

# Truth of the border: It will take two nations to succeed

By Lawrence A. Herzog

In the 19th century, writers called it the "land of sunshine, adobe and silence." It was a landscape not of people, but of vast, empty desert terrain, towering mesas and deep-cut canyons. It was the frontier, unsettled and uncertain, sometimes a hideout for fugitives from the law.

Only a century later, the United States-Mexico borderlands encompass one of the most strategic regions in the Western Hemisphere. Heavily populated cities cover what was once an arid wilderness. Their management is gradually becoming a vital link in U.S.-Mexico relations.

For a brief moment this past January, hemispheric attention focused on the international frontier. The red carpets were unfurled as the presidents of the two nations gathered in the border city of Mexicali for a fourth historic meeting.

No mere accident of geography brought the two national leaders together in this Mexican boundary metropolis of 1 million inhabitants. Since the beginning of the decade, the border zone has demanded the attention of the national media. Both presidential candidates in the 1984 Reagan-Mondale campaign made reference to it in televised debates. Reports on smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal immigration, border crime, sewage spills and water pollution have brought this once remote region into the living rooms of American families from Jersey City to Tacoma.

What effect will decisions about the border have on United States foreign policy? That is a question national legislators will need to address seriously by the end of the decade.

Some lessons might be learned in other parts of the world. In Western Europe, nearly 14 million people live within 25 miles of an international boundary. Sophisticated border planning has been carried out there for more than a decade.

Dr. Hans Briner, director of one of the larger border region planning agencies, the Regio Basiliensis, recently visited San Diego. At a meeting sponsored by the International Trade Commission of San Diego County, he said that "border planning touches on foreign policy-making" in the Swiss-Franco-German borderlands over which his privately funded agency presides.

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*Herzog is coordinator of urban studies and planning at the University of California, San Diego. He is currently writing a book about border cities, and is editor of Planning the International Border Metropolis, a product of last spring's conference on the San Diego-Tijuana region, which will be published by UCSD's Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies.*

More than 2 million residents in this three-nation European border zone are affected by common environmental threats such as air pollution and nuclear plant sitings. Border dwellers share the benefits of an integrated tramway system connecting settlements in the three nations, and of cooperative efforts to promote business, culture and communication across boundaries.

Border policies made by the Regio are designed to enhance the economic, environmental and cultural health of the international region. Local governments work together to achieve common goals that are supported by foreign policy-makers in the national capitals. A strong sense of fraternalism across boundaries is evident. As Briner noted, "We have to help our neighbors get more personality, more power, more possibilities."

Comparison of European and United States-Mexico boundary situations may prove to be a frustrating exercise at best. Vast differences separate our border regions. But the similarities cannot be forgotten.

First, there is the numbers game. Since World War II, as in Western Europe, large- and medium-sized cities have sprung up along the 2,000-mile frontier. In the last decade, the growth rates of U.S. border cities were three times as large as the national average (11 percent). In Mexico, border municipalities grew at more than twice the national rate (37 percent).

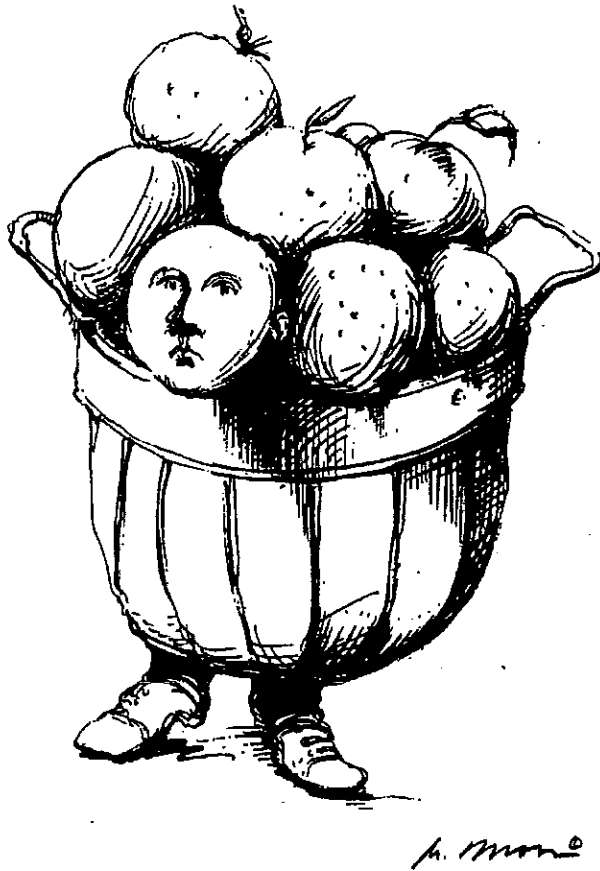
Probably between 6 and 7 million people now live on or near the international boundary, and three times that number in the states contiguous with the border on either side. Yet, like Western Europe, the numbers do not tell the whole story.

The international boundary region is becoming a land of interbreeding culture, economy and living space. The juxtaposition of living conditions for a rapidly expanding, bi-cultural population creates management problems that are crossing the desks of policy-makers in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City with far more regularity than ever before.

Along the California border, problems facing the region have repercussions in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. This was demonstrated repeatedly in 1985.

Border crime is a good example of this. It is now well known that Mexican migrants seeking to enter the United States under the cover of darkness are in great danger of being robbed, murdered or raped. Having entered the country illegally, they are especially vulnerable to criminal acts. Worse still, the offenders typically flee across the border into Mexico, quickly disappearing into the large urban areas.

This raises a question that is being asked both by members of Congress and presidential advisers. How can criminal justice be enforced in the canyons and hills



along the San Diego-Tijuana border when the criminal flees into Mexican jurisdiction? In 1985, 10 boundary zone murders were documented by the San Diego Police Department, and nine of these cases remain unsolved. Their resolution very likely will call for a measure of U.S.-Mexican cooperation that enters the domain of foreign policy.

Pollution now threatens the California border. Industrial and sewage runoff from Mexico crosses the boundary and seeps into the watershed of the New River, eventually reaching the Imperial Valley's Salton Sea. In Tecate, and in Tijuana, it is feared that U.S. companies have been dumping toxic wastes into unregulated Mexican sites.

In Tijuana-San Diego, several million gallons of untreated Mexican sewage have entered San Diego's watershed each day for the past few years. Last year, tension between the two nations erupted when the U.S. sought to prevent Mexico from receiving a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank. U.S. officials argued that the loan, for building the Colorado River-Tijuana aqueduct, should not be approved unless Mexico contractually agreed to address the trans-boundary

sewage spill problem. Mexico felt that it was being bullied.

California's border also was traumatized in the aftermath of the search for those involved in the kidnapping and murder of U.S. drug enforcement agent Enrique Camarena. The incident temporarily strained relations between the two nations, and, as a result, nearly paralyzed the border communities along the California-Baja California boundary.

Operation Intercept, one of the largest international border search efforts in history, created traffic congestion so great, that the border was virtually sealed off for days. For the first time in years, the trans-boundary lifeline that connects families, businesses, workers and friends was cut. The border zone, for a brief time, was transformed back into its role in the 19th century — a tense meeting place punctuating hostilities between two nations.

What is to be done in this enigmatic region? The answers are not entirely clear even to those given a mandate to study them.

Immigration reform, which has received much attention, continues its stalemate in Congress. Migrant streams from Mexico pour into the United States in larger volumes than ever. Border crime lingers, and border pollution is still not under control. In the meantime, cities on both sides of the border grow.

Even the recent meeting of the two presidents did not necessarily signal greater attention to the border region for the future. The great irony of this rendezvous on the international boundary was that, for the most part, the national leaders discussed everything but the border. Reports suggested that the main topics on the agenda were Mexico's financial problems, intervention in Central America and drug smuggling.

By the end of this century, problems native to the border region are sure to sit high on the agenda of U.S.-Mexico relations. Pollution control, criminal justice, sewage management, traffic regulation, land use planning, trade and economic development will present policy-makers with an extensive line-up of border concerns demanding bi-national attention.

It will be tempting to look to the Western European model of border region cooperation for a vision of our future. Yet the lessons of that model must be tempered in our own backyard by a century's history of territorial conflict, and of separately evolving societies.

How the boundary will affect border life, particularly in the large cities on either side, remains unclear. We recognize with Mexico that we share a set of problems and opportunities here. At the same time, our attention

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has been shifted to other arenas, such as oil and monetary policy. We have not put together any solid framework in which to establish the "rules of the game" for managing the boundary region. At worst, we are not even communicating very well along the border.

The problems of creating a fruitful cross-border dialogue were brought to light in a conference held at the University of California, San Diego, last spring. The conference brought U.S. and Mexican experts and politicians to the La Jolla campus for a full day of discussion of "Urban Growth and Public Policy Options for the San Diego-Tijuana Region."

The difficulty of engineering such a dialogue became clear immediately. The mayors of the two cities were invited. San Diego's mayor attended, the mayor of Tijuana did not. High-ranking officials from the federal urban planning agencies of the two nations (secretary of urban development and ecology

in Mexico; the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) were invited. From Washington, D.C., a senior executive and expert on the border was sent. From Mexicali, a junior level planner was sent to represent the senior official invited.

Since the conference was open to the public, Mexican officials were concerned about having their comments quoted in the media. One Mexican participant shared this with me during a break. It is the nature of the Mexican system that public commentaries by government officials can damage their careers, especially commentaries with foreign policy implications. So even the Mexicans who did attend were reduced to making innocent statements, or to reading from existing policy documents.

Possibly the most insightful comment was made by a Mexican panelist who stated that "enough information exists to make border decisions for the next 200 years, yet the level of ignorance in decision-making on both sides of the border is, at times, appalling."

The ease with which misunderstanding can occur was also revealed. One U.S. official, in trying to explain his view of the cross-border relationship, used the phrase, "We need to educate them (Mexican planners)." What he meant was that his agency needed to communicate its needs, and *vice versa*. One of the Mexican participants became infuriated with this remark, and offered a strongly worded rebuttal, laced with hostility.

Cultural contrasts, some as simple as language, will continue to serve notice that, although the boundary is no longer the barrier it once was, our two nations are still separated by an expanse of differences in ways of thinking and living. To build a bridge across this expanse, and be able to navigate it frequently and well, is the challenge that will face our policy-makers.