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Not the Berlin Wall

By Matt A. Mayer

My family recently spent time in Berlin for spring break. We toured a couple of key sites from the Cold War, including Checkpoint Charlie and the [Berlin Wall Memorial](#). Our kids, like most Americans, thought the Berlin Wall was just a single wall dividing East Germany from West Germany. The images they've seen came from the night the Berlin Wall "fell" in 1989 when thousands of people went to the wall to celebrate its opening.

Upon visiting the memorial, our kids realized that the Berlin Wall was so much more than just a single wall with graffiti like in the pictures. It was a vast series of layered barriers containing a high East German inner wall, a lower signal fence of barbed wire with sensors to detect potential escapees, a patrol path for East German soldiers with guns and dogs, watch towers every eight-hundred feet or so, a wide "no man's land," buried and hidden steel spikes and a high outer West German wall, which is the one Americans see in pictures.

The goal of the Berlin Wall: stop East Germans from escaping to West Germany, as roughly three million did from the end of World War II until the wall was built. It divided Berlin for twenty-eight years. In many ways, the Berlin Wall served as a prison wall for East Germans. At least 139 people died at the Berlin Wall. It is hard to believe it has been gone for nearly as long as it was up.

Too often, Americans use the Berlin Wall in the debate over expanding the wall on our border with Mexico. Not only does this usage cheapen the history of the Berlin Wall, it is a terrible analogy. The goal of America's border wall is to keep people and contraband from illegally coming in to the United States, not to prevent Americans from escaping. Unlike with the Berlin Wall, the use of force on the border is significantly restricted by law, including when engaging with violent and well-armed Mexican drug cartels.

Even now, America's southern border has forty-eight places that allow people and goods to flow freely in either direction. Every day, hundreds of thousands of people and vehicles legally cross the U.S.-Mexico border with ease. If someone in Mexico wants to come to the U.S. for a legitimate purpose, there is little stopping them from doing so.

While much of the focus of the media and opponents of an expanded wall on the southern border centers on illegal migrant workers, that group is the least important one a longer wall would deter and is easily dealt with by visa reforms. After all, it makes little sense to spend tens of billions of dollars to stop people from illegally crossing the

border to pick strawberries in California or put new shingles on roofs in Ohio.

Of far more concern are the drug cartels, transnational gangs, human traffickers, and terrorists. With America in the grips of an opioid and heroin crisis, stopping the flow of these drugs from Mexico, the major source of heroin, is a critical step in curtailing the deadly supply lines into the veins of our communities. Along with the drugs come the violence both on the border and across America between rival cartels, dealers, law enforcement and addicts.

As I wrote in the American Enterprise Institute report, ["Reforming America's Immigration System Once and For All,"](#) "the drug cartels have figured out that instead of receiving only a single payment from moving people across the border, they can establish lucrative prostitution rings" by trafficking in women lured with the promise of good paying jobs in America. The cartels then threaten to kill their families if they try to escape. These women are forced to have sex dozens of times a day and are moved periodically to keep them disoriented and ahead of the law. It is abhorrent.

Finally, what is porous for drug cartels and traffickers is equally porous for terrorist groups. The number of individuals from high-risk countries with terrorist activities caught crossing the border is in the thousands, with more than 700 just in Texas in 2015. It isn't coincidental that President Donald Trump selected a former Southern Command general, John Kelly, to lead the Department of Homeland Security. Less than a year ago, that command issued an intel report noting that "Sunni extremists are infiltrating the United States with the help of alien smugglers in South America and are crossing the U.S. borders with ease." The report estimated roughly 30,000 individuals from high-risk countries entered America via the southern border in 2015.

Given the rising global instability in North Korea and the Middle East, it isn't that hard to imagine terrorists getting their hands on biological, chemical or radiological weapons. With an insecure border, it is even easier to imagine those terrorists bringing those weapons across the southern border and launching a devastating attack inside America. Extending the physical and technological wall along the southern border gives us the best chance to detect and to stop the flow of drugs, humans trapped in bondage, and terror.

The communists built the Berlin Wall to limit freedom by trapping good people in. President Trump wants to expand America's border wall to protect our freedom by keeping bad people out. The difference between the two walls couldn't be greater. Yet, opponents seem to believe there is a moral equivalence between the Berlin Wall and the border wall.

Even my kids know the difference between a prison wall and a protective wall. If kids can figure out that not all walls are the same, why can't reasonable adults?

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