



# F O O T N O T E S

## The Cowering Giant

by Lindsey Grant

I think I have found a job for the U.S. Army.

Last December, the Mexican peso collapsed, losing 40% of its value against the dollar. The Clinton administration reacted by calling upon Congress to authorize \$40 billion in loan guarantees to prop up the peso. The President said that it "would help us better protect our borders." The Treasury Department put out a projection showing a potential influx of some 460,000 illegal immigrants if the Mexican Government should default on its international obligations.

A \$40 billion commitment to stop 460,000 refugees works out to \$87,000 per potential entrant deterred. A pretty costly bill. In fact, the number was largely mythological, an unwarranted projection from a speculative study of past correlations between Mexican economic conditions and migration, which itself had concluded that most of the influx would be temporary.<sup>1</sup> (In defense of the Mexicans, no Mexican is on record as making the threat.)

Mythological or not, is that the way to make policy? Are our frontiers so indefensible, our laws so unworkable, that we must resort to such pleas? What happens with the next economic crisis in immigrant-sending countries?

The most immediate losers from the collapse of the peso were those international bankers holding peso loans. Moreover, the administration was heavily committed to avoiding another major depression in Mexico, since it had put its credibility on the line in the battle over NAFTA and assured its opponents that NAFTA would prevent such economic crises. So, when Congress refused to take action, the President in January took the dubious step of bypassing Congress by guaranteeing \$20 billion of loans from a fund set up to protect the U.S. dollar. And, except for Senator d'Amato (Chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee), the House and Senate leadership on both sides of the aisle praised the action or remained silent.<sup>2</sup> International bankers have their little ways.

A rather sordid transaction. \$20 billion here, \$20 billion there... Perhaps, however, we can learn something about the immigration issue from that incident.

There is one lesson that we should have learned, but apparently didn't. Stability in Mexico, or in Central America to the south, is hardly guaranteed. The working age population of our southern neighbors is growing far faster than ours. Unemployment is endemic, and there are rising numbers of desperate people. The pressures to get into the United States will intensify, not diminish. A worse economic crisis, political warfare or a larger version of the Chiapas revolt could send millions of people trying to cross the border.

If the argument about immigration was more than a convenient smoke screen, a more courageous government would be seeking ways to enforce the laws in such a contingency. Earlier NPG FORUMS have spelled out the impact of illegal immigration on population growth, on unemployment and our wasted youth, and on future generations. The question is not whether to enforce the law, but "how?" (I will encounter disagreement from those who believe our obligation to admit illegal immigrants outweighs our obligations to our own poor and our descendants. That is, however, not the position of the U.S. Government. Not officially, at least.)

Do we try to deal with those pressures by continuing indefinitely to increase the budget for the Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS)? This is a very tight time for budgets. Or do we use the resources we have?

Primary among those resources is the Army. The traditional role of armies — other than conquest — has been to defend the borders. The Italians are doing it right now, in Calabria, to cope with an influx of migration coming mostly by way of Albania. We have used the Navy and the Coast Guard to fend off illegal arrivals by sea.<sup>3</sup> We have used the National Guard to help fight drug smuggling, but there seems to be a taboo against even suggesting the use of the Army. It arises in part from images of the Iron Curtain.

The taboo may possibly be weakening. The Departments of Defense and Justice are cooperating in developing contingency plans for housing massive numbers of border crossers if they overwhelm the civilian agencies.<sup>4</sup> That is a beginning, but only a beginning. The real task is to deter or catch the border crossers.

The Army should be told to make plans as to how they would discourage entry, with minimal bloodshed. The most effective and least destructive way is deterrence: set up the patrols and controls before the crisis, so that would-be entrants would know that it would not be easy.

The role of the military should be to supplement, not supplant, the work of the Border Patrol. The routine manning of checkpoints and dealings with the would-be immigrants should remain the province of the Border Patrol, who know how to do it. The military should be used to narrow the avenues of entry, to funnel the movement to keep it more controllable. It would turn over any persons apprehended in designated zones to the Border Patrol.

Some years ago, I arrived in the little border town of Eagle Pass, Texas just after the Texas National Guard had been conducting training exercises in the area. The local Border Patrol people told me that efforts at surreptitious entry virtually stopped for a time, until the would-be entrants discovered the maneuvers were not directed at them. The Army has the personnel and the equipment to make the long stretches of open, arid borderland very hard to cross unseen.

There is another reason for using the Army. From my own Navy experience long ago, and in casual contacts since then, I am regularly impressed by the bearing and self confidence of the young people, many of them Black and Hispanic, who have been through the military training process. They have jobs and they know how to do them. They have developed self respect. They have, at least for a time, job security. When they go back to civilian life, they will be changed men and women. Right now, there is intense pressure to reduce the deficit. The rest of the government is being squeezed, but the Republicans so far have protected the military budget. Here is a use for that money. Our civilian efforts to reach

and help those young people have failed pretty dismally. Until the civilian world can provide as good an educational process and as valuable an experience, I doubt that we should create new machinery when we have an institution that is working. And I think they could do their job on the border with discipline and self-control.

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Improved border surveillance is of course only part of the solution to the illegal migration problem. Even more important is the development of better identification of people who are here, so that legal immigrants can be protected and illegal immigrants deported. The Jordan Commission has made some excellent bipartisan recommendations as to how to do it, and one hopes that Congress will act on them.

The two questions of controlling the border and enforcing our laws internally should be considered together.

Congress is considering immigration legislation, and this may be a good time to take a hard look at the possibility of using the Army. Now, with the administration at odds on so many fronts with the Republican majority in Congress, is a propitious time to offer a proposal that might find widespread Republican support.

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#### NOTES

1 *Migration News*, University of California at Davis, January 1995.

2 AP Washington 1-31-95. Messrs. Dole and Gingrich were quoted as praising the action.

3 AP Miami 3-29-93.

4 "U.S. Drafts Plan for Influx of Illegal Immigrants. Pentagon, Justice Department Discuss Holding Camps for Larger Flow From Mexico", by Pierre Thomas; Bradley Graham, *Washington Post*, quoting Department of Justice spokesman Carl Stern, following up on a revelation earlier made by the *Journal of Commerce*. An unnamed (and apparently nervous) military spokesman was quoted as emphasizing that the planning reflected a task earlier given to the military and that it did not reflect a change of policy. Stern said that so far as he knew it did not reflect orders from the White House or National Security Council. Compuserve Executive News Service, 4-26-95.

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