

Bandits on the Border

Bloody opportunity in the American Southwest.

By Leo W. Banks

When it comes to border security, the Obama administration is desperate to convince the country the job is nearly done. They push the message so relentlessly they remind me of those folks selling condo time-shares, only without the free chicken sandwich. The smart observer needs to step back from the spin and understand what they're not telling us.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano hangs most of her argument on the sharp drop in border-crossing arrests, considered a measure of illegal crossings in general, and on the relative safety of border towns. She says the feds' commitment of more money, more agents and more fencing—Bush administration initiatives, by the way—has helped make the border as safe as it's ever been.

We see both those favorable trends in Border Patrol's Tucson Sector. In 2011, agents here arrested 129,118 illegal aliens, the lowest number in 17 years. By comparison, there were 616,000 arrests in 2000.

And Nogales is among the safest cities in Arizona, in part because it is patrolled by

some 65 city police officers and 800 federal cops from a variety of agencies. A second reason is the tall fences the feds have built through downtown Nogales and out onto Coronado National Forest land east and west of town.

But these factors haven't stopped the illicit traffic, only moved it to the backcountry, and Napolitano isn't so eager to educate Americans about what's going on out there. In places like the Peck Canyon Corridor, it's the Wild West all over again. This notorious smuggling route begins west of Nogales and proceeds north across the rugged Pajarito, Atascosa and Tumacacori mountains, with Interstate 19 as its eastern boundary.

Congressman Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) has proposed designating this forest land a wilderness. His critics contend that that would make it a superhighway for border bad guys, but that's what it is now. The Peck Corridor is a modern frontier populated by

cross-border bandits who carry AKs and wear camouflage and masks as they prowl the canyons for illegals and drug mules to rob, assault and rape.

The Peck name might ring a bell. On Dec. 14, 2010, Border Patrol agent Brian Terry was murdered inside the corridor when his Bortac team, the agency's elite tactical force, confronted armed bandits 13 miles north of the border.

The killing has received enormous publicity—two weapons found at the scene were bought in Phoenix, part of the Fast and Furious gun-walking scandal. But the feds and the media

don't talk much about what's been happening in the corridor since then. Here's a partial list of episodes between May and November 2010:

*May 19—Bandits rob eight illegals near the west end of Peck Canyon.

*July 24—Gunmen atop a ridge shoot at six illegals. No one hit.

*Aug. 19—Bandits with AKs assault nine drug smugglers in Peck Canyon.

*Sept. 26—Masked bandits with assault rifles rob and shoot at drug smugglers near Sycamore Canyon.

*Oct. 17—Bandits wearing bulletproof vests rob 13 illegals near the ghost town of Ruby.

*Oct. 19—Two men wearing ski masks and carrying handguns rob 11 illegals near Murphy Peak.

*Nov. 6—Remains of an illegal alien found in the Tumacacori Mountains.

*Nov. 10—Bandits fire at four men carrying dope bundles near Chiminea Peak, three miles from Ruby.

*Nov. 15—Remains of an illegal alien found in Peck Canyon.

*Nov. 21—Three suspected drug smugglers shot to death, execution-style, in the Tumacacori Mountains.

Speaking of the Peck Corridor, Ron Colburn, retired associate chief of the Border Patrol, tells RANGE, "I still see intelligence

"It's scary out there. When you have rip crews assassinating mules with double-tap rounds to the back of the head, that's serious stuff."



Illegal aliens hang on a pickup as it moves through the Ironwood Forest National Monument, about 75 miles north of Tucson. This shot was taken by a rancher in March 2006, when groups this size were common.



reports from that area and it's scary out there. When you have rip crews assassinating mules with double-tap rounds to the back of the head, that's serious stuff."

According to the *Arizona Republic*, in Nogales last November and prior to his resignation as commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, Alan Bersin told Border Patrol agents the drop in arrests meant illegals "are not coming through here anymore, and when they do they are getting apprehended." Bersin was working real hard to move those condos.

Remember, the above list of crimes only includes reported incidents. Drug mules and illegals, for obvious reasons, generally avoid the cops, so we can assume, as investigators do, the actual number of crimes is far higher. But they take place out of sight and off the books—and this is important to note as Obama and his media allies use reported crime stats to buttress their argument that the borderlands are safe.

And remember, too, the list doesn't include last summer's Murphy Complex Fire, which started inside the corridor three miles north of where Terry was murdered. After combining with the Pajarita Fire to the south, the blaze consumed 68,000 acres. The incident commander in charge of fighting the blaze said an illegal crosser, near death from dehydration, started it as a signal fire.

Ranchers living inside the corridor got walloped during the Murphy Fire. David Lowell says it came to within a half mile of his ranch and had the family standing by, suitcas-

es packed, ready to flee. Asked his opinion of the administration's claims of border security, Lowell says, "I'm inclined not to believe anything they say." He lost 85 percent of his grazing land.

Dan Bell, who lives in the southern part of the corridor, was hard hit, too, as was a third rancher. Between the original fire and backfires set by the Forest Service, this fellow saw nearly 100 percent of his grazing land burned. He is an elderly friend of mine who fears having his name used because of the power of the cartels. As Murphy raged, he refused pleas to evacuate his home. "Like hell I'm leaving!" he told me. "Those drug guys

watch us 24 hours a day and they'll ransack the house within hours. I'm staying to protect my home."

He is referring to the cartel scouts who set up on Arizona's mountaintops to guide drug loads around law enforcement. They're a dangerous lot. Although no suspect has been arrested in the March 2010 murder of rancher Rob Krentz, Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever says he has reason to believe the shooter was one of these cartel scouts.

"Napolitano doesn't want to admit it, but

these scout sites are all over the place and they reach all the way to Phoenix," says Dan Wirth, who retired in December as a senior special agent for the Department of the Interior. His job was to coordinate the work of law-enforcement agencies across the whole Mexican border.

One of the most active drug corridors crosses the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation, through the Vekol Valley, across Interstate 8, and up to the southern part of the Phoenix valley, a trek of about 100 miles. On this corridor alone, Wirth says there are 75 to 100 scout sites. These cartel outposts on American soil are occupied intermittently, though sometimes for weeks at a time. They're equipped with food, blankets, water, stoves, repeaters for long-distance radio communication and night-vision gear.

Another example: The Coronado National Memorial, south of Sierra Vista, has three miles of land abutting Mexico. In this stretch, and a mile back from the line, Wirth says there are 18 scout perches. Outlaws make heavy use of the area because it offers access to the Huachuca Mountains, the tops of which are honeycombed with drug trails.

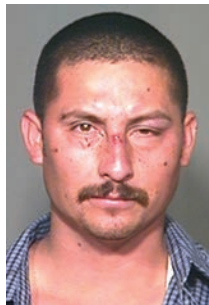
The cartels' goal is to keep eyes on the load at all times, until reaching the drop. They want eyes on Border Patrol and local police, too. "Law enforcement on the border is under constant surveillance, wherever they are," Wirth says. "The administration wants to talk about good things, but they leave out



Taken by a game camera, this photo shows backpackers smuggling dope near the ghost town of Ruby, along the Peck Canyon corridor. AT TOP: Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was murdered by rip crew in the Peck Canyon corridor on Dec. 14, 2010.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: During the Murphy Fire, helicopter drops water in an effort to save a house at Aliso Springs. ▶ Manuel Osorio-Arellenes was the only one of at least five bandits who was captured the night of Brian Terry's murder. He has been charged and is awaiting trial. ▶ In June 2010, this group of illegal aliens reported being assaulted by armed bandits in Peck Canyon. ▶ Trash left by illegals at Diablito Mountain, north of the Peck Canyon corridor.



the fact that drug shipments across the border aren't really being reduced at all?

And we can add Wirth to the list of those who say last summer's Monument Fire, which began on the border at the memorial, was likely set by smugglers. Wirth can't state that with certainty, but he places the likelihood—as does Dever—at 90 percent.

The Monument Fire was particularly cruel, destroying 62 homes and causing the evacuation of 12,000 people, a third of the community. Wirth says one law-enforcement

theory has it the smugglers set the blaze to destroy the two EITs—National Guard Entry Identification Teams—set up on memorial land. If true, it sounds as if those teams were effective. It makes you wonder why, in January, the Obama administration reduced the number of guardsmen watching the line from 1,200 to 300.

Even the FBI seems skeptical that this border is a place where Americans can feel secure in their lives and property. In its 2011 Gang Threat Assessment, the agency concluded that the “Southwest border region represents a continuing criminal threat to the United States.”

The report said gangs on both sides of the line exploit the “porous” border to make enormous profit smuggling drugs, arms and illegal immigrants. The FBI also noted the escalating violence in Mexico—34,000 murders in the past four years—particularly in the northern border states.

The main reason fewer illegals are crossing is the lousy American economy, and another is the soaring Mexican economy, which grew five percent last year. But a third reason is this unprecedented violence in Mexico. Migrants are scared to death to cross cartel-controlled land.

And the gangsters aren't confined to Mexico, as chronicled by Border Patrol's arrest blotter. Sector agents are corralling them in southern Arizona almost every day. Over one June weekend in 2010, agents arrested 10 dangerous criminals who'd crossed from Mexico, eight of whom belonged to violent street gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha, Sureños and 18th Street.

The more important number, though, is how many got through, and no one knows. Similarly, plunging border arrest figures say nothing about got-aways, usually estimated at three times the number of arrests. Let's be generous and say that with so many more agents now, got-aways today outnumber arrests by a factor of two. That means some 260,000 illegals crossed into the United States through the Tucson Sector in 2011.

With so many inconvenient facts going unmentioned in Napolitano's grand PR blitz, I'll hold off buying that condo. ■

Leo W. Banks has been reporting from southern Arizona for more than 30 years. He has won numerous awards for his work, including the 2011 Eugene Katz award as journalist of the year from the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Immigration Studies.

