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Special report: The US Border Patrol

Hold the Line: El Paso operation changed enforcement method along US-Mexico border

By Diana Washington Valdez

Mark Woody was a new U.S. Border Patrol agent in 1993 when he watched rubber rafts filled with migrants routinely make their way over the Rio Grande from Juárez into El Paso.

He and other agents scrambled to catch as many of the arrivals as they could, chasing them along the banks of the river, but the immigrants kept crossing over illegally, and most got away.

Migrants also crossed the border illegally in places like Sunland Park, N.M., and farther east of Downtown El Paso, near Zaragoza and Fabens.

"It was crazy," said Woody, now 52, and a Border Patrol acting division chief in El Paso. "They came in by the boatloads on the lanchas (rubber rafts). We also had large groups of immigrants, 100 to 200, who would make a run for the El Paso side of the international bridges, until some of them got through. It was very difficult back then."

This went on most of the day, every day of the week.

El Paso's Border Patrol agents, which numbered 600 then, were overwhelmed by the number of migrants rushing across the border.

Most paid a quarter or a dollar to be ferried across the river. In fiscal year 1992, the Border Patrol detained 248,642 people. It was an endless cat-and-mouse game, Woody said.

It all changed in 1993.

On Sept. 19, 1993, just about two months after being named the new Border Patrol sector chief in El Paso, Silvestre Reyes initiated a border enforcement operation that took everyone by surprise, and it is still in effect today.

Chief Reyes said we had to change the way we did things," Woody said. "People were getting hurt. Immigrants got run over in traffic while running across streets to evade the agents, or they fell and were injured. Our agents would get injured as well."

The plan, initially called Operation Blockade, called for the deployment of every available Border Patrol agent to different sites along 20 miles of the El Paso-Juárez border, roughly from Sunland Park, N.M., to the Zaragoza port of entry. The operation was initiated over the weekend and it immediately changed the dynamics of the historic cat and mouse chase.

As part of the operation, which later was renamed Operation Hold the Line, agents were lined up very close to each other, within each other's line of site, creating a virtual and visible human wall of enforcement.

"I and my partner were assigned to patrol an area east and under the Stanton Street bridge," Woody said. "We had no idea then how this was going to turn out."

The results were instant and dramatic. Border Patrol agents went from apprehending about 1,500 people a day to less than 100 a day.

In fiscal year 1993, the Border Patrol had counted 285,781 total apprehensions, and by fiscal year 1994, that number had dropped to 79,688.

Border Patrol Agent Ramiro Cordero, spokesman for the El Paso sector, said that today, 20 years later, Operation Hold the Line still forms the basis for the agency's general approach to border enforcement, which is to deter illegal immigration at the border. Ruben Garcia, executive director of the House of Annunciation, a hospitality and temporary shelter for refugees and migrants, said he recalls vividly the early weeks of the operation.

There were protests on both sides of the border, and the Catholic bishops of Southern New Mexico, El Paso and Juárez came out against it. Hundreds of Juárez residents took part in demonstrations because they could no longer get to their jobs in El Paso.

"El Paso was a not a major staging point for (undocumented) migrants," Garcia said. "Most of the migrants that crossed back and forth each day had jobs in El Paso as housekeepers, construction workers, nannies, waiters and landscapers."

"The immediate effect of Operation Blockade is that you suddenly had thousands of people unemployed," Garcia said.

Woody said that about a week into the operation, there was a standoff between protesters and U.S. officials at the Paso del Norte International Bridge.

"They threatened to pour into the north, and we had to shut down one side of the bridge," Woody said. "Cooler heads finally prevailed, and they dispersed."

According to newspaper archives, after the initial shock wore off, then-Mayor Larry Francis testified in Washington, D.C., in support of the operation, which the El Paso Police Department credited with a 15 percent reduction in petty crime along South El Paso, as well as with a dramatic drop in auto thefts. Police said they suspected that unauthorized immigrants were committing many of the auto thefts in El Paso.

Operation Hold the Line's popularity in the El Paso community is believed to be what propelled Reyes, nicknamed "Silver," into running a successful bid for Congress after retiring from the Border Patrol. Reyes was in Washington, D.C., this week to receive a recognition and was unavailable for comment. He was El Paso's congressman from 1997 to 2012.

After Hold the Line was shown to be effective, Reyes proposed new fencing, which was also met with opposition. In Sunland Park, N.M., people walked back and forth constantly across an invisible border in the area until a fence went up.

Woody said that a fence won't stop determined people, "but it slows down the criminal element, giving us a bit more time to respond."

Today, as Congress wrangles over immigration reform proposals, some lawmakers in Washington are insisting on extending the fence along the U.S.-Mexico border and adding another 20,000 Border Patrol agents before they consider voting for a new immigration bill.

More agents and fencing were the two pillars that Reyes employed when he oversaw the Border Patrol in El Paso.

Over the years, the Border Patrol's El Paso sector has seen its staffing levels increase, from about 600 in 1993 to the current patrol force of 2,718, 16 percent of whom are female Border Patrol officers.

"People sometimes look at us and say we are the 'bad guys,' but that's really not true," Woody said. "We're aware of the conditions in Mexico that people are fleeing from, but creating immigration laws and regulations is not our job. Our primary mission is to protect the nation against all forms of terrorism."

Nationally, the Border Patrol's budget has been increased each fiscal year, including through President Barack Obama's administration, from \$362.6 million in fiscal year 1993 to \$3.5 billion in fiscal year 2012.

The total number of agents nationally also grew, from 4,028 in fiscal year 1993 to 21,394 in fiscal year 2012. The greatest rise in the number of Border Patrol agents occurred in

the Southwest border sectors, from South Texas to California, from a total of 3,444 agents in fiscal year 1993 to 18,412 in fiscal year 2012.

Today, the Border Patrol's Tucson sector has the largest number of agents in the Southwest, 4,176 in fiscal year 2012, compared with 287 in fiscal year 1993. Tucson had 92,639 apprehensions in 1993, a high of 616,346 in 2000 and 120,00 in 2012.

The San Diego sector, which reported the most apprehensions in the nation in 1993, 531,689 (El Paso was No. 2), saw its number of arrests drop to 120,000 in 2012.

Why they come

Experts said the Border Patrol had suspected that the North American Free Trade Agreement would bring a flood of new immigrants who would try to cross the border illegally, and prepared for this with enhanced enforcement such as Operation Hold the Line.

Carlos Marentes, executive director of the Border Farm Workers Center in South El Paso, said he clearly remembers how Operation Hold the Line took the region by storm. He said the main reason people migrate without authorization to other countries, such as from Mexico to the United States, is the lack of employment or loss of livelihood in their home countries.

"It was contradictory for the U.S. and Mexico to be debating the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, and for this Border Patrol operation -- intended to seal the border -- to begin months before NAFTA went into effect," Marentes said.

"We were told that NAFTA would create the strongest economic bloc in the world (U.S., Canada and Mexico), that it would bring prosperity to the three countries, and that it would end the need for people to immigrate in search of jobs," Marentes said. "NAFTA actually accelerated immigration, and today's U.S. wages are beginning to resemble Mexican wages in relative terms of their acquisitive power."

He said several things happened that forced many low-income people to try and cross the border illegally in that period: Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari approved a law in 1992 that allowed Mexicans to sell "ejido" properties (communal farm tracts), and NAFTA did away with trade barriers that enabled U.S. growers to export products to Mexico.

"Small farmers used to be self-sufficient in Mexico, growing staples like corn," Marentes said. "Big operators began buying up the land, and small farmers could not compete against them. U.S. government officials did not like the ejido system because they said it resembled socialism. Also, the U.S. agricultural system provided subsidies and other forms of help to growers who could produce products for export."

The result of free trade, Marentes said, is that consumers in Mexico today can pay less now for apples grown in Washington state than for apples grown in Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua.

Manuel Gomez Cruz, a researcher at Mexico's Autonomous University of Chapingo in the state of Mexico, told the El Paso Times in 2003 that NAFTA also changed immigration patterns in Mexico.

States like Veracruz became new sources of migrants headed to the border, to work in maquiladoras and try their luck at crossing into the United States. Gomez said the end of tariffs on food products and bad Mexican farm policy directly affected 25 million

Mexicans who before NAFTA had depended on agriculture for their livelihoods, according to newspaper archives.

"At the moment you destroy (agriculture), where are 25 million people going to go?" Gomez said then.

Migrant trends

The Border Patrol's operation in El Paso was viewed as controversial as immigrant advocates pointed out that migrant deaths were on the rise because the operation, and others like it along different parts of the border, had pushed migrants to attempt to cross through dangerous remote desert and mountainous terrains.

Statistics show the Tucson (177), Laredo (90) and the Rio Grande Valley (150) had the highest numbers of migrant deaths reported in fiscal year 2012.

Stuart Anderson, in a 2013 policy brief for the **National Foundation for American Policy**, "How Many More Deaths? The Moral Case for a Temporary Worker Program," found that a total of 5,595 migrant deaths were reported at the Southwest border between fiscal years 1998 and 2012.

The foundation is a nonpartisan public policy research center based in Arlington, Va., that focuses on trade, immigration and related issues.

Anderson was the policy head of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) during President George W. Bush's administration. The agency eventually was merged with others as part of the Department of Homeland Security.

"The evidence suggests an immigrant attempting to cross illegally into the United States today is eight times more likely to die in the attempt than approximately a decade ago," Anderson said in his brief.

Migrants died from dehydration, drowning and vehicle crashes, among other causes.

In a telephone interview, Anderson said that Bush and former Mexican President Vicente Fox were seeking to fashion an agreement that would allow low-skill workers in Mexico access to the U.S. labor market. However, he said, the events surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks preempted those efforts.

Anderson said it's "the lack of legal temporary visas for lower-skilled jobs, the significant buildup of the Border Patrol and border enforcement that have pushed those who want to work in America into increasingly remote and dangerous areas."

He also said that "poverty in Mexico means the loss of life will continue unless more legal paths are open to work in the United States."

El Paso's Border Patrol sector reported a total of 221 migrant deaths from fiscal year 1998 to fiscal year 2012. During that period, El Paso Border Patrol agents also conducted 1,749 rescues, including of people wandering in the desert or falling into irrigation canals.

Woody said the El Paso sector is immense, extending 268 miles along the U.S.-Mexico border in West Texas and New Mexico, and encompassing 125,500 square miles. El Paso sector Border Patrol stations are located in El Paso, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Deming, Lordsburg, Truth or Consequences, Santa Teresa, Zaragoza, Fabens and Fort Hancock.

Immigrant numbers

Currently, as the debate over immigration reform rages on, U.S. officials estimate that there are between 11 million and 12 million undocumented immigrants in the nation, a majority of them from Mexico. They represent roughly around 3.7 percent of the nation's total population of 314 million.

In 1986, when the Immigration Reform and Control Act (Simpson-Mazzoli) went into effect, an estimated 3 million undocumented people were living in the United States, or just under 3.1 percent of the population then of 240.1 million.

The percentages of undocumented immigrants have not changed much over the years. According to the PEW Research Center for Hispanic Trends, illegal immigration seems to be on the increase again after falling in 2009 to 11.3 million from a high of 12.2 million in 2007. The latest figure from PEW is 11.7 million.

PEW, a nonpartisan think tank, also found in 2006 that people overstaying their visas (such as student or tourist visas) accounted for at least half of undocumented immigrants in this country, contradicting media stereotypes that portrayed immigrants solely as people climbing over border fences or swimming across river boundaries.

Nine years ago, the U.S. General Accountability Office had recommended that Congress develop ways to keep better track of foreign visitors who arrive with visas intended for short-term visits or stays, though officials agree a perfect system doesn't exist yet. Woody, who was assigned to the Border Patrol Academy before returning to El Paso, was involved in the staffing and funding buildup of the Border Patrol.

"I am proud of belonging to the Border Patrol, which got started in El Paso, and where Operation Hold the Line also began," Woody said. "Our agents work in diverse roles, in vehicle, horse and bike patrols, on ATV (all terrain vehicles), and in other assignments."

"We will continue to face challenges, but we can say that we have a much more orderly border than we had before Hold the Line. It also played a role in El Paso being ranked the safest city in the United States," Woody said.