

United States Southern Border Still Open for Business

The recent debate around the southern border focuses on whether or not the term “border crisis” is appropriate and if a “wall” is effective. The problem: the debate misses the mark and doesn’t recognize the hard truths from the past.

According to the [DEA 2018 National Drug Assessment](#) 174 people are dying every day from drug poisoning in the U.S. Despite the recent attempts to reform drug laws because they are now considered by some as “non-violent,” the opioid threat (controlled prescription drugs, synthetic opioids and heroin) has reached epidemic levels.

Additionally, methamphetamines remain prevalent and the threat of cocaine — a drug some now also view as non-violent — has rebounded. The DEA is also seeing new psychoactive substances (NPS), and the domestic marijuana situation continues to evolve.

Where is this all coming from? Asia, Europe, Canada? No — the southern border.

In their report, the DEA went on to state that Mexican TCOs (Transnational Criminal Organizations) continue to dominate the heroin market in the United States.

They control smuggling routes across the southwest border and work with U.S. based gangs and other drug trafficking organizations to distribute the drugs at the regional and local levels.

The DEA also said that the “Mexican TCOs remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States; no other group is currently positioned to challenge them.”

Some think this is “hype” or not “real.” They think a “wall” [isn’t necessary because, as cited by some in Congress](#), “more drugs are caught at border checkpoints than anywhere else.” Logic would indicate that makes sense — at the border checkpoints there is a law enforcement presence and equipment to catch drugs. But what about the other parts of the border?

In 1997, I found myself on South Padre Island near Brownsville, Texas. Across from Brownsville lay the Mexican City of Matamoros, which at the time, was crime-ridden, dangerous and a top drug smuggling route.

That year the Coast Guard launched a massive drug interdiction operation titled [Operation Gulf Shield](#). Smugglers were using fast, open-hulled 25-foot boats (lanchas) capable of speeds in excess of 30 knots to run drugs into the U.S. along its coasts.

The “average” load on these small boats was 500-1,000 pounds of marijuana or cocaine; in some cases the loads were mixed. If confronted at sea, these smugglers would sometimes dump their loads, resulting in kilos of cocaine washing up on Texas beaches. On the other coast, Operation Border Shield was launched along the California coastline, and in the Caribbean, Operation Frontier Shield, effectively creating a "wall" from coast to coast.

Once the smugglers landed these “lanchas” on U.S. soil, they would dig a hole, bury the load, leave the boat and grab a backpack with a few days’ supplies and commence their illegal entry into the U.S. If stopped and not in possession of drugs or listed as a repeat entry offender, the “catch and release” policy would kick in and they would receive a "ticket" to appear in a federal court wherever they ended up in the U.S.

It's essentially free admission. At the time, 21 percent of the drugs smuggled into the U.S. came from maritime smuggling routes. Within the first six months of these operations, 11 vessels carrying a total of more than 20,000 pounds of cocaine were seized.

An additional 17,000 pounds of cocaine was jettisoned by smugglers fearful of being apprehended. During this period, trafficking in the eastern Caribbean dropped sharply, from 38 percent down to 23 percent and continued to drop. By the end of the year, 103,000 pounds of cocaine and almost the same amount of marijuana was seized — thanks to this “wall.”

These operations were part of a broad national drug interdiction strategy, implemented by then President Clinton's administration, in order to interdict the drugs from source countries, all of which were located south of the U.S. border.

To create this “wall”, the Coast Guard deployed 210-foot medium endurance cutters, patrol boats, fixed-wing aircraft surveillance, helicopter response assets, numerous utility boat and rigid hull inflatable small boats, Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDET) and lots of personnel. They also partnered with the legacy U.S. Customs, INS, DEA, the National Guard's Joint Task Force six, the Texas DPS and various Sheriff's Departments, each providing personnel and gear to form this “wall.”

At its peak, that “wall” curtailed smuggling routes that were once wide open and allowed agencies to focus resources and personnel on the areas (further inland) where this “wall” didn’t exist. But despite these operations successes, they were unsustainable due to the operational tempo, personnel and burden on the agencies — which forced the Coast Guard and others to re-prioritize other missions to meet these operations requirements.

When the 1997 operations ended, the drug trafficking naturally increased due to smuggling routes re-opening. In the world of security, a layered approach is the best way to keep people safe. Why can’t our southern border have that same layered approach? The lesson, a “wall” worked back then

and would work again and a permanent “wall” would send a message that the U.S. is not open for the drug smuggling business.

Donald J. Mihalek is the executive vice president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA) Foundation and the Secret Service Agency president for FLEOA.