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The Atlantic Monthly | May 2006

BOOKS & CRITICS

BOOKS

EXODUS*The ominous push and pull of the U.S.–Mexico border*

BY MARC COOPER

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On January 6, celebrated as Three Kings Day in Mexico, the flow of border crossers heading north restarts its annual cycle. So when I arrive on the following Wednesday in the dusty, gritty Sonoran Desert town of Altar, two hours south of the border via a liver-jostling dirt road, the local merchants couldn't be more delighted. I have been to Altar before. And on this trip, I can readily agree with the local street entrepreneurs and hustlers that this year's crossing season, barely in its third day, looks to be as bountiful and profitable as ever—in spite of an also cyclical uproar, north of the border, over illegal immigration. Once an anonymous bus stop on Mexico's Route 2, Altar—a diesel-marinated ten-block grid of around 10,000 people—has become the primary staging area for Mexican migrants before they make their desperate bounce across the border. And the town's entire commercial life rests on this singular enterprise.

All around the central plaza that skirts the butternut-colored colonial-era church, small groups—mostly men, mostly young, mostly dressed in dark clothing and running shoes, though there are also some women with babies in their arms—await contact with the *coyote* or *pollero* who has promised to push them through a treacherous but in many ways invisible membrane from which they will emerge, almost magically, on the other side as our carpenters, gardeners, waiters, pickers, pluckers, and nannies. The going rate, door-to-door, from the fields of Veracruz or Oaxaca to the orange orchards of Florida or to a Brentwood kitchen: about \$1,500. No need, even, to pay it all in advance: installments, with interest, will be drawn from future income.

On the streets adjoining the plaza, tiny, airless shops selling phone cards and converting currency are doing brisk business, as are the occasional youth gangs, who find few other places in Mexico where so many people

**Down by the River:
Drugs, Money,
Murder, and Family**
by Charles Bowden
Simon and Schuster

**The Devil's Highway:
A True Story**
by Luis Alberto Urrea
Little, Brown

**By the Lake of
Sleeping Children:
The Secret Life of the
Mexican Border**
by Luis Alberto Urrea
Little, Brown

**Illegals: The
Imminent Threat
Posed by Our
Unsecured U.S.-
Mexico Border**
by Jon E. Dougherty
WND Books

**Whatever It Takes:
Illegal Immigration,
Border Security, and
the War on Terror**
by Congressman J. D.
Hayworth with Joseph J. Eule

are walking around with so much folding money in their pockets. Other Mexican migrants fleeing the impoverished south operate a warren of kiosks and stands, offering up for sale everything needed to ease the perilous crossing ahead: plastic gallon jugs of water; plastic baggies of combs, toothbrushes, aspirin tablets, and lip balm; dark jeans; black windbreakers; hooded sweatshirts; athletic shoes; baseball caps; bandanas; backpacks; and the black woolen ski masks favored by the salaried guides who lead the walkers across the desert. Also for sale are black plastic trash bags—\$3 each—to be wrapped around the body; they’re said to foil the heat-seeking sensors that the U.S. Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security have stitched into the other side of *la linea*. One Oaxacan vendor shows off a black cap with an embroidered green cannabis leaf. “They buy this one a lot,” he says. “I tell them I don’t think it’s the best one to wear.”

introduction by Sean Hannity
Regnery Publishing

A few yards away, the Red Cross has just opened its first-aid trailer for this year’s season, and its advice is also readily spurned. “I tell them that they run a great risk,” says uniformed paramedic Amado Arellano. He even shows them a colorful but macabre wall map—provided by the Tucson-based Humane Borders group—that marks every spot where a migrant has died in the desert. Hundreds of fatal red dots cluster just above the border. “We try to tell them not to go,” he says. “But no one listens. The necessity is too great.” Right beside the medical trailer snakes a line—sometimes twenty or thirty vehicles long—of battered windowless ten-seater vans, their seats torn out and replaced with benches that allow twenty-seven, even thirty, passengers to be crammed in. These shuttle operations—charging an average of \$10 a head—are some of the more lucrative businesses in Altar, and their overloaded vans rumble up the same rocky road I’ve just come down. The destination of “Sasabe” is written with washable white marker on the sides of the vans. They might be more honestly labeled “California” or “North Carolina” or “Texas,” as no sane person would voluntarily travel to the grim, unpaved Mexican border hamlet of Sasabe—except to use it as a location for a Robert Rodriguez movie or, more likely, as the final stepping stone over the line. By midday, the vans are departing with the perpetual rhythm of Disneyland people-carriers zipping into the Haunted House. Approximately 40,000 migrants per month make this trip through and out of Altar.

Accompanied by Jorge Solchaga, a thirty-eight-year-old diplomat who works with the Mexican consulate in Phoenix, I walk through a nameless tortilla shop on a side street off the plaza, out its back door, and into a brick-and-cement courtyard teeming with people getting ready to cross. This is one of Altar’s countless unregulated and ill-named “guest houses”—tenement flops that offer nothing except a body-sized patch of floor for \$5 or \$6 a night. On one side of the cramped courtyard, workmen plaster together an add-on to the tenement; its owners clearly realize that they are part of a growth industry. A rickety iron staircase leads us to some second-floor lodgings, a bare twenty-by-twenty-foot room in which about fifty people have put down their sleeping mats and backpacks.

In the courtyard once more, Solchaga spots a dark-skinned girl with a nursing-age infant in her lap. She stares at the ground as Solchaga gently warns her that she is about to put her life and that of her child at risk. When he presses her on the dangers, she barely nods. Almost inaudibly she says that she’s twenty, but she looks five years younger and somewhat terrified. However, the die is cast. She’s given up everything back home and will be heading out into a new world within a few minutes. “Make sure your husband carries three extra gallons of water for you, you hear?” Solchaga says, nodding to the man sitting behind her. As we exit the flop, Solchaga tells me that the blank look in that girl’s eyes will surely haunt him. One of his jobs at the consulate is to process the deaths of Mexicans in the United States. Three years ago in Altar, he tells me, he warned another nursing mother not to make the crossing, and less than a week later, when a call came in to his Arizona office requesting him to help identify a “fatality” that had been found in the desert, he recognized the same young woman. “This is my job, and I am used to it,” he says. Last year he processed the deaths of

219 Mexicans in the Phoenix area; some were migrants who had wandered in the desert for eight or nine days before their souls and bodies burned out. “It’s the young women I never forget,” he says, shrugging his shoulders.

The night before my trip to Altar, I had dinner with the Tucson-based journalist Charles Bowden, author of more than fifteen books, most of them set along the border. In perhaps his most acclaimed work, *Down by the River*, certainly a must-read for anyone researching the border, Bowden describes the poverty that swamps even the more prosperous Mexican border cities and that relentlessly churns the human flow northward. “Over there,” he writes of Ciudad Juárez, just across from El Paso, Texas,

most of the streets are unpaved, two thirds of the houses lack any sewage connection. At least 200,000 people in the city live as squatters ... At least 35,000 more poor people descend on Juárez each year. Or sixty thousand, no one is sure. They take jobs at \$3 to \$5 a day that cannot sustain them.

When they realize that it’s only the width of a river—or a twelve-foot wall, or three strands of cattle wire, or a three-day walk, for that matter—that separates them from a First World economy and some reasonable chance at a future, they push north. “The Mexican border is the only place,” Bowden writes, “where the cyberspace world of a major economy rubs up against a world of raw sewage and mud huts. The world of mud is failing to sustain its people.”

Writing *Down by the River* with a feverish intensity, stringing his phrasings out like bursts of angry jazz, Bowden describes the borderlands as a violent netherworld where both Mexico and the United States can flaunt their most unappealing aspects. Concentrating on the front line of the endless and fruitless war on drugs, he captures the barbaric and bloody energy generated when—and where—the north’s insatiable pull for drugs meets the coke, cash, and corruption pushing up from the south. For Bowden, the same inexorable law of supply and demand explains the flow of human cargo—of illegal immigrants.

With an estimated 11-to-1 manufacturing wage differential between the two countries (some experts put the agricultural wage gap at twice that), why is anyone shocked by what’s happening? “You’re looking at the biggest story of our lives,” Bowden told me over dinner. “This is the largest cross-border human migration in history.” Though rarely, if ever, posed in those terms, the staggering numbers tend to bolster Bowden’s sweeping vision. Something like 15 million to 20 million migrants have crossed into the United States over the last two decades. An equal number are expected to do so in the next twenty years. “People aren’t coming here as much as they are leaving a cratered economy,” Bowden said. “The only way you’ll stop Mexicans coming to the U.S. is if you lower American wages to the same level as Vietnam. Someone worth maybe \$100 a month in Mexico who comes to the U.S. becomes a human ATM machine. McCain-Kennedy, Kyl-Cornyn?” he said, referring to the hodge-podge of current immigration-reform proposals. “It’s all bullshit. What we’re seeing is something right out of the Bible. This is an exodus.”

That’s certainly the deep emotional impression I come away with as Solchaga and I depart Altar. An hour up the road back toward the border, all vehicles are stopped at a checkpoint run by Mexico’s orange-and-blue-uniformed Grupo Beta. Created last decade under U.S. pressure and with some American assistance, the Beta teams were intended to be elite Mexican immigration police that would work in tandem with the U.S. Border Patrol on the other side, to stanch the human flow. Then reality intervened. The Beta teams instead went into business, running

their own lucrative shakedown schemes on the migrants. A few years ago, the Mexican government simply disarmed the Grupo Beta and reorganized it into a sort of community-assistance force for the migrants—seemingly a mix between the Automobile Club and the Eagle Scouts.

On our way up from Altar to the Beta checkpoint called El Tortugo, Solchaga and I count thirty-one vans coming the other way. Something like 900 crossers have been delivered to the border in the previous hour. Now, at the Grupo Beta roadblock, the vans coming behind us are arriving every three or four minutes. As each one arrives, two Beta officers unload the passengers and gather them by the side of the road for a short lecture—sometimes two or three vans' worth at a time. "However long the *pollero* told you it will take, it will take longer," says officer Julio Cesar Cancino. "If they told you it will be a two- or three-day walk, they lied. It will take longer." He advises them, in the event they get scattered, to look for the blue flags that demark water stations set up by American religious activists. Or to look for the red lights on the radio towers on the Mexican side of the border. "Whatever you do, don't run. The *migra*," he says, referring to the Border Patrol in Mexican slang, "isn't there only to arrest you, but also to help you. If you're in trouble, if you're lost and out of water, or if your *pollero* abandons you, go to them for help. But don't run. And don't reach for your pockets."

Like the girl that Solchaga had warned earlier in the day, these groups of crossers don't quite know what to make of this advice. They don't know whether to trust fellow Mexicans in uniform. Isn't endemic corruption one of the reasons they're leaving Mexico, after all? They shuffle their feet and stare down at the ground, or off into the middle distance, and don't look the Grupo Beta officers in the eye. When asked, they quietly tick off their home states: Oaxaca, Veracruz, Puebla, Chiapas, Michoacán. And they aren't shy about their destinations: Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, San Bernardino, Portland, New Jersey. Bowden is right. An exodus, indeed.

Rural, lightly educated, some of them indigenous people who speak only broken Spanish, they wouldn't be able to tell a McCain from a McGillicutty. They don't know, nor do they care, how much the Border Patrol has been reinforced in the past decade, how many millions have been spent in the past five years on new border fences, sensors, stadium lighting, infrared scopes, remote-control cameras, Black Hawk helicopters, and even unmanned aerial drones that will track them—or at least will try. (Almost \$430 million has been invested since 1997 in border technology systems. But a recent audit by the Department of Homeland Security estimated that fewer than 1 percent of the sensor alerts have led to arrests. Most of the alarms are set off by passing trains and cows, producing a massive waste of time. Radar systems that are used to find tunnels under border walls have proved just as ineffective. The longest known tunnel—2,400 feet, near San Diego—was discovered, in late January, because of a tip, not technology.) What difference does it make if this or that House committee has marked up one or another bill, or if Lou Dobbs is back on CNN bloviating about "broken borders," or if some gringos calling themselves Minutemen have camped out in lawn chairs on the other side? All the migrants know is that the young man sitting with them in the van has vowed to get them to the promised land, and that's where they're going. They're aware that the next three or four or more days will be tough—though few know just how tough. But the choice is, maybe, between working a cornfield for \$4 a day in the south or picking grapes in the north for \$60 or \$70. By nightfall, all of the travelers will be moving across the border. The Grupo Beta officers, however, will be withdrawing. As has always been the case, the migrants will be on their own after dusk. "We leave at dark," Officer Cancino tells me. He points to the myriad bullet holes in the twisted road sign reading EL TORTUGO. "After that, it's way too dangerous."

Making the crossing ever more dangerous seems to be about the only tangible result of U.S. border policy in the past decade. In 1994, the Clinton administration—fearing the political repercussions after the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 passed in California—implemented a

“prevention through deterrence” border program. One after another, the traditional urban crossing points, near San Diego, Nogales, and El Paso, were simply blockaded and more or less shut down. Military-sounding campaigns like Operation Gatekeeper, Operation Hold-the-Line, Operation Safeguard, and Operation Rio Grande didn’t do much to keep the migrants out of the United States. But driving them away from border cities got them—for a while, at least—out of the news. Historic and decades-old human streams were rerouted from California and Texas and funneled into the relatively unpopulated, inhospitable terrain along the Arizona border. Out of sight. Out of mind. Again, for a time.

No one was actually deterred, but more people died. Since the early 1990s, whatever the official policy, the Border Patrol has made about a million “apprehensions” per year (the number of detainees this past year was almost identical to that of 1993). And every year about half as many people—500,000 or so—elude arrest and make it across. But in 1994, the year of the Clinton clampdown, a total of twenty-three migrants died attempting passage. That number climbed to average 300 a year in the late 1990s and has topped 400 annually since 2000. Last year’s toll set a new record: nearly 500, more than half of them in south-central Arizona.

At the same time that the United States was blocking the border arteries, its trade policies were only increasing the pressure on Mexicans to leave their country. Before the 1993 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, only about 2.5 million undocumented Mexicans were living in the United States. Since then, by conservative estimates, the number has more than doubled. With all barriers dropped on the inflow of cheap American agricultural products, over a million Mexican subsistence farmers have been wiped out, and left with no choice but to head north. And the NAFTA boom for Mexican industrial workers, promised by the Clinton administration, never materialized. Over the past decade, wages for Mexican factory workers have actually declined.

The single most compelling, lucid, and lyrical contemporary account of the absurdity of U.S. border policy is Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Devil’s Highway*, a 2005 Pulitzer finalist for general nonfiction. Urrea writes with the clarity of a world-class journalist, the sensibilities of a poet, and the insight of a Mexican born in the purgatory of Tijuana but raised and educated in the United States. His terrifying and meticulously researched narrative reconstructs the tragic trek of twenty-six men, mostly Veracruz subsistence farmers, who in May 2001 tried to cross into southern Arizona along the legendary and brutal patch known as the Devil’s Highway. Led astray by three confused and frightened guides, fourteen of them—who came to be known as the Yuma 14—perished in the heat. The twelve survivors were found in a grotesque state, as if they were being broiled. Many of the group’s members had passed through Altar; one of their teenage guides hailed from Sasabe. Consular official Jorge Solchaga told me he spent days “camped out” in the Pima County coroner’s office, overseeing the gruesome task of identifying the sun-charred corpses and arranging for their shipment back to Mexico. “They are embalmed, then placed in a cloth-covered wooden casket,” Urrea writes of the processing of the recovered bodies of Mexican migrants.

This undertaking costs \$650. If they are to be flown home, the “air-tray” to hold the casket costs an extra \$50. The Mexican consulates pay for the embalming, and other parties—sometimes the governments of the walkers’ home states—pay for the flights. For more than 80 percent of the dead, it is the most expensive gift they have ever gotten.

The same sense of foreboding inevitability that marks Bowden’s attitude pervades Urrea’s storytelling. In his earlier and equally luminous nonfiction work *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, Urrea takes us into the stinking, rotting heart of the Tijuana municipal dump. Here an entire

community, dedicated to squeezing a living out of the rubbish, has mushroomed. On one storm-ravaged day, the dump floods and the washing walls of water erode the surrounding banks. Improvised children's coffins, made of cardboard boxes, slide loose and break apart, and hungry seagulls pick away at the remains. The lake of sleeping children. Immersed knee-deep in this ghastly stew, Urrea taunts us:

Proposition 187? A new Berlin Wall at the border? California citizen identification cards? ... You think they're going to work? You think they can possibly work? Swim in this lake for a minute, then tell me you can keep these people on its shore. Jump in—you own it: it's Lake Nafta.

In *The Devil's Highway*, Urrea cuts through the prevailing mythologies surrounding the border and reveals, unsentimentally but with compassion, how a simple political boundary manages to scramble the basic humanity of all whose lives it divides and defines. He shows enormous sympathy for the world-weary Border Patrol agents who delight in calling their prey “tonks”—the sound made by a government-issue flashlight crashing on a skull—but who will later, at their own personal expense, build a rescue beacon to save the lives of future tonks. The twelve Mexican survivors of the doomed crossing party, meanwhile, are described as not only happy to be alive but also rather relishing the perks and comforts offered by the U.S. government in exchange for their cooperation in the criminal case against one of their hapless guides:

The survivors were suddenly paid professional narrators. At the beginning of their federal jobs, they were paid in room and board. They got cheap shoes and pants. T-shirts. As they sang, they learned they could get job advancement. Even a substantial raise. Like all good bards, they embellished and expanded their narratives ... It was the new millennium's edition of the American Dream.

While Urrea's sympathies are clearly with the walkers, he refuses to make martyrs of them, just as he balks at demonizing their pursuers. Instead, he casts them all in the drama of a global economy whose ominous pushes and pulls defy the logic of laws, policies, and even climate. What wasn't wholly predictable about the deaths of the Yuma 14? The walkers were consumed at the onset of what is now known as the yearly “death season”—May through July, when Arizona temperatures float in the triple digits. Urrea writes:

It is then that lettuce, tomatoes, cu-cumbers, oranges, strawberries are all ready to be picked. Arkansas chickens are ready to be plucked. Cows are waiting in Iowa and Nebraska to be ground into hamburger, and grills are ready in McDonald's and Burger King and Wendy's and Taco Bell for the ground meat to be cooked. KFC is waiting for its Mexican-plucked, Mexican-slaughtered chickens to be fried by Mexicans. And the western desert is waiting, too—its temperatures soaring, a fryer in its own right.

The deaths of the Yuma 14, coming at a time when migrant fatalities were spiking, brought the border issue back into public view—at least for those who cared to notice at all. These “unintended consequences” of the Clinton-era lockdown—grisly border deaths and no letup in crossings, and all the bad publicity thereof—sparked some transitory hope that an obsolete policy of denial would be replaced by something more pragmatic. In early 2001, newly elected Presidents Bush and Fox publicly hinted that some grand, historic immigration compromise was in the making. In the summer of 2001, Mexico's then-Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda told me and others that he was confidently pushing for the “whole enchilada”—an agreement that would provide a legal channel for Mexican

guest workers and that would also “normalize” the millions of Mexicans already working and living in the United States without legal status.

September 11 blew away that early optimism, and reforming immigration and border policies once again became politically taboo. Until January 2004, that is, when President Bush, his eye cast on a growing Latino electorate and his administration under pressure from a worker-starved business lobby, rekindled the debate by again publicly calling for a guest-worker deal and by strongly suggesting that something should be done to legalize those already here. An odd-bedfellows coalition stretching from John McCain to Ted Kennedy, from the Chamber of Commerce to the AFL-CIO, was in place to support the reform call. They all agreed that control of the border was imperative. But that could realistically be achieved, they argued, only if future migrants could enter legally, and if the “illegals” already here could be recognized, perhaps pay a fine, and then be given formal papers.

The initiative in the political fight, however, was taken by the reactionary flank of Bush’s own party. No way were they going to go along with what they called an “amnesty” for the illegals already here, nor let the doors be flung open to even more Mexican immigrants. The rise of the Minutemen, the blasts of openly xenophobic AM talk radio even in cosmopolitan outposts like Los Angeles, the emergence of a fiercely anti-immigrant fringe House caucus led by Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo, sounded a new border war. Bush, fearing a split among his own base, quietly retreated on the issue, and left the field wide open for a nativist resurgence.

While the market features no current pro-immigration manifesto, a panoply of books are now cashing in on the restrictionist fever. Jon E. Dougherty’s *Illegals: The Imminent Threat Posed by Our Unsecured U.S.–Mexico Border* perfectly reproduces the Minuteman meme that America is quickly being consumed by Mexico, which secretly plans a “*reconquista*,” the re-incorporation of the Southwest into Mexico. Dougherty even puts forward the novel notion that America isn’t really a country of immigrants. “Despite ethnic diversity,” he writes,

most Americans can trace their roots to America, and America alone, for several generations. We’ve never lived anywhere else. Our parents have never lived anywhere else. Many of our grandparents didn’t, either. As such, most of us have deep cultural, spiritual and social ties to this nation—despite a desire by certain quarters to hyphenate us along ethnic lines.

One thing Dougherty’s got right, even if he overdramatizes it, is that the historic migration we are witnessing is radically remaking American culture, producing what some call, in a new twist on an old term, a “Los Angelization” of the country. More and more neighborhoods, even some entire towns, are now predominantly Spanish-speaking. Other areas are officially bilingual. In a number of big cities—starting with Los Angeles—some of the highest-rated radio shows and TV news programs are Spanish-language. Salsa replaces ketchup as our favorite condiment. More-densely immigrant neighborhoods—especially if the immigrants are low-paid and undocumented—produce pockets of deep poverty, and of crime. A ZIP code in California’s Central Valley—brimming with predominantly Mixtec field workers—houses more people living in concentrated poverty than any other in the country. Another precinct, near downtown Los Angeles and home to tens of thousands of Salvadorans, is one of the most crowded neighborhoods in America and is ravaged by drugs.

Illegal immigrants contribute work, pay a share of taxes (which can’t be refunded), and stimulate consumerism. They also pressure and overload hospitals, schools, and jails, something that local governments—unreimbursed, for the most part, by a federal government that closes its eyes to these

realities—can't afford. Liberals don't know whether to celebrate this diversity or to minimize it for fear of a backlash. Conservatives, for the most part, have made up their minds—especially those who live closest to the border, for whom the migratory traffic is a daily reality that flattens the immediate border environment, overruns local communities, tramples fields and fences, and creates a general sense of insecurity.

“Such realities are difficult to accept for Americans ... who live along the border regions and are fed up with the invasion of immigrants and the associated violence,” Dougherty writes.

They're tired of the costs. They're tired of the threats. They're tired of the trash. They're tired of the drugs. They're tired of being tired of it all. But most of all, they're tired of being ignored by politicians, law enforcement, bureaucrats and policymakers—most of whom criticize any effort citizens make to take care of the problem themselves.

For those who are fed up enough to dial 1-800-MINUTEMEN, Arizona Republican Congressman J. D. Hayworth has now weighed in with his own bookful of border and immigration remedies, titled *Whatever It Takes: Illegal Immigration, Border Security, and the War on Terror*. It is a perfect specimen of modern partisan political pamphleteering, in which Hayworth not only slams what he calls “lettuce liberals” (those who warn that food prices would soar if higher wages brought Americans back into farm labor) but also demands that George W. Bush apologize for having, last year, called the Minutemen “vigilantes.” Hayworth proffers a long list of draconian solutions: a new “Americanism” movement to make English the official language, military troops on the border, a \$4 billion to \$8 billion wall running from the Pacific to the Gulf Coast, more detention centers to house captured illegal crossers, repeal of U.S. citizenship for future “anchor babies” (children whose birth on U.S. soil makes them citizens and anchors their families in the United States), the expulsion of Mexican diplomats who criticize American border policy, the hiring of 10,000 new work-site enforcement agents to arrest violators, and even a temporary but renewable three-year ban on legal immigration from Mexico.

This final, punitive measure, Hayworth argues, would “create a domestic constituency in Mexico demanding that the Mexican government cooperate with the United States on illegal immigration.” The logic here, if any, is a bit tough to follow. How would clamping the lid down tighter on an already overflowing economic pressure cooker do anything except create more instability, more social conflict, and probably even more illegal immigration? (The last time Mexico experienced a revolution, 10 percent of its population wound up in the United States.) Questions of that sort are probably of little interest to Hayworth, whose policy notions seem derived more from pandering to his own domestic constituency than from facing up to complex issues with global implications. He offers no advice on what to do about the 12 million illegals already living in the United States. And he makes the preposterous statement that “free markets are incompatible with illegal immigration,” when, in fact, the flow into the United States is almost exclusively about an open market for jobs. Borders that are open to the free flow of capital are going to be readily crossed by job seekers (human capital), with or without visas.

Nevertheless, Hayworth's mad-as-hell approach now dominates the congressional debate. Last winter, his House colleague James Sensenbrenner pushed through a landmark bill that mandates the construction of 700 more miles of border walls and makes illegally entering or residing in the country a felony (it's currently only a civil violation). Sensenbrenner's measure—if matched by the Senate—would also permit felony prosecution for any American who in any way assists or hires an illegal, and would thereby make thousands of American businesses, housewives, and gardening enthusiasts

guilty of high crimes.

This spring, the Senate is expected to craft its own border-reform package, one likely to be somewhat more in touch with reality than the House measure. But virtually no one involved in the debate is willing to guess what a final conference package will look like. Not willing, because they know that for some decades now, our border and immigration policy has reflected only our internal fears and fancies, and has in no significant way been informed by the realities on the ground. The border between the United States and Mexico, much more than a mere political boundary, is the volatile meeting point of economic and social tectonic plates. Legislating against the resulting earthquakes makes little difference.

One thing is for certain: those battered vans in Altar will continue to load up every afternoon, and every evening, their human cargo will find a way across the border. If the migrants run into some new Sensenbrenner wall, they will simply go around it. Or over it. Or under it. Mexicans will show as much ingenuity in getting into the United States as Americans would in breaking into British Columbia if the Canadian minimum wage were \$70 an hour. “Nothing really changes here,” Charles Bowden said to me, as a chill night descended on the Tucson desert. “When people ask me what the solution will eventually be here, I say, ‘This is it.’”

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