

Book Review: Hidden Deaths in a Long War — The US war against immigrants

Saturday 2 May 2020, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2020).

Sand and Blood: America's Stealth War on the Mexico Border. By John Carlos Frey. Bold Type Books, New York, 2019, 243 pages, \$28 hardcover.

Contents

- [The Long War Against Immigrant](#)
- [Prevention through Death](#)
- [Bill Clinton's Legacy](#)
- [Using 9/11 as Pretext](#)

"I WAS SURE that if I had stayed in the desert, I would be dead."

Much of the power of this book comes from the author John Carlos Frey's personal narrative, as well as his work in interviewing many people including officials, immigrants on both sides of the border, humanitarian water providers in the desert, activists and many more with first-hand knowledge — even a few Border Patrol agents not cut from the same racist and cruel cloth as most of them.

Frey went on forays into the desert with water providers, and gives a detailed narrative of the experience, so readers feel like they were there.

Another long account is his joining with a group of immigrants led by coyotes, criminals who smuggle immigrants across the border for exorbitant fees. These are members of the Mexican drug cartels, adept at smuggling drugs. With Washington's war on the border making the crossing difficult, the cartels saw an opening for another illegal capitalist enterprise.

Frey joined the group in Mexico some 70 miles from the border. Allowed to take videos of the immigrants along the way, he was told in no uncertain terms that if he took any videos of the cartel members he would be killed, and he believed them.

Getting up to the border was itself grueling. Getting across into the desert on the U.S. side took the expertise and patience of the coyotes.

Frey took part in the long trek in the desert on the U.S. side and chronicled the difficulties and hardships. Those who couldn't keep up were left behind, with a good possibility of dying.

Frey himself found he couldn't continue. "I had blisters on my feet. My skin burned, and my throat was dry. My water had to last me at least the whole day, so I rationed it in sips and only sips, and it was never enough.

"By 10:00 a.m., sweat was singing my eyes, and the day appeared to be hotter than the previous scorcher. I took one last sip of what was left of my water which was hot now, and yelled to the guide that I couldn't go on."

He was left behind. But unlike the migrants he was accompanying, Frey had a phone, and called to be rescued.

The Long War Against Immigrants

Sand and Blood presents a harrowing, well-researched description of Washington's war against immigrants on the Mexican border. The author is an investigative journalist and documentary filmmaker, including for the PBS Newshour. His interviews can also be seen at www.democracynow.org, August 15, 2018 and July 10, 2019.

John Carlos Frey was born in Tijuana, Mexico. His parents moved in 1965 across the border to southern San Diego, from where he could see Tijuana as a child. His mother was Mexican and his father a United States citizen, so he was a U.S. citizen too.

This fact enabled him to move fairly freely back and forth between the U.S. side and Mexico, and he followed the developments at the border his whole life.

We are well aware of Trump's cruel treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers at the border. What I was largely ignorant of before reading the book was how the stage was set by previous administrations.

A qualitative turning point came in 1986 under the Reagan administration as immigration from Mexico grew, with what became known as the "amnesty bill" because it allowed legal status for many undocumented immigrants who had worked in the United States for years and had put down roots.

As Frey writes: "But the bill did not address the root causes for the migration [T]he bill's authors also made sure to provide for a militaristic approach to border enforcement. [It] would be fortified with physical barriers, and more border guards would be deployed.

"If the United States was going to grant an exception to codified immigration law by granting amnesty, it was going to make sure, by sheer force, that migrants would not come illegally again."

But of course they continued to come anyway. Frey also says, "Southern California was the destination for undocumented immigrants, and they would gain access to the United States through Tijuana and cross into San Diego

"But in the late eighties and early nineties, this pristine area became one of the main centers for the militarization of the border with Mexico."

Under the administration of George H.W. Bush (Bush the Elder), 1989-93, the size of the Border Patrol was doubled and seven hundred miles of new border fencing was built. But the real militarization of the border began under Bill Clinton as immigration continued to grow along with anti-immigration sentiment whipped up by the Republicans.

Prevention through Death

Sensing a winning issue, Clinton out-Republicaned the Republicans on immigration, and the militarization of the borders began in earnest. Under Clinton's order, the Border Patrol issued the Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994 and Beyond — National Strategy, which became known as the

“prevention through deterrence strategy,” still employed today.

That strategy was to build up fencing and Border Patrol agents at the border between El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico, and to increase the fencing between Tijuana and San Diego, and the Border Patrol there. This would force those entering the United States without documents to cross the border in the inhospitable terrain of mountains and desert, sometimes scorching hot.

The trek across this terrain is long and difficult. Many die along the way, most often from dehydration. Frey has a chapter titled “Death as Deterrent.”

The border between El Paso and Juarez is the Rio Grande, crossed by bridges. Some try to evade the Border Patrol by swimming or using rafts to cross the river, and there are drownings — another “deterrence.”

It isn’t known how many migrants have died in the deserts and mountains since “prevention through deterrence” was implemented from Clinton up through Trump, for reasons Frey explains, but it is in the thousands.

Many bodies and skeletons have been found by humanitarian volunteers who venture into these terrains to leave water for the migrants.

These heroic volunteers notify local authorities, who sometimes can bury the bodies. But most of the time they can only advise the Border Patrol where the bodies are. Although the Patrol has the resources to find and bury the corpses, and keep track of how many there are, and are supposed to do so, they most often do nothing.

Bill Clinton’s Legacy

In his 1995 State of the Union address to Congress, Clinton struck many themes and falsehoods Trump uses (although Trump uses openly racist language):

“All Americans, not only in the states most heavily affected but every place in this country, are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country. The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants. The public service they use impose burdens on our taxpayers.

When Clinton ended “welfare as we know it” in 1996, included in the bill was the provision that barred even legal immigrants from accessing welfare for the first five years of their stay in the United States.

Also in that year Clinton signed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act after the first World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City bombings.

The Act allowed the government to increase prosecutions and arrests of suspected “terrorists,” but also allowed immigrants, legal or otherwise, to be apprehended and detained without due process if they had been convicted of certain felonies. As a result, the number of immigrants held in detention doubled.

Another law signed by Clinton, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, placed new restrictions on immigrants anywhere in the country who were caught without documents, denying them due process.

An undocumented immigrant, if deported, could not apply for any legal means to re-enter for 10 years. This meant that families of mixed undocumented, documented and citizen members could be separated for ten years. Most likely, those deported would try to re-enter.

The law also allowed the Attorney General's office to in effect deputize local law enforcement as federal immigration officers. Sheriffs and cops could stop anyone and demand proof of legal residency.

The notorious Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio famously took full advantage. Some cities have resisted, but their struggle with the feds continues up to today, with ICE raids in "sanctuary cities."

This measure sent shock waves of fear through Latino communities. People stopped trusting police, and avoided reporting crimes to local police for fear they'd be deported.

Clinton also made it even harder for migrants to apply for legal documents to enter. The reason there are so many immigrants crossing the border without documents is that it can take years, even two decades, to get legal documents for Latinos from Mexico and points south.

Also under Clinton, the military increasingly was used at the border to enforce anti-immigrant laws. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 said the military cannot be used as a police force domestically — unless the Congress or the President authorizes it. This loophole had been rarely used, but that has been reversed in the war against immigrants at the Mexican border.

Using 9/11 as Pretext

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the "War on Terror" was launched, justifying the war against Afghanistan and Iraq, and with attacks on civil liberties domestically.

I hadn't realized before reading the book that there was another aspect: the border with Mexico was falsely claimed to be an entry point for terrorists, so the militarization of that border (but not the Canadian) was greatly increased.

Under Bush Junior, the budget for the the Border Patrol jumped from \$1 billion to \$2 billion. Under Obama and Trump the amount continued to rise, and is now around \$4 billion.

Under George W. Bush, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established. Concerning the southern border, the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was established.

CPB took over all functions of Customs, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), including the Border Patrol, creating the largest police force in the country, of some 60,000. It was composed of Customs and Border Patrol agents and immigration inspectors. ICE did not fall under the CBP, but was part of DHS.

Under Bush another law was added, for the first time making crossing the border without papers a crime. The Trump administration's sadistic border policies required no new laws; those passed under Clinton and Bush sufficed.

Under president Obama, ICE ballooned to 20,000 employees with 400 offices around the country. Its duties morphed to include a massive immigrant detention center complex, and deportation force, with a budget of \$6 billion. ICE operates throughout the country, but also in the border area where the Border Patrol operates.

“Obama continued the legacy of all U.S. presidents and administrations since Ronald Reagan, making life more difficult for immigrants,” Frey writes. “Obama’s rate of deportations of immigrants already established in the country was higher than any president before or since. During his eight years in office, Obama deported more than five million people, and, so far [2019] even Trump has not beat that record.

“Obama also expanded family detention facilities for women with their children” as a response to an influx of thousands of Central Americans fleeing violence and poverty.

“Many believe that the detention of children, albeit with their mothers, is the most egregious immigration-related stain on the Obama record.”

That’s how the stage was set by both Democrats and Republicans for the openly racist Trump to intensify and deepen the war against immigrants on the border, in all its horrific manifestations that we know about.

Barry Sheppard

P.S.

- Against the Current 206, May-June 2020:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/206/marx-in-his-times/>