Securing the U.S. Border

Good afternoon. Thank you, Congressman Reyes, for inviting me here today. As chairman of the Intelligence Committee, you are well aware of the threats we face every day, not just here on the Southwest border but around the world. We in the FBI appreciate your support.

As you know, the FBI does not handle border security in the traditional sense. The difficult and often dangerous job of securing our borders falls to our partners at the Department of Homeland Security. But as a member of the global law enforcement and intelligence communities, the FBI plays a significant role in combating crime and terrorism wherever it occurs, regardless of borders or boundaries.

Today I want to talk about the FBI's history of combating crime, our perspective on the threats along the Southwest border, and how we are working with our partners to address those threats.

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Last month, as the FBI celebrated its 100th anniversary, we reflected on all that has changed since the earliest days of the Bureau. When the FBI was established back in 1908, there were few federal crimes. There was no jet travel. No cell phones, no Internet. But that didn’t mean there were no threats to security.

One of the most legendary cases in the FBI's history illustrates this point. Back in the 1930s, Bonnie and Clyde were on a crime spree in North Texas. They soon crossed over the Texas border and into surrounding states, leaving behind a trail of prison breaks, hold-ups, kidnappings, and murders.

The FBI was created to address just such a crime spree. Criminals had begun to take advantage of the latest technology — the automobile — to cross state lines and evade local law enforcement.

But it is not just the means of committing crime that has changed dramatically since those days. It is also the nature of crime itself.

If you were to spend a day in any FBI office, you would see agents investigating terrorism and public corruption, espionage and organized crime, computer intrusions and mortgage fraud. What ties these diverse and complex threats together is their borderless nature. Our enemies may be based anywhere in the world, or anywhere on the World Wide Web.

It is sobering to realize that a terrorist in a visa-waiver country may be just a plane ticket away from the United States — or that a violent gang member may cross the border from Mexico and end up in Michigan. Yet this is today’s reality.
The FBI’s highest priority is preventing terrorism. But we are also combating traditional criminal threats.

We are deeply concerned about high levels of violence along the Southwest border. All too often, this violence can be traced back to three things: drugs, human smuggling, and gang activity.

Of course, drug-related violence is not new to the border area. But there have been shifts in alliances among Mexican drug trafficking organizations. As many of you know all too well, several cartels are vying for control over Southwest border territory, leading to an increase in violence.

More than 600 murders have occurred in the city of Juarez alone since January 1st. The vast majority of these are related to two drug cartels fighting for control of the Juarez plaza.

Mexican authorities have made significant progress in cutting off drug smuggling routes from Mexico to the United States. But one of the unintended consequences of their good work has been a surge in violent crime, particularly homicides.

Improved border security and aggressive counterdrug operations have also put financial pressure on many drug cartels. They are looking for other ways to make money, including kidnapping and extortion.

And stronger border security has made it more expensive to smuggle aliens into the country. As a result, alien smuggling operations also are turning to kidnapping and extortion to boost their revenue.

The third area of concern is gang violence. Here in El Paso, the most significant threat comes from the Barrio Azteca gang, which has connections to a Mexican drug cartel. To date, this gang has centered on Texas and Mexico, but we are starting to see migration into other states.

The FBI’s El Paso office has been working closely with federal, state, and local law enforcement to dismantle this gang. Over the past several months, we have indicted 16 high-level gang members. We expect more arrests down the road.

This is not a particularly cheerful assessment. Indeed, we would not be together today if there were not serious challenges to our border security, and by extension, our national security. But we are together — and it is together that we must address each threat.

Like every other agency here, we in the FBI face finite resources and unlimited threats. We try to focus on areas where we bring something special to the table — in terms of technology, manpower, or federal statutes. And we try to maximize our resources by working closely with our state, local, and international counterparts.

We do this in two ways: through joint task forces and joint training. Let me run through a few examples.

The FBI has 146 Safe Streets Task Forces dedicated to combating violent gangs, 12 of which are here in Texas. More than 650 Agents and more than 1,200 state and local officers share gang information and investigate cases as a team.
Because gangs are truly a transnational threat, the FBI formed the MS-13 National Gang Task Force. These agents and analysts coordinate investigations with our counterparts in Mexico and Central America.

To address the surge in kidnappings, the FBI works closely with Mexican police officials on a Bilateral Kidnapping Task Force. This task force investigates cases along the border towns of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

To combat drug-related violence, FBI agents participate on OCDETF strike forces, which target the most significant drug trafficking organizations in the region. One of these strike forces is right here in El Paso. It is jointly managed by the FBI and the DEA, and our agents work as a united front.

We also participate on EPIC – the El Paso Intelligence Center – which I just visited.

Finally, the FBI established a task force to combat drug-related public corruption. Representatives from the FBI, DEA, and ICE work as a team to investigate those very few law enforcement officials who assist drug cartels.

Aside from operational task forces, there is also a substantial amount of liaison work that goes on behind the scenes. Each of our border offices has Border Liaison Officers. They travel to Mexico on a weekly basis to coordinate with law enforcement partners.

We also have many FBI employees stationed in Mexico, both in embassies and consulates, and in our own Legal Attaché office in Mexico City. They work closely with their counterparts, sharing intelligence and coordinating international investigations.

They also conduct a significant amount of training for our counterparts in Mexico. Last year, the Legat office provided more than a dozen courses to Mexican investigators, analysts, and prosecutors. Topics ranged from drug trafficking and organized crime to counterterrorism.

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Working together, we have slowed drug trafficking, tracked down violent fugitives, and rescued kidnapping victims. We know that the most powerful response is a joint response. This has always been true — 74 years ago, it was local police and the FBI that finally put a stop to Bonnie and Clyde.

In our line of work, we are beset with many difficulties. But we must find the opportunities amid the difficulties.

We must continue to strengthen our partnerships. We must continue to improve our information sharing. We must continue to work as a united front, to undertake investigations that might once have been limited to one department, one city, or one country.

The more complex these investigations are, the more we need each other. And most importantly, our communities need us.

The officers policing drug transit routes need us to stand up and fight for them. The men and women held for ransom by smuggling organizations need us to stand up and fight for them. The Juarez families torn apart by murder call out to us — they are not statistics, they are human victims, and they need us to stand up and fight for them.
I want to close with the words of American president John F. Kennedy. These words were spoken 47 years ago to our friends in Canada, but they apply today to our partners and friends in Mexico and Central America.

President Kennedy said, "Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder."

No matter how formidable the challenges — no matter how forcefully violence threatens to tear our communities and our coalitions asunder — we must maintain our commitment to being neighbors, friends, partners, and allies.

Standing together, we are more formidable than any adversary. And standing together, we will prevail.