Views From The Border

Scores of flea market vendors hawk their wares over the sounds of salsa in Tijuana’s urbanizing Otay region, a bleak and hilly border slum that seems to have been shaped and twisted more by natural disasters than by purposeful design. For years the grimy neighborhoods have been both a housing opportunity for thousands of recently-hired workers in the border industrialization program as well as a staging area for illegal border crossings. It was the starting point for many of the several thousand illegal migrants arrested in the northern San Joaquin Valley last year. Of that number about half were charged with crimes including drug smuggling. Yes, Otay residents have heard of Modesto.

In recent times open border advocates have been critical of “Operation Gatekeeper”, a federal program enacted in 1994 to reduce illegal crossings into the United States. Frustrated smugglers have been forced to move their operations to more rural and dangerous areas, like the Otay Mesa region, or even Arizona and so the risks for desperate migrants heading to the Central Valley are greater. Today, everyone agrees that illegal migration has been significantly reduced, but some still want to debate whether these new border management policies are a costly mistake or a step in the right direction.

Each day up to 300,000 people are granted permission to walk or drive across one of the nation’s three busiest frontier gates near San Ysidro, California. And, each day along the 15 mile region beyond the gate about 100 illegal aliens are stopped and detained. If that number seems high, it is only a fraction of the number that was arrested a decade ago. Back then, according to INS officials, the grossly understaffed Border Patrol could only watch while hundreds of prospective migrants gathered each day along the broken perimeter fence in preparation for the massive rush across. In those days, perhaps 3000 migrants might be detained in a single 24 hour period but many others would escape. One area, inside the U.S., was actually converted into a primitive soccer field so that all could play before the coming night’s northern invasion. The border region was out of control.

Within the last few years, border management has been vastly improved. Wartime surplus steel landing mats have been converted into a formidable forty-two mile barrier replacing the once porous border fence. More than a thousand underground sensors have been buried. Dozens of mobile infrared scopes and miles of high intensity lighting point to the boundary. And now, sophisticated remote control video cameras are being installed. Staffing has more than doubled, and a thousand more vehicles are now on patrol. Today, officials sympathize with those that must deal with the ugly conditions of their homeland, and understand that the incredible opportunities that lie only a few miles north is more than many can resist. But, an essential part of any nation’s duty is to manage its border; escaping poverty is not a justification for allowing illegal entry.

An even greater concern is apprehending smugglers who charge a small fortune to arrange a crossing. Many migrants will pay thousands of dollars to smugglers who may simply leave them stranded in a remote area only to face robbery and brutalization by border criminals. Alternatively, people might try to sneak across stuffed into a hidden vehicle compartment.
Typically, a gas tank is carved into a crude under seat carrier to hide one or more people while gasoline is rerouted from a small plastic jug. Each week 200 to 300 of these vehicles are seized; drivers are often American high school students who hope to pick up an extra $500 from the smugglers. And, if the trip is slow, the fumes can be deadly.

Another major concern is vigilance against criminal activity. Each week about 2000 pounds of marijuana is captured at the border, usually detected by trained dogs. In other cases, chemicals crucial to drug manufacturing, but regulated here, are bootlegged. Sometimes the contraband is simply placed on top of a car engine - the smuggler gambling that officials will only check the trunk if any check is made at all in the few seconds that a border inspection allows. Modesto is an important destination for all of this and other more dangerous contraband.

So, as long as people represent a commodity and drugs offer a profit, increased border vigilance is going to remain an everyday reality and an unfortunate necessity.