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Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement (Inter-America)

Timothy J. Dunn

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To understand border enforcement and the shape it has taken, it is imperative to examine a groundbreaking Border Patrol operation begun in 1993 in El Paso, Texas, "Operation Blockade." The El Paso Border Patrol designed and implemented this radical new strategy, posting 400 agents directly on the banks of the Rio Grande in highly visible positions to deter unauthorized border crossings into the urban areas of El Paso from neighboring Ciudad Juárez—a marked departure from the traditional strategy of apprehending unauthorized crossers after entry. This approach, of "prevention through deterrence," became the foundation of the 1994 and 2004 National Border Patrol Strategies for the Southern Border. Politically popular overall, it has rendered unauthorized border crossing far less visible in many key urban areas. However, the real effectiveness of the strategy is debatable, at best. Its implementation has also led to a sharp rise in the number of deaths of unauthorized border crossers.

Here, Dunn examines the paradigm-changing Operation Blockade and related border enforcement efforts in the El Paso region in great detail, as well as the local social and political situation that spawned the approach and has shaped it since. Dunn particularly spotlights the human rights abuses and enforcement excesses inflicted on local Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants as well as the challenges to those abuses. Throughout the book, Dunn filters his research and fieldwork through two competing lenses, human rights versus the rights of national sovereignty and citizenship.

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