

Wall of shame: Mostly a political gesture

From the Editors in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

"Mr. Gorbachev—tear down this wall." Ronald Reagan's demand in 1987 regarding the Berlin Wall needed no nuancing. It was obvious that many East Germans wanted to enter the politically free and economically prosperous West and that leaders in East Berlin and Moscow could prevent them only by building a physical barrier, guarded by machine guns.

Now a wall is going up on U.S. soil, and its backers include many who claim to be Reagan's political heirs. The wall is planned for almost 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Some of it will be built on private land. One farmer about to be separated from her fields by the wall asked the *Chicago Tribune*, "Are we going to have to ask permission from the Border Patrol every time we need to plow?" The wall will not be contiguous—sometimes a mountain or electronic trip wire will take the place of concrete. But it's likely to be useless. As Governor Janet Napolitano of Arizona has often said, "Show me a 50-foot wall and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder."

The wall is mostly a political gesture, a dramatic way to allow presidential candidates and legislators to claim that they're being tough on immigration and tough in defending national security. Proponents like to raise the specter of terrorists crossing the Rio Grande to enter the U.S. illegally, even though the 9/11 hijackers entered the country legally, with U.S. visas. The posturing on walling out illegal immigrants has thwarted bipartisan efforts to enact comprehensive immigration reform.

Comedians and cartoonists have had fun observing that if the wall does get built, it will probably be constructed by illegal immigrants. Comedy became reality when the Golden State Fence Company, which is working on a section of the fence in California, was fined millions in 2006 for employing undocumented workers.

Some 135 landowners in Texas, California and Arizona have refused to allow surveyors to do the preliminary work necessary for the government to purchase

their land through eminent domain. When the federal government sued the landowners, over 100 of them decided to resist in court. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has raged against the dissenters: “What we’re not going to do is say that everyone gets to decide whether they’re going to participate in the process and if they don’t want to, then the greater good be damned.”

But what is the greater good? There would not be millions of undocumented workers in this country if there was not work for them to do and if there were no employers eager to hire them. The record shows that immigrants’ children and grandchildren learn English quickly and become productive citizens. The wall is an unprecedented physical expression of xenophobia. Xenophobia is not new in American history, but every instance of it makes our culture more coarse and undermines efforts to think sensibly about immigration policies and to deal realistically with the 12 million undocumented immigrants already here.

[Editor's note: In the print edition and in an earlier Web version, we repeated a legend about the 9/11 hijackers—that they entered the U.S. through Canada. All the evidence indicates that the hijackers did not come through Canada and that they entered the U.S. with U.S. visas. We deeply regret the error.]