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BOOK REVIEW

Crossing the line — a risky journey of hope

Hard Line

Life and Death on the
U.S.-Mexico Border

By Ken Ellingwood

PANTHEON, 256 PAGES, \$25

Reviewed by Stephen
Hendricks

What's the best way to kill a Mexican?

That question has loitered silently at the center of U.S. border policy for the past decade. For if there is a given in the way we hold

the line from Tijuana to Matamoros, it is that some of those who scrub our toilets and pick our oranges will die on their commute. It is just a matter of how and how many, and that, as Ken Ellingwood capably documents in "Hard Line," is a matter of where Americans choose to put the charnel house.

Until the mid-1990s, the most porous stretch of the Mexican-American frontier was the few dozen miles separating San Diego County and Tijuana. Of the Border Patrol's 1.5 million annual arrests, about 1 million were on the

Mexican border, and an astonishing half of these were in San Diego County.

The chase was not pretty. Clump after clump of migrants drifted along the filthy Tijuana River and through the canyons near Imperial Beach, where they were preyed on by bandits, rapists and the Border Patrol, not all of whose officers were upstanding upholders of the law. Migrants were pursued through backyards, shopping malls, even freeways, where traffic shielded some but killed so many that the Patrol had to close four of Interstate 5's six

lanes. Atop it all, coyotes (smugglers) plied an \$8 billion-per-year trade in human chattel with the ruthlessness of their drug-smuggling kin.

The chaos at other urban crossings differed only in degree, and the sum helped beget the anti-immigrant movement that peaked in 1994 with California's Proposition 187 and, less famously, Operation Gatekeeper, the Clinton-era bid to plug the urban dikes. In San Diego County, Gatekeeper replaced leaky fences with mile upon mile of fortress walls, stadium lighting

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Detail from the cover of "Hard Line"

A California highway sign found between Mexico and northern San Diego County warns motorists of dashing immigrant families.

Urban controls pushed the crossings into the deserts

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and motion sensors. Border guards, their numbers doubled, were stationed on the line at intervals so close it became almost impossible to slip through. In time, arrests plummeted. Rapes, murders and highway deaths plummeted. Border officials cried victory but, as it happened, prematurely.

“Hard Line” shows that Gatekeeper merely pushed the crossings into merciless deserts and mountains. The result, almost entirely foreseen by Gatekeeper’s draftsmen (and well chronicled by Ellingwood), was a killing field from southeastern California to southeastern Arizona. Most of the stricken were taken by satanic heat, but blizzards and irrigation ditches claimed their share as well. The numbers of the dead soon mocked anything the cities had seen. In California’s Imperial County alone, 95 walkers succumbed one year — and those were just the known deaths. A coroner told Ellingwood that if all the lost skeletons in his desert province rose from the dust, the place would be a ghoul’s Manhattan.

Ellingwood worked the border for the Los Angeles Times from 1998 to 2002 (he is now the Times’ Jerusalem correspondent). In this, his first book, he is concerned mostly with Gatekeeper’s impact on the people nearby: the priest who fights the government to put water

in the desert, the guards who want the line held but not at the cost of 300 corpses a year, the Arizona rancher-turned-vigilante who captures 2,000 immigrants annually, the pilgrims who flee economic hopelessness for a crack at a bearable life.

Throughout, Ellingwood makes clear that Gatekeeper has cut crossings not a whit. Meanwhile, coyotes grow rich, every community between San Diego and El Paso is disrupted, and

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hundreds of thousands of Latinos are grievously endangered.

This is a fabric that should be woven of strong passions. But instead “Hard Line” is gelded by a scrupulous here’s-one-view/here’s-another-ism, rather like a long news feature: eminently readable, ultimately tepid. On even the most urgent questions — is Gatekeeper moral or immoral? What should we do on the border? — Ellingwood says only that answers are “exceedingly complicated.” For contrast,

see Luis Urrea’s “The Devil’s Highway” (Little, Brown), a brilliant story of border death whose unshrinking intimacy is disquieting, infuriating and apt.

Back to those exceedingly complicated questions: Per Ellingwood, immigration officials admit that although they zealously patrol the border, they just as zealously ignore the 6 million to 12 million “illegals” already here. There is no mystery why. Policing the fatherland would rob business of cheap, tractable labor, while policing the frontier soothes powerful cities and makes a grand show of beating back the hordes — all at the trifling cost of sending a few hundred mop walkers to their desert deaths. In America Inc., that’s not even a choice.

It would be nice to think that the proposals now before Congress — both parties want to legalize varying numbers of “illegals” who have jobs — are motivated by outrage at, or even awareness of, this hypocrisy. But the bills are mostly overdue, bottom-floor bids for the Latino vote, and this year’s electoral politics will surely kill them, at least temporarily. And with them, hundreds more sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. ■

Stephen Hendricks is writing a book about the struggle between the FBI and American Indians, forthcoming from Thunder’s Mouth/Nation Books.