We need a smart border wall, not a 3rd century solution

We have the technology to improve border security, and it would be much cheaper than a physical wall. Plus, it could be operational within a year.

(Photo: Gregory Bull, AP)

We have driverless vehicles, we can use facial recognition software as payment for goods, and outer space is the next hot commercial travel destination. Yet we continue to debate the efficacy of a third century solution to secure our nation's southern border.

The American people are frustrated and have every right to be. The federal government should have secured our borders by now. The tools to do so are available and have existed for some time in the private sector.

I used many of them when I worked for a private intelligence firm after nearly a decade of service in the CIA. I am continuously amazed by innovations in security and surveillance technology as a member of the House committees on both Homeland Security and

Intelligence. We have access to existing [sensor technology](#) that can determine the difference between a jack rabbit and a human moving across the desert. We have [drones that can track](#) individuals anywhere on the planet. But when it comes to the border, we've allowed an outdated, physical barrier to dominate the national dialogue and stifle innovation.

[The wall will be neither big nor beautiful: Ruben Navarrette](#)

A one-size-fits-all approach will not solve our complex border problems. While a physical barrier can be effective in urban areas, each sector of the border faces unique geographical, cultural and technological challenges that would be best addressed with a flexible, sector-by-sector approach that empowers the Border Patrol agents on the ground with the resources they need.

Of the [650 miles of existing border](#) fencing, hundreds of miles are in [need of repair](#) because [criminal organizations](#) have cut through, dug under or plowed over it repeatedly. The drug cartels are using more modern technology than we are to breach our border, so why would we double down on an outdated tool?

What we need is a "Smart Wall" to solve our 21st century border problems. A Smart Wall would use sensor, radar and surveillance technologies to detect and track incursions across our border so we can deploy efficiently our most important resource, the men and women of Border Patrol, to perform the most difficult task — interdiction. Most of this process can be done with computer vision, artificial intelligence and machine-learning, allowing our Border Patrol agents to focus exclusively on stopping individuals and contraband from crossing our border illegally.

The recent horrific [human smuggling tragedy](#) in my hometown of San Antonio is a stark reminder that there are [nine major criminal organizations](#) operating in Mexico that have zero regard for human life. A physical wall would not have prevented the Zeta cartel from smuggling some of those people [across the river](#)on rafts. On the other hand, a Smart Wall could have detected the crossing and followed the individuals until they were safely apprehended by agents.

For every move we make to defend ourselves, our adversaries will make a countermove. As the [National Border Patrol Council](#) agrees, true border security demands a flexible, defense-in-depth strategy that includes a mix of personnel, technology and changing tactics — all of which come at a lower price tag than a wall.

Based on this administration's budget, each mile of physical border wall would cost [$24.5 million](#). According to leading technology entrepreneurs, utilizing off-the-shelf technology

to build a Smart Wall would bring the cost-per-mile down to [less than $500,000](#). With proven tracking technology and state-of-the-art drones, we could have a more secure border at a fraction of the cost — and it could be fully operational within a year.

Based on these figures, we'd save more than [$32 billion](#)that could be used to pay down our national debt, hire more Border Patrol agents, or increase CIA and NSA operations pursuing criminal organizations in Mexico and Central America.

 I introduced the Secure Miles with All Resources and Technology [(SMART) Act](#) to ensure that we adopt the most effective and fiscally responsible strategy to achieve situational awareness and operational control of our southern border. Under my bill, the Department of Homeland Security would be required to deploy the most practical and effective border security technologies available. And before constructing expensive physical barriers, the DHS secretary would have to justify the expense to Congress.

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In the past decade, there have been failed attempts at technological solutions along the border. One program in particular, [called SBInet](#), was put in place along 53 miles of Arizona-Mexico border at a cost of $1 billion, then suspended shortly afterward due to poor management. This attempt failed because of a lack of input by the people that would ultimately use the system — the Border Patrol agents.

Additionally, in the short time since this last attempt, sensor technology has gotten so inexpensive that the types of sensors needed along the border are essentially disposable, and advances in data processing will allow for easier integration of disparate data feeds into a single picture that can be beamed to a Border Patrol agent wherever he or she may be.

We can spend tens of billions of dollars on an outdated solution and years fighting eminent domain lawsuits against our fellow citizens, or we can be SMART and deal with this most pressing national security challenge faster, more efficiently and cost-effectively.

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The answer to border security is technology, not wall

Henry Cuellar from Texas, is the US representative from Texas' 28th District. The views expressed in this commentary are his own.

I was born and raised on the US-Mexico border, and I represent 290 miles of that border today. I know from personal and professional experience that a physical wall would be ineffective at reducing the number of undocumented people and the amount of illegal drugs that come across the border into the United States, a point I tried to explain in Tuesday's bipartisan meeting with President Donald Trump.

The more effective ways to secure the border -- which Democrats could support -- include the use of modern technology, increased border personnel and better coordination with our southern neighbor.

As a member of Congress, I am in frequent contact with experts, including US Border Patrol agents and US Border Patrol sector chiefs, who have reaffirmed my belief that expanding the wall won't help much in securing the border. We already have permanent walls and fences in the highest traffic areas -- and they have proven to be unsuccessful. Between 2010 and 2015, the current 654 mile pedestrian wall was breached 9,287 times.

Instead of a wall, we should increase the use of modern technology, including cameras, fixed towers and aerial and underground sensors. Violent drug cartels are using more modern technology to breach our border than we are using to secure it. We can't double down on a 14th century solution to a 21st century challenge if we want a viable long-term solution.

A physical barrier also doesn't address the illicit trafficking of people and narcotics or the issues surrounding visa overstays. The majority of illicit narcotics enter the United States via our land ports of entry, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration's 2016 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary. A more efficient use of limited tax dollars would be to invest heavily in state-of-the-art detection technologies and strengthen the US Customs and Border Protection's Container Security Initiative to mitigate illicit trafficking.

In addition, since 2007, visa overstays (aliens who have remained in the United States longer than their visa allows) have exceeded those who cross the border illegally, based on information contained in the Center for Migration Studies report -- DHS Overestimates Visa Overstays for 2016. We must expand the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit, which is dedicated to the enforcement of nonimmigrant visa violations and provide funding to fully implement the Biometric Entry-Exit System at all air, land and sea ports of entry.

Customs and Border Protection staffing shortages further jeopardize our national and economic security. While the number of Border Patrol agents doubled from 2004 to 2011, the number of Border Patrol agents has declined from over 21,000 in 2011 to 19,437 in 2017. According to the Office of Inspector General Special Report "Challenges Facing DHS

in Its Attempt to Hire 15,000 Border Patrol Agents and Immigration Officers," "CBP projects an annualized attrition rate of 6% (approximately 1,380 losses per year) for CBP law enforcement positions."

CBP has had to outsource its recruitment efforts in an attempt to fill staffing shortfalls. I have been a strong advocate for the expedited hiring of CBP personnel, co-sponsoring such legislation as H.R. 2213: Anti-Border Corruption Reauthorization Act of 2017. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I am also working to ensure that CBP has adequate resources to address its operational challenges.
Finally, we must also continue to strengthen our partnership with Mexico in order to improve border security efforts. Already, Mexico stops thousands of people from ever reaching our borders by stopping them at its southern border. Mexican law enforcement and US Border Patrol coordinate interdiction efforts, perform joint patrols, respond to border violence and pursue prosecution of criminals of transnational criminal organizations.

We will never realize a secure border with Mexico without investing in our border security technology and personnel, and extending border security outward so American borders are the last line of defense, not the first.

Instead of wasting American tax dollars on a symbol of separation, we should capitalize on the fact that Mexico and the United States are great neighbors and trade partners, not enemies.