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If you build it, they'll come anyway

BY WAYNE A. CORNELIUS

BOTH THE SENATE and House versions of an immigration bill to keep unauthorized migrants out of the United States rely on the construction of hundreds of miles of new physical barriers, high-tech gadgetry and more manpower along the Southwest border. But from Western Europe to the Far East, the evidence clearly shows that anything short of complete militarization of international borders will not deter illegal entry by determined, economically motivated migrants. Partial militarization only rechannels illegal migration. It doesn't reduce it overall. If the probability of apprehension isn't uniformly high, migrants will continue to cross in areas where risk of detection remains relatively low.

The latest case is Spain. Since the mid-1980s, the country has become a major destination and transit country for Third World migrants, especially from Africa and Latin America. But illegal immigration only became a crisis last fall, when waves of sub-Saharan Africans began jumping the fences that separate Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's small territorial enclaves on the North African coast, from Morocco.

In response, the Spanish government doubled the height of the fences and installed high-tech monitoring equipment to create the world's most elaborate electronic border-surveillance system. It also diplomatically pressured the Moroccan

government to mobilize its police forces to stop migrants from using the country as an exit point.

The assaults on the border fortifications in Ceuta and Melilla followed Spain's installation of advanced radar-detection equipment and stepped-up maritime patrols in the Strait of Gibraltar. African migrants were crossing the 9-mile strait in small, grossly overloaded rubber rafts that often capsized in the rough waters, drowning their passengers. Spanish officials boasted that the new technology and added patrols made the country's southern borders "watertight."

But almost immediately, prospective migrants and the smugglers who assisted them shifted their efforts toward the Atlantic. Spain's Canary Islands became their new destination. This was a much longer and more dangerous passage — a voyage of 100 miles from the Moroccan coast in heavy seas. When the Moroccan government moved to shut down this route, migrant departure points shifted southward to Mauritania, a journey of 600 miles to the Canary Islands. After another flurry of Spanish diplomatic activity, Mauritanian authorities began cracking down, which pushed embarkations farther south, to Senegal, a 900-mile voyage.

Despite the perilous, eight- to 10-day ocean crossing in flimsy wooden boats, sub-Saharan migrants continue to sail for the Canary Islands in record numbers. About 8,000 migrants have been

apprehended so far this year, nearly double the total in 2005. Humanitarian organizations estimate 2,000 more have perished at sea.

In the face of the African exodus, the Spanish government continues to focus on intercepting migrants before they arrive or making their journey as difficult as possible. Spain does not have a guest worker program big enough to allow for an orderly, legal flow of African workers into its economy. Although the Socialist government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero last year legalized nearly 600,000 migrants who had been working in the country without authorization, there has been no systematic crackdown on employers who to hire illegals, thus assuring that this workforce will grow again.

Spain is losing the battle for immigration control for two reasons. First, the real-income gap between Spain and sub-Saharan Africa is huge and growing, not so much because the migrant-sending countries are economically stagnant but because Spain's economy continues to outperform all other European Union countries. Unemployment has dropped dramatically since 1996, and native-born Spaniards overwhelmingly spurn the jobs done by foreign workers. Second, Spain is aging so rapidly that by 2030 its population will be the second-oldest in the world, after Japan's, and replacement workers are urgently needed.

Spain's experience should be a cautionary tale for immigration reformers in the U.S. Hardly anyone questions the efficacy of pouring ever more resources into border enforcement, which we have been doing since 1993, even as the population of illegal immigrants has nearly tripled.

The problem with fortifying borders is that it does nothing to reduce the forces of supply and demand that drive illegal immigration. The Senate approved 370 miles of new double- and triple-layered fencing and 500 miles of vehicle barriers. Last December, the House voted for 700

miles of new fortifications. If built, these new layers of protection will have no discernible effect on the flow of illegal migrants from Mexico.

But these enhancements will enable smugglers to charge more for their services; divert crossings to more remote and dangerous areas, increasing migrant fatalities; induce more migrants and their family members to settle permanently here; and cause more crossings through legal ports-of-entry using false or borrowed documents.

The outcome might be different if we were prepared to accept the huge economic and diplomatic costs of militarizing 100% of our land borders with Mexico and Canada, as well as the Pacific and Gulf coasts, and the long-term expense of monitoring the fortifications. But polls say most Americans are leery of this approach. Even as part of a "comprehensive" immigration reform package, anything less than a full-blown Fortress America makes no sense, except as a symbolic reward to xenophobes.

WAYNE A. CORNELIUS is director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego and coeditor of "Impacts of U.S. Immigration Control Policies on Mexican Migration: The View from Sending Communities" (forthcoming, 2006).