Before the Trump Era:
The “Wall” Made In Arizona as Political Performancee

By Damien Simonneau | September 2018
“Trump's Wall” illustrates the US obsession with ever-greater militarization of the Mexican border, independently of the actual numbers of unauthorized crossings. Yet these debates began revolving around the slogan “Build The Wall” long before the rise of Trump. Between 2010 and 2013, the activities of a coalition of activists, politicians and Arizona security experts had already legitimized recourse to a “wall”. Border-security debates thus concern more than mere control of border crossings. More crucially, they structure local and national political life in accordance with the interests and agendas of the political players whom they bring together.

The Governors of California and Arizona reacted unevenly to President Trump’s announcement on April 4th, 2018, that National Guard soldiers were to be sent to the Mexican border to reinforce the Border Patrol and local police. Doug Ducey, Republican Governor of Arizona, displayed his enthusiasm: “I’m grateful today to have a federal administration that is finally taking action to secure the border for the safety of all Americans”. Jerry Brown, Democrat Governor of California, was more circumspect. He insisted upon the limits of such a measure: “This will not be a mission to build a new wall [...] It will not be a mission to round up women and children or detain people escaping violence and seeking a better life. [...] Here are the facts: There is no massive wave of migrants pouring into California?”. These

1. “READ: Trump’s memo ordering National Guard troops to the border”, CNN, 5 April 2018.
contrasting reactions illustrate the US rift over migration and border-security issues. To the anti-migrant camp, the border is insufficiently secured, and is subject to an “invasion”. For opponents of the border’s militarization, this deployment is futile.

On the anti-migrant side, between 2010 and 2013, Republican state congressmen in Arizona set up a unified Committee to gather all the political players who demanded of President Obama that he increases militarization of the border4. This included Sheriffs and Arizona State ministers—but also a breeders’ organization, the border Chambers of Commerce, militia men who patrol the desert, and Tea Party groups. In May 2011, this Committee launched a fundraising drive dubbed “Build the Border Fence”. They portrayed cross-border migration as a threat to the public, consecrated the “Fence” as a legitimate security tool, and, seeking to force the hand of the Federal Government, accused it of failing in its duty to protect. Examining this mobilization prior to Trump’s election enables illustrating how militarization and the debates around it came to acquire legitimacy—and therefore to shed light on its current crystallization around the rhetoric of the “Wall”. This article will, first, briefly describe stages in the performative militarization of the border within which this political mobilization is embedded. It then presents three stages in the legitimization of the “Wall”, drawing on pro-“Border Wall” activism in Arizona.

**MILITARIZATION BY ONE-UPMANSION**

Parsing differences over migration debates in the United States requires situating them within the framework of the long-term political performance of militarization of the border. The process whereby the border with Mexico has become militarized has gone hand in hand with the criminalization of unauthorized immigration since the 1980s5. In the border area, militarization is displayed through the deployment of technology and surveillance routines of transborder mobility, both by security professionals and by citizen vigilantes7. The construction of “fences” made the borderline visible and contributed to this policy of militarization. The Trump administration is banking on these high-profile moments of wall-construction. In doing so, it follows in the footsteps of the G.W. Bush administration through the 2006 Secure Fence Act, and California Republicans in the 1990s. This is even while the numbers of unauthor-

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4. Over Easter Weekend, a Fox News report became a pretext to reac-tivate these tropes. In this report, the “Migrant Caravan” march held yearly by the Pueblo Sin Fronteras NGO in Mexico, to raise public understand-ing of migrant and refugee rights (and of the rights of Hondurans in particular) was portrayed as a “Migrant Army”.

5. This analysis is based on the author’s field research with pro-fence activists in Arizona in 2012-13. The author was based at Arizona State University on a Fulbright grant, conducted interviews with these activists, observed their activities, and followed Arizona State Legislature debates on border security.


8. According to the statistics of the federal Customs and Border Protection agency, total arrests in 2017 were at their lowest level since 1971, standing at 310,531 (as against around 1.6 million in 2000). Statistics for March were slightly up on February: 37,393, up from 26,666 https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics. Criticism of these statistics notwithstanding, they are the reference point for measuring and discussing unauthorized immigration.
rized crossings are at historically low levels, and federal agencies’ efforts are more directed towards chasing down migrants within the US. At various stages in the development of this policy, different players, ranging from federal elected officials through members of civil society to the security sector, local elected officials and residents, have staged themselves against the backdrop of the territory that had been fenced against the “invaders”. They thereby invest the political space concerned with closing this territory against political opponents who are considered to be in favor of its remaining open, and of welcoming migrants. The latter range from players in transborder trade to religious humanitarian and migrant rights NGOs. Border security is therefore at the core of the political and media project of portraying immigration in problematic and warlike terms. Beyond controlling migrants, the issue above all orbits around reassuring the citizenry and various political players positioning themselves within society-structuring debates.

WHY DEMAND “FENCES”?

First and foremost, Arizona’s pro-fence players package transborder mobility as a variety of forms of violence, deriving from interpretation, speculation and—to reprise their terms—fantasies of “invasion”. In their rhetoric, the violence in Mexico has crossed the border. This spillover thesis is based on the experience of ranchers of the Cochise County on the border, who have faced property degradations since the end of the 1990s as a result of migrants and smugglers crossing their lands. In January 2013, the representative of the Arizona Cattlemen Association struck an alarmist tone: “Our people are on the frontline and the rural areas of our border are unsecured”. The murder of an Association member in March 2010 was cited as evidence, swiftly attributed to what was dubbed an “illegal alien”.

Based on their personal experiences of border migration, the pro-fence camp has taken up a common discursive register concerning the national stakes tied to such mobility. As Republican State Senator Gail Griffin explains, they express a desire to restore public order over the national territory, against the “chaos” provoked by these violent intrusions:

“People in larger communities away from the border don’t see it as we do on the border but the drugs that are coming in though my backyard are ending up in everybody’s community in the State of Arizona and in this country. So it’s just not a local issue, or a county issue or a state issue, it’s a national issue.”

In their view, the threat is as much to public order as it is to national identity. These fears denote a preoccupation with the Hispanicization of society and cultural shifts affecting a nation that they define as being “Anglo-Saxon”. When the Build the Border Fence fundraising drive was launched on July 27, 2011, for example, Representative Steve Smith pronounced himself “horrified” by a deve-
velopment that he called “Press 2 for Spanish” in telephone calls. He also condemned the lack of integration on the part of Mexican migrants:

“If you don’t like this country with you, you wanna bring your language with you, your gang-fare with you, stay where you were! Or face the consequences. But don’t make me change because you don’t want to.”

Finally, border security also reflects domestic political stakes. It is a variable in the political balance of power with the federal government to influence decisions on immigration policy. Arizona elected representatives condemn the federal government’s inefficiency and lay claim to migration decision-making powers at the state-level. The “fence” is also portrayed a being a common sense “popular” project against reticent decision-making elites.

“FENCES”—OR VIRTUAL SURVEILLANCE?

Control of the border is already disconnected from the border territory itself, and virtual and tactical technologies are prioritized in order to manage entry to the US. “Fences” appear archaic compared to new surveillance technologies that enable remote control. In the 2000s, the “virtualization” of

border control was favored by the Bush and Obama administrations. Since 2001-2002, it has been embedded in the strategic concept of “Smart Borders” within the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This aims to filter authorized migration through programs that grant expedited- and pre-registered-entry to US ports of entry, and through the generalization of biometric technologies. This strategy also rests upon integrating leading-edge technologies, such as the Secure Border Initiative (SBI) program that was in place from 2006 to 2011. At the time, the border area (including South-West Arizona) acquired watchtowers equipped with cameras and radar. Fences are, moreover, costly—and the financial and human costs of the construction, guarding and upkeep of these fences raise doubts over the benefits of such infrastructure. These doubts are expressed at security-technology fairs, where security professionals and industrialists gather\textsuperscript{14}. There, the “fence” is ultimately understood as being a marginal control technology.

Regardless, pro-fence activism in Arizona grants a key role to those military and police who help legitimate the recourse to “fences”. In particular, they draw on such models of securitization as the California border, that has been gradually been sealed since 1991, as well as, since 2006-07, the triple-barrier of Yuma, in South-West Arizona. Sheriff Paul Babeu, an ex-military National Guardsman who erected the “fences” in Yuma, assesses that they provide a tactical bonus for Border Patrol agents in smuggling centers, urban areas and flatlands\textsuperscript{15}. Mainly, Arizona security professionals articulate their defense of the “fence” within the pursuit of personal political agendas, such as Republican sheriffs who are both security and political professionals.

**ATTACKING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FOR FAILURE TO PROTECT**

The spread of the pro-fence narrative largely rests upon widely-covered events designed to symbolize the process of militarization and to call for federal intervention. The materiality of “fences” elicits easy media coverage. The pro-fence camp are well aware of this, and regularly stage this materiality. During such public events as the 4\textsuperscript{th} of July national holiday, they erect fake wooden fences on which they encourage participants to write “Secure the Border”. These pro-fence political players also seek out media coverage for their public statements. Such media as Fox News follow their activities to the extent of turning pro-fence events into a regular series. On August 25, 2011, on the Fox News program On The Record, presenter Greta Van Susteren invited Republican Representative Steve Smith and publicized the fundraising drive using visuals drawn from the initiative’s website\textsuperscript{16}. The presenter framed the interview by gauging that Arizona parliamentarians had “got a grip on things to get the White House’s attention”. At no point was Steve Smith really challenged on the

\textsuperscript{14} Field observation at the Border Security Expo in Phoenix, March 2013.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Sheriff Paul Babeu, Florence, AZ, March 7, 2013.

true cost of the fence, nor on opposition to the project. This co-production between the channel’s conservative editorial line and the pro-fence narrative enables the border area to be presented as a warzone, and amplifies the critique of the federal government.

This staging of the debate complements lobbying to set up direct contact with federal decision-makers, as well as legal actions to pressure them. Pro-barrier activists in Arizona thus set out plans to secure the border, which they try to spread among Arizona authorities and federal elected officials. Sheriff Paul Babeu, for instance, took part in consultations on border security conducted by Senator John McCain and Presidential candidate Mitt Romney. By passing repressive immigration laws and mobilizing Arizona legal advisors to defend these laws when they are challenged in court, Republicans consecrate Arizona as their laboratory for immigration and border security policy.

**TWISTS AND TURNS OF “BUILD THE WALL”**

Portraying transborder mobility as a “problem” on the local and, especially, the national levels; Legitimizing a security-based response by promoting the “fence” as only solution; And accusing the federal government of failing to protect its citizens. These are the three pillars of “The Fence”, the performance by pro-fence activists in the early 2010s. These moves have enabled making militarization of the border and the “Build The Wall” trope banal. Its elements are present in the current state of the discourse,

when Donald Trump resorts to aggressive rhetoric towards migrants, touts his “Wall” as the solution, and stages photo-ops alongside prototypes of the wall—and when he accuses both Congress and California of refusing to secure the border. The issue here has little to do with the undocumented, or with the variables governing Central American migration. It has far more to do with point-scoring against political opponents, and with political positioning within debates that cleave US society.

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17. Such as the 2010 “Restore the Border” plan by the Arizona Cattlement’s Association.