**Operation Hold the Line**

by: Vincent Dowd

Operation Hold the Line was a preventative measure taken by the United States Border Patrol, initiated on September 19, 1993.[[1]](https://organpipehistory.com/orpi-a-z/operation-hold-the-line-2/#_ftn1) Originally the operation was named Operation Blockade.  The location of the operation was on the United States-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas.[[2]](https://organpipehistory.com/orpi-a-z/operation-hold-the-line-2/#_ftn2)  A similar operation called [Operation Gatekeeper](https://organpipehistory.wordpress.com/orpi-a-z/287-2/), was also taking place in the San Diego sector.Silvestre Reyes, who was the head of the El Paso Border Control at the time, ordered his officers to form a human and vehicle blockade along the border.  There were four hundred agents and vehicles every 100 yards from one side of El Paso to the other, in order to prevent illegal immigration.  Similar blockade attempts had been [experimented with before](https://organpipehistory.wordpress.com/border/history-of-th-border-fence/) but inevitably failed due to the expensive nature of such a preventative measure.  Unlike the previous attempts, however, Reyes’ blockade stayed in place until the Immigration and Naturalization Service saw the success it was having and permanently funded it.[[3]](https://organpipehistory.com/orpi-a-z/operation-hold-the-line-2/#_ftn3)  Operation Hold the Line was the first operation of its kind and represented a shift in ideology in policing illegal immigration.  Previous policies focused on finding and deporting illegal immigrants who had already crossed the border.  Operation Hold the Line instead focused on intercepting and preventing illegal entries at the border.



U.S. Border Patrol Station in El Paso, Texas

Immediately the operation affected El Paso and surrounding areas.  “Operation Hold the Line was credited with a seventy-two percent drop in apprehensions in the El Paso sector (covering the border area between Tucson, Arizona, and Marfa, Texas) between fiscal 1993 and 1994, when other sectors averaged only a three percent drop. It was also seen as the cause of 286,000 fewer aliens crossing in fiscal 1994, 146,000 fewer in 1996, and 105,000 fewer in the first nine months of 1997 in the El Paso sector.”[[4]](https://organpipehistory.com/orpi-a-z/operation-hold-the-line-2/#_ftn4)  Following the success of Operation Hold the Line, lawmakers in Washington, D.C., began passing legislation that focused on border security.  In February of 1994 Attorney General Janet Reno and INS Commissioner Doris Meissner announced a multiyear strategy to slow illegal immigration.  The strategy’s main focus was strengthening border control by allocating resources on the traditionally busiest crossing corridors for illegal immigration into the United States. “It called for adding 1,000 Border Patrol agents in the areas of greatest need and expanding the use of infrared scopes, lighting, secondary fences, and upgraded sensors.”[[5]](https://organpipehistory.com/orpi-a-z/operation-hold-the-line-2/#_ftn5)   During the late 20th century, a major reason that Mexicans were immigrating to the United States was peso devaluation.  In the early 1970s the Mexican economy was consistently growing but in the next two decades the economy collapsed due to inflation, and this resulted in the peso being worth far less than the American dollar.  However, Operation Hold the Line has flaws that we now see with hindsight.  The Operation had two major effects.  First, the number of immigrants who die trying to cross the border has risen significantly.  This is because immigrants now attempt to cross the border in remote desert areas, which have less security.  The second effect is that migrants who successfully cross the border, stay in the United States longer than before, rather than risking arrest traveling back and forth from Mexico.

**Operation Hold The Line, 18 Years Later**

****About 18 years ago then-El Paso Border Patrol Sector Chief Silvestre Reyes (the El Paso [**Congressman**](http://reyes.house.gov/Biography/) since 1996), started an operation to deter immigration that came to be called Operation Hold The Line. He was the first ever Latino sector chief, and a native of the area.

The gist of the operation it was to push Border Patrol agents closer to the actual border so as to deter crossings. According to the [**DOJ**](http://www.justice.gov/oig/special/9807/gkp01.htm):

Agents assumed positions along the border, visible to both would-be crossers and to each other. This deployment effectively stopped numerous day-crossers, resulting in a 70 percent drop in El Paso Sector apprehensions. Although smugglers and illegal immigrants heading for cities beyond the border circumvented this deployment by shifting to areas where more traditional apprehension tactics were in use, they no longer came through central El Paso. Crime rates dropped along with apprehension numbers.

Operation Hold The Line took place right around the time things were getting hot and heavy with anti-immigrant (read: Latino) sentiment in California with Proposition 187. The San Diego version of “containment” known as [**Operation Gatekeeper**](https://www.amazon.com/Operation-Gatekeeper-Remaking-U-S--Mexico-Boundary/dp/0415931053/ref%3Dsr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1316720381&sr=8-2), which [**resulted**](http://www.justice.gov/oig/special/9807/gkp01.htm) partly in the construction of the first part of the U.S. border wall on the western part of the border. (It’s also good to remember that a lot of the anti-immigrant, anti-Latino rhetoric and tactics we’re seeing nowadays were born during this time period.) Much like its El Paso counterpart, the San Diego operation was largely billed as a success because of how it stemmed immigration in that sector.

Of course one way to view this tactic is as a “success,” but if you read between the lines all you’re really doing is diverting traffic from one place to another. You don’t actually “stop” immigration, just move it away from where people can see it. So here we are, almost two decades later, without comprehensive immigration reform and contending with an even larger industrial border complex that involves billions in government contracts, sometimes as in [**SBI Net**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/16/AR2010031603573.html), not to actually do anything but just to change our perception of things.

The very idea that any of these operations “work” is really a matter of perspective. The fact is, you can’t stop people from moving — the Great Wall of China, Berlin Wall and West Bank Barrier are good examples — if people are going to move, they’re going to find a way. One way to combat this inconvenient fact is by deporting the heck out of people here in the U.S. without papers — President Barack Obama seems to favor this tactic, on track to [**deport more people in two and a half years**](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44599016/ns/politics-more_politics/t/obama-set-outpace-bush-deportations/) than President George W. Bush did in two terms.

Whatever your perspective, there were pros and cons of Operation Hold The Line — crime did go down in El Paso, for example — even though the challenges we face with immigration reform today are, in some ways, more complex than they were 18 years ago.