aid and comfort border crossers suffering from the effects of anti-refugee government practices designed to harass and intimidate. Her work “contributes to a better understanding of how notions of human dignity, justice, and advocacy are articulated by humanitarian actors at the border, a site of striking civic and faith-based resistance to the criminalization of refugee and undocumented communities” (22). Examples in the lower Rio Grande Valley (US) side include Sister Norma Pimentel's Catholic Charities organization (religious) and Team Brownsville (nonsectarian), among numerous others, whose work collectively provides food, water, shelter, travel assistance, and other relief to border crossers based on the concept of social justice—which is not exhibited fully by the state.

Conclusion: Neoliberalism and the Problem of Humanitarianism

The border wall and associated simulacra and spectacles continue to plague US foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. Systemic problems will persist given the policy directions that past US administrations have taken. The border wall is a symbol of oppression along with the other aspects of the security apparatus. The systemic inequities that are institutionalized and in place continue to dominate border crossers and borderlanders. Spectacles on the border take place continuously to reinforce the status quo bor-

der policies. What is particularly interesting about former NSC official Restrepo's immediate migration policy recommendations are that they do not address the long term and militarized border security apparatus, symbolized by the border wall simulacrum, established on the US-Mexico border with the corporate interests who seek profits by creating homo sacer under a now-constant state of exception (see Agamben, 1995, 2005, 2009). The current US "illegal" drug policies that are in place also are not considered. Rather, profits based on human misery are too lucrative, and cheap labor for corporations based on fearful migrants, are fetishized. No real, lasting, humanitarian change for human beings is possible under today's neoliberal US immigration and drug policies. Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* persists—enabling further spectacles on the border as well as elsewhere. With those provisions, borderlanders are left to fill the void of humanitarian assistance based on the transborderism of communities.

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Terrence M. Garrett is Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV).

Security, Our Border, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

José María Ramos (Mexico)

Two key recent historical events—the last year of Donald J. Trump’s presidency and the first three months of Joe Biden’s administration—presented context and security challenges relevant to the US-Mexico border.

We need to identify first a recent paradox that developed since March 2020: “The most important border in the world became closed to Mexican border residents.” Shortly thereafter, on July 1, 2020, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) was ratified and entered into force. A second paradox is that 2021—the year this text was written—marks the twentieth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. A fundamental lesson we learned from these unfortunate events was incorporated into the “multilevel governance model” of the “21st Century Border Policy,” which simultaneously strengthened the anti-terrorist strategy and promoted the agility of border crossings

(of automobiles, merchandise, and commerce in general).

This model of security and development governance could have been applied to promote cross-border cooperation during the peak of the health crisis and could have furthered better control of the pandemic—without suspending border crossings, especially of Mexican people. However, this multilevel governance, which would move toward a border policy that is both secure and sustainable, was not considered by the Trump administration and has not yet been fully considered by the Biden administration.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic under Trump was not adequate. In the case of the border with Mexico, a national security criterion from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) prevailed. The border was closed for border residents, and health cooperation mechanisms were quite limited, even though some of them worked effectively during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. This might explain, to some extent, the increases in the levels of contagion and deaths registered in the US southern border states during the last year of the Trump administration.

From the perspective of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the renewal of the “Joint Statement on US-Mexico Joint Initiative to Combat the COVID-19 Pandemic” (announced on March 2020) was intended to protect the health and safety of US citizens, while maintaining essential trade and travel (DHS, 2020). In practice, tourism and non-essential trade and travel continued for US citizens; they have continued to cross into Mexico with no major restrictions.

In the history of US-Mexico relations, a partial border closure with the current characteristics had never been established in the past. And it remains unclear exactly what are the cross-border health cooperation mechanisms envisioned in the US-Mexico Joint Initiative to Combat the COVID-19 pandemic of March 2020.

Unlike the excellent cross-border cooperation in the framework of the 2009 H1N1 epidemic (Lee, 2020), today—with a more complex pandemic situation—the CDC’s decision was to limit cooperation (CDC, 2020). This