

# September 11 A Watershed in the U.S. Migratory Debate<sup>1</sup>

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Daniel Aguilar/Reuters

Surveillance on the border has increased as never before since September 11.

On September 11 we awoke to one of the cruelest terrorist offensives in contemporary U.S. history, a watershed in the history of international relations. Undoubtedly, the United States has already felt its repercussions both domestically and in its foreign policy. Probably there will also be important changes in its migratory policy and legislation, given the domestic debate about immigration that has changed radically since the attacks.

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The public's perception of immigrants, its attitude about what is "foreign" or "external" may change, negatively affecting Mexican immigrants. Clearly U.S. foreign policy with regard to national security will toughen, taking on an even more defensive position to fight terrorism, a tendency that will definitely have an impact on the U.S.-Mexican border and, therefore, a negative impact on bilateral relations.

We know that about 6,500 people died or disappeared in the Twin Towers, of whom about 2,600 supposedly came from 65 different countries, and many of whom were Mex-

ican. In some cases, their migratory status meant that not even their own family members knew of their tragic fate. This allows us to think about the many ties that unite us with Americans, ties that do not jibe with many Mexicans' only grudging recognition of the depth of the tragedy. While many European countries showed their solidarity by holding three minutes of silence, our government representatives responded in a slow, lukewarm and fearful manner, getting caught up in domestic discussions that had nothing to do with a simple expression of solidarity with our friends, neighbors, re-

Since five of the 19 hijackers entered the United States through the long, scarcely guarded border with Canada, attitudes have changed about it.<sup>2</sup> While the southern U.S. border is super-militarized, patrolled by 9,000 guards to cover 41 ports of entry, the northern border (3,987 miles long, with 115 ports of entry) is patrolled by only 340 officers, despite its being twice as long as the one shared with Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Now, the government has decided to reinforce surveillance there and authorized the transfer of 100 agents from the southern to the northern border.<sup>4</sup> There is no room for doubt: controlling the 500

one of the "Schengen Area" countries, it is necessary to present a passport, but once inside, the visitor may cross borders as he or she needs.

Until September 11, the U.S. debate about migratory reforms both in the administration and in Congress centered on the impact of immigrants on the country's economy, particularly of unemployed and unschooled workers in the agricultural and service sectors that employ temporary immigrants whether documented or not. There was also discussion about the impact on the environment, among other issues, in addition to the airing of the traditional, recurring xenophobic arguments expressed by some individuals and sectors of U.S. society. After the attacks, the debate has focused on the need to control the borders more as a measure of national security and to ensure that fewer immigrants enter.

Unfortunately for us, the trend toward a more open border between Mexico and the United States is going to reverse. Residents on both sides of the border could not have received a worse piece of news than September 11. Today, the scrupulous inspection of goods on the Mexico-U.S. border has already caused losses in tourism and bilateral trade. Many Americans who make their living from Mexican consumers have watched their sales drop more than 60 percent and, in areas very near to Mexico, up to 90 percent. To temporarily solve this problem, representatives from different sectors on both sides of the border held meetings and agreed on a process to get the border declared an "emergency area"; to do that they solicited tax breaks and immediate loans from the governments of both Mexico and the United States.<sup>6</sup> The situation was worsened by the

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gional partners and —whether we like it or not— allies. Many Mexicans both in the United States and here continue to be confused, fearful and sad not only because of the death of our fellow Mexicans but because of the possible outbreaks of violence and aggression that will make us even more vulnerable.

Americans have awakened vehemently to an awareness of their immense "vulnerability" and today are questioning the effectiveness of their national security. The effects of this unease can be felt only weeks after the events: their borders have become increasingly militarized to control their now fragile national security and they are carrying out investigations to block the entry of new terrorists.

million people who cross both borders every year —180 million from the Canadian side— is a complex task.

On the other hand, many terrorist groups have been discovered in different Canadian provinces, constituting a potential threat not only for Canada, but also for the United States. President Bush ordered his cabinet members, including Attorney General John Ashcroft, to work more closely with their Canadian counterparts and there has even been a proposal of establishing a North American perimeter to harmonize migratory policies, border security and customs norms between both countries.<sup>5</sup> For its part, the Chrétien administration fears that this proposal implies extraordinary cooperation in the European style. That is, to come into

fact that it coincided with the time limit for replacing the *mica*, or border area visa, with new laser visas at a cost of U.S.\$45 each, which has hindered even more the traditional large flow of people in the region. The State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began the process of renovating the visas in 1998 and by January 2001 almost four million laser visas impossible to counterfeit, valid for 10 years each, had been approved.<sup>7</sup> Since a similar number of border passes are still left to be renewed, members of both houses of the U.S. Congress have introduced a bill to extend the time limit until October 2002 to alleviate tensions in the area.

There is no doubt that Mexicans who live in the United States will suffer from more aggressive persecution and will now perhaps be seen as suspicious and dangerous and not just as people looking for work. It is to be expected that the already heavy border surveillance—over the last seven years the number of agents patrolling the border has risen from 4,000 to about 9,000—will increase and focus not only on the hunt for terrorists, but for undocumented migrants, drug traffickers, etc. In the short term, our fellow citizens on the Mexican side will suffer the immediate repercussions of the drop in transborder trade and tourism, a product also of the economic deceleration and/or recession which, if it becomes sharper, will have even graver consequences.

I am convinced that the U.S. debate on immigration will be linked from now on to the issue of terrorism. An important segment of the U.S. public, which in recent years had flirted with the idea of opening up the borders to more immigrants, has changed

its mind today. Recent polls show that this sector of the public now feels it lacks control over its borders; it thinks that terrorists have easily entered into the U.S. and that, therefore, more severe border controls are needed, along with a profound reform of immigration laws. This makes it possible for conservative and extremist voices to resurface, the voices we heard at the beginning of the 1990s with nativist, xenophobic and racist attitudes, and for these opinions to be translated into local and national measures in the tradition of California's Proposition 187.

Unfortunately the trend toward a more open border between Mexico and the U.S. will reverse.

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A few months ago, President Bush was open to the possibility of establishing a guest workers program and the "normalization" of the status of undocumented Mexican migrants. However, his priorities seem to have changed drastically, and he has asked Congress to review immigration policy in order to put in place the mechanisms he needs to fight terrorism. He intends to restrict and review the assignation of temporary visas issued annually; to do that he recently created the Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force.<sup>8</sup> He gave orders for this group, together with the Mexican and Canadian governments, to coordinate the necessary preventive measures to hinder the possible entry of suspected

terrorists through their territories. He has even issued instructions to limit the entry of members of 46 terrorist groups scattered around the world. He has also proposed working jointly to share data bases in order to speed up the detection of possible foreign terrorists.

U.S. congresspersons, for their part, have shown concern and opened a lively debate around the question of amending immigration legislation and finding new solutions to the problem of the security of the Mexican border and, now, the Canadian one. Some have blamed the government for not adequately living up to its function of keep-

ing the borders safe, saying that the terrorist attacks revealed how easily people can enter the United States. Others are concerned about the possible impact on the U.S. economy if many migrant workers—with or without documents—have greater difficulties in entering the U.S. because of stepped-up border surveillance. In general, they are alarmed about the economic depression because it is possible that it may come on more quickly than originally foreseen, particularly in border areas.

Congresspersons will have to find a balance between restrictive initiatives to reduce and control immigration and other more permissive ones to allow for the entry of new immigrants with a

border semi-open to workers at the same time that they implement more effective security measures and greater border controls. Meanwhile, the two houses of Congress are discussing highly restrictive bills that would:

- Reinforce national security, mainly on land borders, increasing the number of border patrols. The Office of Management and the Budget authorized a special apportionment of U.S. \$114 million to improve securi-

There has even been a proposal to share information with intelligence services of other countries.

- Restrict the admission of students and prohibit the entry of people from the seven countries that, according to the United States, support terrorism.

Meanwhile, liberal congresspersons who have traditionally defended open-door immigration policies are facing a very hostile environment and

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ty both in airports and at high-risk border points.

- Use the National Guard to reinforce the border and/or militarily train the border patrol.
- Declare a moratorium on the entry of immigrants and/or substantially reduce the number admitted annually.
- Computerize visa records for tourists and students through a data base.
- Issue a standard identification card or “intelligent card” for foreigners who enter the U.S.
- Set up measures that facilitate the deportation of immigrant criminals. An automated system has been proposed to detect foreigners who are potential terrorists and criminals so that the State Department and the INS can have electronic access to Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency files.

are having difficulties in getting pending bills discussed like the amnesty program for millions of undocumented immigrants (a bill many consider “dead” because it threatens national security) and the approval of the guest workers program proposed by Mexico, which many in Congress oppose. Despite the heated debate, little by little, the members of Congress will realize that they have to draw a line between immigrants who go seeking work and those who use their temporary visas to carry out terrorist acts.<sup>9</sup>

#### REPERCUSSIONS FOR MEXICO

I think it is important to remember that only a few weeks ago we were celebrating Fox’s successful visit to

Washington and on the horizon was a possible migratory agreement between the two countries that would include border security, regularization of undocumented migrants’ status, a guest workers program, regional development and an increase in the quota of visas, a project that, if approved would constitute an important achievement for the Fox administration. Despite the fact that President Bush and the U.S. Congress would probably not grant all of President Fox’s requests, today it is even less probable that the Bush administration will approve a program to regularize or normalize the migratory status of some undocumented Mexican migrants, much less the utopian Fox proposal of gradually opening up the borders to turn our countries into a community in the European style, where workers move without restrictions.

Mexico’s ambiguous response to the terrorist acts has brought into doubt the “depth” of our friendship with the Americans that Fox had publicized during his last visit to Washington. The extemporaneous visit to the U.S. three weeks after the attacks seemed a clear attempt to smooth over possible rough spots that might have arisen. The approach is important, but timing is also a determining factor for making it clear that there is good communication.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it was recently announced that discussions on migration would be renewed, although now they will surely have a different focus.

It is important for the Mexican government to continue to try to formulate a well defined “emigration policy,” clearly coordinated among all the many visible actors involved, with specific long-term projects and a clear delimitation of functions.<sup>11</sup> It is exceedingly clear that our government will be pres-

sured to cooperate and earmark more economic resources to better control both our southern and northern borders if it expects to be committed as a partner and hopes to receive “special treatment” as a neighbor. We must be prepared to weigh the costs and benefits of a bill that is still floating in the U.S. Congress that would create a North American National Security Perimeter through collaborative efforts by Mexico and Canada. Perhaps this would be our cooperation in the field of anti-terrorism, and it should be given in exchange for an eventual approval of a guest workers program, a goal that the Fox administration should pursue as long as it does not counter our sovereign interests.

I think the time has come when Mexicans should resolve our ancestral identity conflict with regard to the United States; we have to think about whether we want to be one of the three members of the North American Community with the costs and benefits that this implies, or we simply want to continue as an important trade partner, a sometimes friendly, sometimes distant and not always committed neighbor. To do this, we must examine the European experience.

The reformulation and redefinition of our borders are imminent in light of recent events. The “deborderization” begun during the 1990s, a product of globalization and regionalization to welcome goods and services, will be less visible because at the same time there will be a policy of “reborderization” that has been implemented for some time now to reject foreigners without documents.<sup>12</sup>

For many years we have fought against impositions by our neighbors to the north that have affected bilat-

eral relations. We have insisted that unilateralism should be replaced by regional and/or bilateral initiatives with mutual commitments and responsibilities. Let us think about whether we find ourselves at that turning point. Meanwhile, it is urgent to emphasize the need to create a regional migratory system that would be managed in an ordered, legal and safe way to guarantee respect for workers’ human and labor rights so that we create a shared border that does not encourage the division foreseeable today. **NMM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Summary of the paper presented at the colloquium “Globality and Conflict: The United States and the Crisis of September,” held September 27 and 28 by the UNAM’s Center for Research on North America, School of Political and Social Sciences and Institute for Legal Research. Send comments to [mverea@servidor.unam.mx](mailto:mverea@servidor.unam.mx)

<sup>2</sup> Thirteen of the 19 terrorists entered the U.S. on tourist visas and in only three cases had the visa run out; that is, only three of them had become “visa abusers.”

<sup>3</sup> “Canadá no cederá soberanía para mejorar su relación con Washington,” *El Financiero* (Mexico City), 12 October 2001, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Alan Gross, “100 border agents going north. Canadian crossings a growing concern,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, 25 October 2001. [http://www.uniontrib.com/news/uniontrib/thu/news/news\\_in25bpnorth.html](http://www.uniontrib.com/news/uniontrib/thu/news/news_in25bpnorth.html)

<sup>5</sup> Mark Clayton and Gail Russell Chaddock, “Terrorists Aided by a Leaky U.S.-Canada Line,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September

2001, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0919/p3ssl-woam.html>

<sup>6</sup> Olga Ojeda, “Emergencia económica en la frontera norte,” *El Financiero* (Mexico City), 15 October 2001, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer González, “Cinco millones y medio de mexicanos no podrán cruzar la frontera norte: SIN,” *El Financiero* (Mexico City), 1 October 2001, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> “President tightens U.S. access,” United Press International, 29 October 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Immigrants of Arab descent will probably be the ones to suffer the worst consequences of September 11 after temporary legal entry for study or work is frozen. See “Freeze U.S. admissions of foreign students from Arab countries. Lawmakers want tighter border,” *The San Antonio Express News*, 19 September 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Raúl Izaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, wrote a letter to President Fox suggesting that his “total, unequivocal visible support” was indispensable since it would not only counter the negative atmosphere reigning after the terrorist attacks, but also the tensions that could be foreseen in the complex bilateral relationship. Gregory Rodríguez, *Opinion*, 14 October 2001. <http://www.lats.com/rights/register.htm>

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see Mónica Vereá, “Mexican Migration to the U.S. Is Regularization Possible?,” *Voices of Mexico* 53, October-December 2000; and Mónica Vereá, “¿Hacia la administración bilateral de la migración entre México y Estados Unidos en el siglo XXI?,” Rosío Vargas, Remedios Gómez Arnau and Julián Castro, comps., *Las relaciones de México con Estados Unidos y Canadá: Una mirada al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM, 2001), pp. 95-127.

<sup>12</sup> Mónica Vereá, “Los inmigrantes ante los procesos de desfronterización vs. la re-fronterización en la frontera México-Estados Unidos,” Elizabeth Gutiérrez and Alejandro Mercado, comps., *Fronteras y comunidad latina en América del Norte* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM, at press).