

Chertoff talks about necessity of border fence

by CNS

Michael Chertoff, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, oversees the lead agency that is constructing the fencing and vehicle barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border as required in legislation approved by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush. Chertoff was recently interviewed on the border mission by San Diego Union-Tribune editorial writer Beth Barber and editorial columnist Ruben Navarrette.

Q: Mr. Secretary, your own position on border fencing seems to have evolved. When we spoke to you in January 2006, you were primarily interested in virtual fencing as opposed to more physical fencing. But lately, the push is for physical barriers and the 700 miles of border fencing that the government wants to complete. That part of the debate has met with resistance in Texas, where landowners are challenging the government's authority to seize their land. Have you changed your mind on physical fencing? And, if so, why?

A: First, let me unpack what you just said. I'm still a fan of virtual fencing, but I've always said that physical fencing has its place. We're not talking about 700 miles (of fencing) in Texas. We're talking about, as our target by the end of the next calendar year, is 370 miles of pedestrian fencing and 300 of vehicle fencing, which comes to a total of 670 miles - almost all of which will be in California, Arizona and New Mexico.

Q: Some people want targeted fencing in strategic areas of the border; others, like U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., have proposed a 2,000-mile fence that would cover the entire border. Where are you on that spectrum?

A: Well, I haven't heard anybody propose a 2,000-mile fence. I'm in favor of what the Border Patrol has proposed based on what actually is operationally appropriate. And that is, approximately 670 miles of pedestrian and vehicle fencing. What that will mean is that, from the Pacific Ocean to the New Mexico-Texas border, there will be some kind of barrier over that entire stretch except in those areas where there is a natural barrier like a mountain or something like that. And in Texas, we're looking at about 180 miles out of about 1,300 miles of border. But there is a river there and so, in many places, the river serves the purpose of a barrier.

Q: Some folks in Texas complain that the Department of Homeland Security has mishandled this and that the department hasn't told them where the fence is going - that it promised to consult with landowners and hasn't done that.

A: That's just false. We have had a lot of interaction. We've had 18 town halls. And we've told them yard by yard what we're going to do. And by the way, two-thirds of the landowners have agreed to let us come in and do this, but some people have a disagreement about it. Some communities have actually proposed alternatives, and we accepted those alternatives. The bottom line is that there are some areas - particularly urban locations

near the border - where, in the absence of a fence, we're going to get drugs and violence and human smuggling across the border. Now I understand that, for some people along the border, it's not worth it. But that may be because you're not experiencing the consequences. The drugs may be ending up in Chicago, or San Diego, or Los Angeles, and the people there are suffering. If there is methamphetamine coming across the border, and you have a landowner who says that they don't care about that, they don't want to have a fence, should we just say "OK" and let the methamphetamine come in. Part of what it means to be a country is that sometimes things happen in your back yard. Sometimes people don't want to have a police station in an area where it might interfere with their business. Some people don't want to have a halfway house in their town. You know what we say? We say, "Sorry, you've got to put up with it." Now we'll compensate them for it. That's why eminent domain allows for just compensation. But what we're not going to do is to say that everyone gets to decide whether they're going to participate in the process and if they don't want to, then the greater good be damned.

Q: Why is this sort of thing even within the purview of the Homeland Security department? Is keeping drugs out of the country now a matter of national security?

A: I hate to tell you this but our responsibility - as part of the Border Patrol and Customs and border protection and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) - is to prevent the importation of narcotics into the United States.

Q: But the very term "Homeland Security" connotes something related to protecting the homeland, does it not - perhaps something related to the war on terror?

A: I don't know what it connotes to you. If you look at the law and the statute, and the mission of DHS, it involves dealing with - among other things - the integration of Border Patrol and Customs functions. That involves the smuggling of people and the smuggling of contraband into the United States. That has always been our function. Of course, terrorism is something we're very concerned about. It's a high priority. But I'm not going to tell you that we're putting the fencing up to keep out terrorists. I take our capture narcotics function and our human smuggling function very seriously. It's part of my responsibility and it's why we're doing all this - to keep bad stuff out of this country.

Q: Are the people who oppose giving up some of this land in Texas the same people who are protesting the fence itself?

A: You know, I think it varies. Some people have been trying to bargain for more money, frankly. They just want some enormous amount of money, and we're not going to give it to them. Some of these people don't even want a road on their land.

Q: Isn't this just about politics - the fact that walls and fences have become so popular in places like Iowa and

New Hampshire as a simple answer to a complicated problem?

A: You see, I don't care what they're saying. I don't care what they say in presidential debates. That is not how we derive our strategy. Since I'm not a politician, I'm not driven by what they say on the stump. I'm driven by what I'm hearing from the Border Patrol agents and the operators, and what I'm hearing from them is that they need more tools to prevent things from being sneaked across that border.

Q: Some Border Patrol agents on the front lines say that walls don't do any good, that they're at best a speed bump on the smuggler's path or the immigrant's path, because people can always go around them, or over them, or even under them. They prefer more "green shirts," more boots on the ground. How do you respond?

A: You have to look at what I've said. I've never argued that fencing is a total solution. I've argued that it is a solution in some places. We're increasing the number of Border Patrol. We're doing exactly what those people are telling you that they want done, including putting more green shirts on the border. Unlike some people, I don't have a political dog in this fight. I don't have a religious feeling about fencing. It's a tool and, like any other tool, it works well in some areas and not so well in other areas. I want to put it where it works well, and not put it where it doesn't work well. I get attacked by people who don't want any fence, who want open borders. I get attacked by people who want 2,000 miles of fencing. That's fine. That tells me that I'm probably in the sensible middle here.

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