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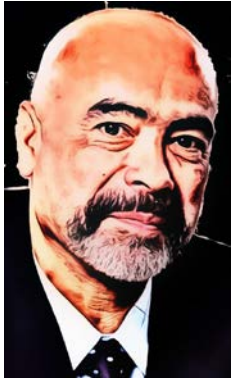
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The Insatiable Drive Towards Militarization: The Price for Any Legislative Immigration Reform?

By Juan Cartagena (September 10, 2014)

Drones search for Central Americans crossing the border. Military grade machine guns are aimed at unarmed African-American men in Ferguson. An MRAP tank is deployed to stop the revelry of Puerto Ricans in Rochester. These are all recent images of increased militarization in America. The massive transfer billions of dollars of federal military armament to police departments in response to America's two seemingly perpetual wars, the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism, gives further credence to Jonathan Simon's thesis that we essentially govern through crime in the U.S. But in comparison to the militarization of our southern border these periodic military episodes in urban America can't compete.



The drive to further militarize our southern border is insatiable. And President Obama drank the Kool Aid. Since the start of his administration Border Patrol doubled in size to a force of 22,000 making it larger than the Puerto Rico Police force at 17,000 and second only to the New York City Police force at over 34,000. Its fleet of vehicles is close to 17,000 and it commands over 250 aircraft and 300 watercrafts. Rather than recycling Defense Department drones it has been reported that the Department of Homeland Security commissions its own drones at a cost of \$18 million per with the cost allocated by Congress to the unmanned aircraft program for the border surpassing \$240 million. Obama's 2014 budget proposal called for \$12.9 billion for Customs and Border Protection an increase of close to 7% from FY2013.

Any assessment of a Latino strategy for comprehensive immigration reform cannot escape this reality. In Congress, militarization is the stick to the carrot of any normalization of status. Coming from both Republican and Democrat quarters it is an inevitable element in any legislative solution to immigration reform.

Indeed, in Congress no display of compassion can occur without a countervailing

measure of punishment. The legalization of the undocumented in the Immigration Reform and Control Act of the 1980s came with the stick of employer sanctions. The realization of government-based voter registration in the National Voter Registration Act of the 1990s came with unique limitations on the registration of public benefits applicants and a side of voter fraud enforcement. Similar acquiescence to preventing the bogey man of voter fraud accompanied the passage of the Help America Vote Act which otherwise helped modernize voting procedures in the states in 2002.

This may look like the normal give and take of compromise politics in Washington, but it isn't. What is different today is the exaggerated implementation of partisanship that impedes even common-sense solutions, supported by the core of both parties, to the complex problems of the day. Immigration reform has been promised by significant Republican leaders for over ten years from President George W. Bush to Speaker John Boehner to House Majority Leader Eric Cantor. It enjoys the support of the business lobby and religious leaders, two mainstays in Republican circles. But it remains deadlocked in a dysfunctional Congress held hostage by partisan extremists.

For example, just months ago Congress couldn't even agree to any compassionate measure to address the plight of unaccompanied minors crossing the southern border - undoubtedly because they couldn't agree on an appropriate dose of punitive measures. In a country that can only see a refugee crisis if it emanates from countries in the Eastern Hemisphere we inexplicably cannot fathom a refugee crisis at the U.S. / Mexico border. Even when the administration was prepared to ignore international norms that protect minors who may be refugees fleeing violence and persecution by categorically stating in advance that the bulk of the minors are not refugees Congress still failed to act. President Obama asked for an additional \$4 billion of speedy justice, assembly-line style, but that wasn't punitive enough for this Congress.

Now the very crisis of minors crossing the border - a chickens-coming-home-to-roost moment born of misguided U.S. foreign policies in Central America - is being blamed for Obama's delay for unilateral action on deportation relief until after the midterm elections in November. Opinion polls - yes, those *maldita* opinion polls - showed significant disapproval in the way Obama handled the "surge" (another label ensconced in military terminology). This led the White House to conclude that minors crossing the border erroneously proved how porous the border is.

¿*Qué, qué?* The minors weren't crossing the border in the stealth of night. They were walking towards Border Patrol in relief. But in these delicate and sensitive times when real leadership is called for, the White House capitulated to the political calendar and punted - again.

This means that the urge to militarize will continue unabated. Last year when the Senate reform bill from the Gang of Eight was unveiled many Latinos were shocked at how much militarization and private sector profit dominated the outcome. The Senate was prepared to invest another \$40 billion over ten years, double the size of the Border Patrol again, and add 700 miles of fence. In other words it was prepared to exacerbate the very conditions that lead to so many unnecessary deaths, vigilantism and despair.

This is where advocates have to draw the line on reform.

If legislative action is the goal then good luck in the current environment. The thirst for militarization will be fast-tracked with little consideration of the full ramifications of its impact. Some Senators in 2013 were conditioning citizenship on a fallacious benchmark of 90 percent security on the border, for example. Now undoubtedly other elected officials will demand that the conditions in the Central America triangle of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala that lead to the recent migration be miraculously eliminated.

Instead it appears that only Executive action in friendlier (relatively speaking) White House is the best route now. Admittedly it is only marginally better as it will pave the way towards some relief now with the prospect of less militarization at the border and a possible respite on excessive deportations. Normalization of status on a large scale may not be possible until after 2016. And only if Latino voices are heard in the ballot box and the streets.

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