

Border crossing: Communion at Friendship Park

by [John Fanestil](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

Among the least recognized yet most lasting legacies of the Bush administration's "war on terror" has been a dramatic transformation of the U.S.-Mexico border. This transformation is about to reach its symbolic and geographic culmination at Friendship Park, a plaza atop a seaside bluff south of San Diego.

For generations residents of San Diego and Tijuana have gathered at Friendship Park to visit with family and friends through the border fence. In coming months the Department of Homeland Security will erect a secondary fence across the park, eliminating public access to this historic meeting place. Until then, I will serve Communion at Friendship Park each Sunday afternoon, distributing the elements through the border fence.

Moves toward destroying Friendship Park began in the aftermath of 9/11, when Republicans in Congress, many of whom had long championed cracking down on illegal immigration, decided that control of the southwest border was a matter of national security. Never mind that the men who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did not enter the U.S. from Mexico. Never mind that no known terrorist ever has. The psychic needs of an aggrieved nation matched nicely with the desire to limit Mexican migration to the U.S.—a desire shared to varying degrees by many Americans for many different reasons. Post-9/11, the idea that the nation's security depends on "securing the border" became axiomatic for politicians of all ideological persuasions.

The Bush administration institutionalized the axiom in 2003, when the newly created Department of Homeland Security took operational control of the Border Patrol and other immigration-related agencies. The result was more than mere bureaucratic reshuffling: with all matters pertaining to life on the border now cast in the light of national security, the strategies of heightened vigilance, beefed-up enforcement and increased militarization came to trump all others in U.S. border policy. What was

once the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was reorganized as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The sound of the acronyms reflected a deep shift in organizational culture. As a friend of mine once put it: “We used to offer services for immigration and naturalization; now we give a cold shoulder.”

This recasting of the border as a battleground in the war on terror has dramatically altered the physical and social landscape. By the end of the Bush administration, over one third of the 2,000 miles of border with Mexico will be covered by double or triple layers of fence. Vehicle and pedestrian waits at border-crossings have doubled and tripled too. Border Patrol staffing in the region has increased more than 50 percent since 2004, a figure which does not include periodic reinforcements from the National Guard and other branches of the armed services.

Rates of Mexican migration have not significantly diminished, but the pattern of this migration has been profoundly altered. The cost of entering the U.S. illegally—as measured by the price of a “coyote” on the streets of Tijuana—has increased tenfold in the past eight years, a fact that entails a host of unintended consequences. Because there is now real money to be made in immigrant-smuggling, the enterprise is more and more dominated by the forces of organized crime, which also traffic in illegal drugs.

With illegal entry so much more costly and difficult, Mexicans committed to bettering their families’ circumstances have been creative—in some cases desperate—in seeking alternative ways of entry. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. did not cross the border illegally; rather, they crossed the border legally on student or tourist visas and then stayed illegally. Immigration officials refer to these people as “visa overstayers.” The black market in falsified documents has exploded, as have cases of Border Patrol corruption. Poor Mexicans unable to afford these more sophisticated means of entering the U.S. have assumed greater and greater risks by attempting to cross on foot through the borderlands’ remote mountains and deserts, and thousands have died trying.

Because the cost of reentering the U.S. is now so high, more Mexican immigrants than ever are making commitments to stay long-term in the U.S., commitments which often include arrangements for family members to come and join them. This is the most ironic consequence of increased border enforcement: what for generations was a pattern of two-way migration (from Mexico to the U.S. and back again) has

been turned into a one-way street.

The transformation of the border from a filter through which people flowed slowly, steadily and freely in both directions to a less permeable barrier characterized by long waits for regulated crossings has imposed a deep toll on people who live in the region. People unfamiliar with *fronterizo* culture may have a hard time understanding it, but millions of border residents think of themselves and their families as living on both sides of the line. Of the region's 13 million people, over 9.5 million are of Mexican ancestry, 6 million of these living on the Mexican side and 3.5 million living in the U.S. (Outside of San Diego and Tucson, Arizona, the region's population is over 90 percent Mexican or Mexican-American.) Most border residents have kinship ties that span the international boundary, which means that U.S. policy is drawing a sharp line of division across millions of family trees.

Champions of "gaining control of the border" achieved a significant breakthrough in 2005 when Congress attached a rider to the Real ID Act granting to Department of Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff the authority to waive any and all laws as he deemed necessary to expedite construction of supplemental fencing along the border. While many consider the Real ID Act an abdication of Congress's constitutional responsibility to exercise oversight of the executive branch, it has withstood legal challenges in the courts and retains the force of law.

On April 1 Chertoff exercised the authority granted to him by Congress and waived over 35 federal, state and local laws and regulations. In announcing the waivers, Chertoff made clear that he believes the executive branch has *carte blanche* to do whatever it pleases to complete construction of the fence. "I reserve the authority," Chertoff wrote, "to make further waivers from time to time as I may determine to be necessary."

In San Diego, the pace of construction has accelerated dramatically in the wake of the April 1 waivers. The urban corridor connecting San Diego and Tijuana had already been double-fenced, and DHS is now pursuing the construction of triple-fencing along the western-most 3.5 miles of the border, all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

To meet the stated goal of completing the project by year-end, DHS has condemned over 150 acres of land (without adequate compensation of county and state governments). A \$48 million "design-build" contract has been awarded to the Kiewit

Corporation, which will design the project and build it on a timetable allowing no room for public review of any kind. Cutting into the mesa tops and filling the canyons as they work their way to the coast, Kiewit will be relocating some 3 to 4 million cubic yards of earth, transforming what are now alternating canyons and mesa tops into rolling hills.

After reinforcing the existing border fence, Kiewit contractors will erect a second fence that is 20 feet high, made of concrete pylons with steel mesh angled at the top. Between these two barriers they will lay a patrol road made of decomposed granite, allowing for rapid movement of Border Patrol vehicles along the border. A third barrier—this one a chain-link fence—will be built north of the secondary fence, with a maintenance road in between. The final price tag on the project is expected to exceed \$70 million, making it one of the largest public works projects in recent San Diego County history.

The project has been condemned roundly by human rights, interfaith and environmental organizations. Even mainstream groups like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society have registered formal complaints, the Sierra Club joining a recent lawsuit contesting the constitutionality of the DHS waiver authority. In May the Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of the case.

For some of us in San Diego, the destruction of Friendship Park is a desecration. The park was constructed with the aim of promoting friendly relations between the peoples of the two nations. In its earliest days, the international boundary inside the park sported no fence at all but was marked by a single, low-hanging chain, allowing people to move freely from one side to the other. When the first fence at the park was erected in the 1970s it was made of chain link with the intent of preserving clear views of the other side and of promoting transnational gatherings.

I have been visiting the park for years, often to participate in an annual Christmas event called La Posada Sin Fronteras. La Posada is an ancient Mexican ritual in which participants reenact the search of Mary and Joseph for a dwelling place (*posada*, in Spanish) on the night of Jesus' birth. Each December, a large interfaith crowd assembles at Friendship Park. People on the Mexican side sing a traditional song, "Pidiendo Posada," asking for a place to stay. People on the U.S. side play the role of the innkeeper, declaring that "there is no room in the inn."

Last December I was honored to preside at La Posada Sin Fronteras, and since then I have taken to visiting the park more frequently, sometimes weekly. Along the way I have gotten to know people who have been visiting the park for decades, and a not insignificant number who consider the border fence their spiritual home.

I have witnessed people kiss through the fence, cry together through the fence, buy and sell tamales through the fence and say goodbye to dying loved ones through the fence. I know one young man, a U.S. citizen, who visits the fence regularly to see his Mexican *novia*, the mother of his two small children. A recovering drug addict, he can't convince his girlfriend to marry him, and he says he doesn't blame her because of the way he's treated her in the past. He can't believe that public access to Friendship Park will soon be eliminated. It is the only place he gets to see his children. The last time I saw him, I gave him my phone number and told him that if he and his *novia* decide to get married at Friendship Park, he should give me a call.

The tradition of serving Communion at Friendship Park began with a vigil on June 1. For this event we planned to share a "love feast," rather than enter into the complicated liturgical issues of how to share Communion with the spectacularly ecumenical crowd that turns out for our border gatherings. As we made our preparations, we were told by Border Patrol agents—for the first time ever in our years of gathering at this location—that we were not to pass anything through the fence. Doing so, we were told, would constitute a "customs violation." On that day we decided to adhere to this new restriction, and in an act of lament, those of us in the United States ate our bread in silence, as we looked through the fence at our friends and *compadres* in Mexico, who went without.

Two months later, on August 3, we gathered again, and this time I couldn't bring myself to tolerate what seems to me a farcical prohibition. "What have we come to as a nation," I asked the crowd assembled, "when the simplest and most common act of human solidarity and fellowship is named an illegal act?"

This time I was determined to celebrate the sacrament. I consecrated the bread and juice and passed them through the fence to a Methodist colleague from a church in Tijuana. People formed into two lines, one in each country, and came forward solemnly to receive Communion. People were given the choice of receiving the elements from either celebrant, the people on the U.S. side having been forewarned that the act of taking a small piece of bread through the fence might be considered by some an act of civil disobedience.

I have never taken so much pleasure in not serving Communion. One by one, my friends on the U.S. side shook their heads at me as they approached the serving station and reached out their hands to receive the body of Christ through the fence. I sat silently with tortilla in hand, as my colleague from Tijuana, separated from me by 18 inches and an international boundary, served the entire congregation.

I am committed to serving Communion at Friendship Park each Sunday afternoon until border authorities prevent me from doing so. For at least a few more weeks, Friendship Park will remain a most humanizing place along an increasingly dehumanized border.