November 2018

The Poetry of "Build the Wall"

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JUST BEFORE MY BOOK *BORDER WALLS* (Jones, 2012) came out in 2012, a colleague asked me, "Do you think people will still be talking about border walls in five years?" Probably not, we both agreed. At the time, it seemed like I might have missed the wall moment. The security fervor of the early war on terror had faded into the background. The Israeli wall in the West Bank was stalled and had not been expanded for several years. Barack Obama was about to be reelected president of the United States and there seemed to be little appetite for more walls on the U.S.-Mexico border beyond those built in 2007–2009 under the Secure Fence Act.

And yet, here we are six years later and we are certainly still talking about walls. When *Border Walls* was published, there were about thirty-five border walls around the world. The number has doubled to seventy. To the surprise of many, the border wall also became the central issue in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Mario Cuomo famously said, "You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose." Although "Build a wall and have Mexico pay for it" is not exactly poetry, it turned out to be a winning campaign slogan. For Donald Trump's supporters, the wall stood in for many complex issues connected to borders: the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs to China, the scourge of cartel-smuggled drugs, the fear of cultural changes brought by migration, and the threat of terrorists carrying out an attack. In the heat of a campaign rally, it all suddenly made sense. Build a wall. Close the border. Put America first. Figure out the details later.

But a year and a half into the Trump presidency, it is time for the prose of governing and building a border wall is just not good policy. Trump's Chief of Staff John Kelly acknowledged this in January 2018, by telling lawmakers privately and then stating publicly on Fox News that Trump's campaign pledges on the wall were not "fully informed" and his thinking had "evolved" (Pappas, 2018). Kelly said, "Campaign to governing are two different things."

The cost of the border wall alone should make fiscal conservatives flinch. The 2018 appropriation bill allocated $696 million for thirty-nine miles of border wall, or $17.8 million per mile. To put that in context, 8.5 miles of border wall would equal the entire annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts ($152 million in 2018).

Border walls are not particularly effective at stopping migration on their own. They require constant surveillance by agents, high-tech sensors, aircraft, and drones or else they can easily be climbed with a ladder. Over the past decade, the majority of undocumented people in the United States did even cross the border on foot, but entered the U.S. with a valid visa and then overstayed it (Gonella, 2017). A wall would have no impact on these movements. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (2015) reports that 95 percent of drugs enter the U.S. through ports of entry in containers, which would be unaffected by a wall. A wall also has no impact on global trade and the outsourcing of middle-class

manufacturing jobs that many of Trump's Midwestern supporters want back.

Of course, as Trump instinctively gets, walls are not primarily about security, but rather symbolism. For Democrats, the wall stands in for the racism and anti-migrant positions of the administration. For Trump's supporters, the wall is concrete evidence of action against migration and terrorism. A 2018 CBS poll found that while 61 percent of all Americans oppose building a border wall, 68 percent of Republicans still support it (De Pinto et al., 2018). Perhaps this is why Trump is not willing to accept Kelly's suggestion that he evolve his campaign pledge to build a wall into the prose necessary to govern. As Trump tweeted in response to Kelly's public statements, "The Wall is the Wall" (Trump, 2018), which is poetry to the ears of his support base.

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