

The Wrong Place to Stop Terrorists

The Washington Post

By Peter Beinart
Thursday, May 4, 2006; A25

Last week Senate Republicans passed an amendment diverting \$1.9 billion from securing Iraq to securing Arizona. The new money for border security, explained New Hampshire's Judd Gregg, will pay for "the unmanned vehicles, the cars, the helicopters which are a critical part of our fight in the war on terrorism." Senate Democrats generally opposed the diversion. But they wholeheartedly agreed that defeating terrorism requires more enforcement along the Rio Grande. As Massachusetts's Edward Kennedy recently put it, America's immigration problems "directly threaten U.S. national security."

Rarely have the two parties been so united in a belief that is so wrong. Stopping terrorists from coming across America's southern border would be an urgent concern -- if any were actually coming. So far, however, there is little evidence they are. Using newspaper reports and government documents, Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke of the Nixon Center have painstakingly compiled a database of 373 known or suspected terrorists in North America or Western Europe since 1993. In a forthcoming essay in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, they disclose their findings: Not one terrorist has entered the United States from Mexico. And they're not the only ones who have reached that conclusion. As a recent paper published by Syracuse University's Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism notes, "it does not appear that authorities have apprehended even a single terrorist trying to cross over the southern border into the United States."

Immigration scaremongers like to note that more than 150,000 OTMs -- "other than Mexicans" -- were caught crossing the southern border in fiscal 2005. What they generally don't say is that the vast majority of them -- as much as 99 percent -- come from other Latin American countries. The number hailing from "countries of interest," i.e., Islamic countries that produce a lot of terrorists, is in the hundreds, if not the tens.

Does that mean it's impossible for a terrorist to enter the United States from Mexico? Of course not. But consider the odds. The United State posts more than five agents per mile across our southern border. By contrast, we post less than one agent every five miles across our northern border. What's more, as the United States has cut off urban crossing points in places such as El Paso and San Diego, it has forced many illegal immigrants to go through the Arizona desert -- a brutal journey, particularly for someone with no knowledge of the terrain. Would-be terrorists coming from Canada are not only less likely to be caught, they are less likely to die along the way.

There also happen to be many more potential jihadists in Canada. Unlike Mexico, with its negligible Arab and Muslim population, Canada in recent decades has welcomed large numbers of immigrants from the Middle East. And while the vast majority are law-abiding, Canadian authorities estimate that roughly 50 terrorist groups operate in the country. In their study, Leiken and Brooke identify three suspected terrorists who have tried to enter the United states from Canada, including Ahmed Ressay, an Algerian native arrested in December 1999 on his way to blow up Los Angeles International Airport.

On national security grounds, then, if America wants to build a wall along one of our borders, it should be our border to the north. More practically, the best way to prevent terrorists from entering the United States, according to experts such as Richard Falkenrath, a Brookings Institution scholar and former deputy homeland security adviser, would be to invest in a state-of-the-art terrorist watch list complete with biometric screening. After all, terrorists are most likely to enter the United States the same way the Sept. 11 hijackers did -- through airports.

Over the past four years, politicians have tried to fold every issue imaginable into the "war on terror." The temptation is understandable. It would be wonderfully convenient if America's disparate problems all had the same solution -- if the government could ease Americans' economic and cultural anxieties about illegal immigration at the same time it safeguarded them against the jihadist threat. Unfortunately, it can't. And when politicians conflate immigration and terrorism, they not only subtly tar illegal Mexican immigrants as violently anti-American, which they are not, but they also give Americans a false sense of security. Sinking billions into enforcement along the southern border may or may not safeguard American culture and American jobs, but it will do precious little to protect American lives.

Peter Beinart is editor at large of the New Republic and author of "The Good Fight: Why Liberals -- and Only Liberals -- Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again," to be published next month.