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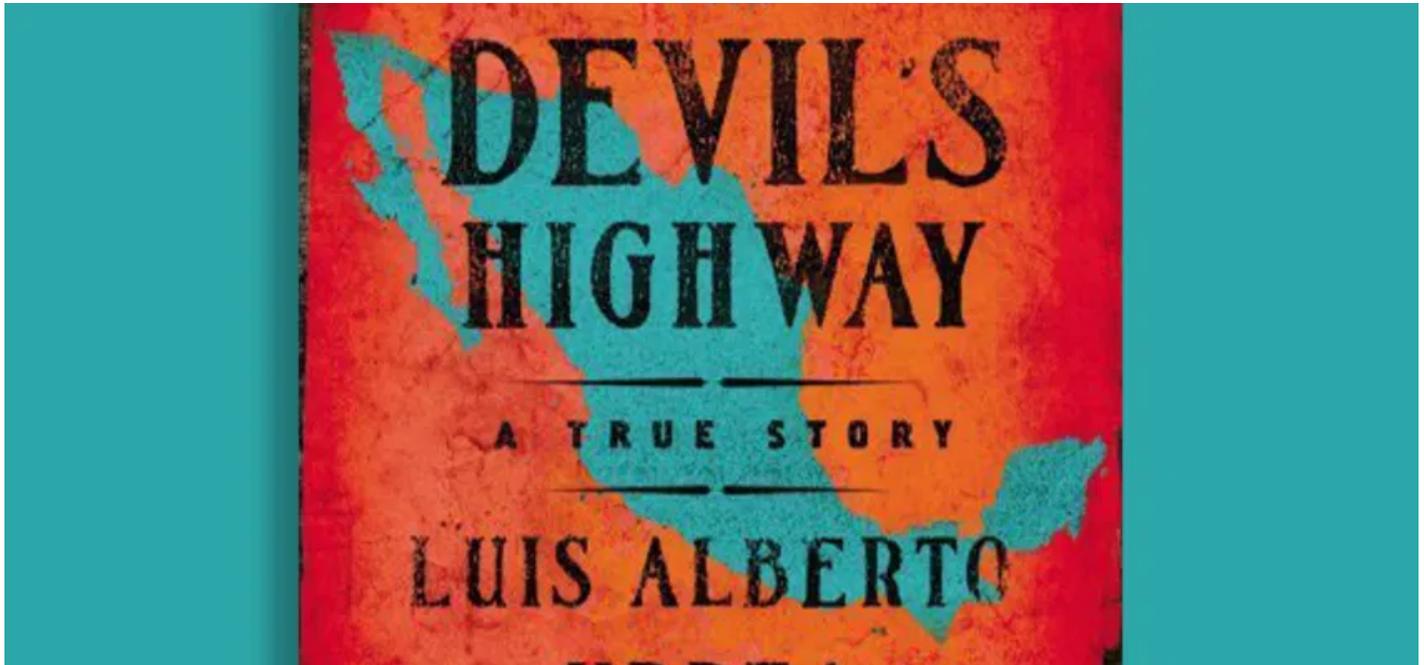
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The Politics of Stupidity at the U.S.-Mexico Border: *The Devil's Highway* by Luís Alberto Urrea

A vivid, shocking, and provocative story about 26 “walkers”—migrating Mexican men who suffered and died in the Arizona desert on May 19, 2001—*The Devil's Highway*¹ is a profound work of nonfiction by Luís Alberto Urrea. Born in Tijuana to a Mexican father and an American mother, Urrea understands the contradictions and absurdities at the U.S.-Mexico border. While Urrea clearly wants the reader to learn about the walkers’ humanity and motivations to leave Mexico, he leaves it up to readers to arrive at their own conclusions about their *coyotes*² and guides. Sometimes Urrea sympathizes with the walkers’ main guide, while in other instances, he paints him as the villain. When it comes to the Border Patrol, Urrea also focuses on their humanity. The Border Patrol agents are filled with “rage [at] the deaths of the illegals lured into the wasteland and then abandoned by their *coyotes*.”³ While it is gratifying to learn that the Border Patrol agents have a heart, Urrea falls short of painting the whole picture. Even a decade later after its publication, *The Devil's Highway* is a must read for everyone, particularly those in Congress who currently oppose any type of immigration reform and Americans who think immigrants do not pay taxes and come here solely to steal their jobs.⁴ And, for those who believe all immigrants are rapists and murderers, *The Devil's Highway* is an important read that will inform otherwise.⁵

The Devil's Highway is the story of the 26 men who crossed into the deadly desert for a better life—the tragedy that the Border Patrol accurately called “Operation Broken Promise.”⁶ By sharing intimate details about the walkers’ lives, Urrea clearly wants his readers to empathize with them and understand why they risked their lives. Most of the walkers were from Veracruz, Mexico. Mostly, they were poor coffee farmers and factory workers. Some were indigenous and spoke Spanish as a second language. It is important to tell their stories.

Three of the walkers, the Gonzalez-Manzano brothers, were from Guerrero, Mexico. They had just been apprehended and deported back to Mexico a week before the fatal walk. Reymundo, Sr. and Reymundo Jr. were father and son. Fifteen-year-old Reymundo was the star of the local soccer league and a solid student. Reymundo Sr., a soda bottler, had planned a summer of orange picking in Florida to expand and re-roof his home for his wife. He reluctantly brought his son on the walk, knowing Reymundo Jr. would make the trip alone if he didn’t take him.

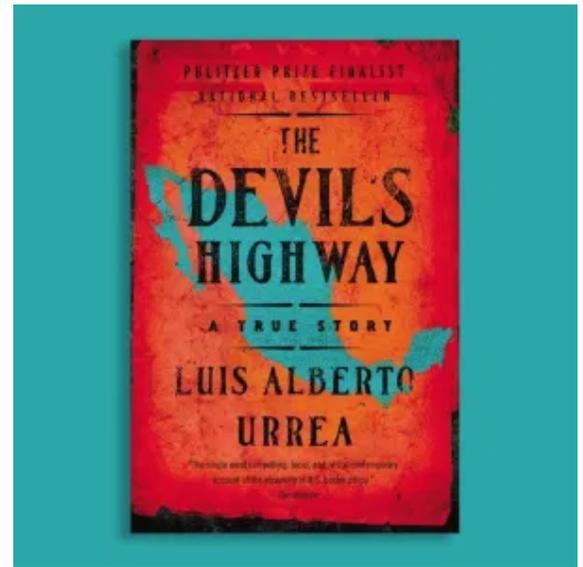
Nahum Landa, the brother-in-law of Reymundo Sr., was in his twenties and brought his boys with him. Enrique Landeros Garcia walked for his wife and his seven-year-old son, Alexis. Enrique wanted to send his son to school. Reyno Bartolo Hernandez made the trip to pay for his newly adopted daughter’s care. Mario Castillo Fernandez was headed to Florida to provide for his wife and their two young children.

Javier Garcia was a joker, claiming he randomly saw the group of walkers in Sonora and decided to join them. Edgar Adrian Martinez was only sixteen, working at the Coca-Cola plant for eight dollars a day. On his days off, he worked for four dollars a day picking coffee beans. He promised his girlfriend he would work five years and then come back and marry her. Edgar was joined by his uncle, Jose Isidro Colorado, and his godfather, Victor Flores Badillo.

Rafael Temich was a corn farmer from Apixtla. He lived in a tiny hut with his wife, toddler, mother, two sisters, and their four daughters. Mario Castillo was a citrus and coffee plantation worker. Mario’s dream was to build a home for his wife and two young daughters. Lastly, Julian Ambros Malaga was a former soldier, looking to build cement walls for his mother’s home. He was a newlywed and expecting his first child. None of the walkers wanted to leave their families behind but they had to. Their children were dying, dengue fever and malaria were spreading, and corruption and political violence remained unchecked.

Desperate, these men departed for *El Norte*. The trip was not cheap, costing 13,000 to 20,000 pesos per person. This was equivalent to a year’s salary, so the men acquired loans from “local loan sharks” against a plot of land starting at a 15% interest rate.⁷ Some made loan deals with Don Moi, recruiter for the *Coyotes* of Sonora. These loans were \$1,700 or \$1,800 against their future earnings in the United States. If they failed to pay their loans, the mysterious “Chespiro” knew where to find their wives and children.⁸ The walkers didn’t know it yet, but they had signed up for a fatal and gruesome tread across the border.

On May 19, 2001, in the middle of a heat wave, the walkers began their journey across the Arizona desert. By Sunday May 20, the walkers were out of water and the temperature was 96 degrees at 9:00 p.m. On Monday at 6:00 a.m., the guides collected dollar bills from the group, claiming they were going to get water and help. They abandoned the



The Devil's Highway by Lu s Alberto Urrea, Little and Brown Company, 2005, Pp. 272.

group and never came back. At 11:00 a.m., Reymundo Jr.'s "body was cooking from within," while his father begged for water and tried to shade him with his body.⁹ Two hours later, others were "melting on the burning gravel" and screaming that they did not want to die.¹⁰ By 2:00 p.m., the walkers knew the guides were not returning, so they decided to continue walking north. They walked for ten miles, even with painful thorns in their feet.

On Tuesday afternoon, it was 108 degrees and two walkers died of hyperthermia. Edgar Martinez fell into a bush, "burning and burning" until he died.¹¹ Abraham Morales "crawled, rolled on his side, kicked" and died.¹² By 11:00 p.m., five walkers went in search of help. Meanwhile, more walkers died of hyperthermia. One walker buried his torso in the scorching ground, either smothered himself or passed out. "His face bloated and came loose from the bones, tender as barbecued pork."¹³ When Reymundo Jr. died in father's arms, Reymundo Sr. began wailing, ripping and throwing money into the air. "He walked until he fell, trying to swim in the dirt" and eventually dying.¹⁴ An unidentified walker took off all of his clothes, folded them neatly and tucked his socks in his shoes. He faced the sun until he died. On Wednesday at 7:30 a.m. one of the five who went for help died. By 10:00 a.m., it was 110 degrees when a Wellton Border Patrol agent encountered the group of four walkers. Within ten minutes, the Border Patrol was rushing to save walkers, even carrying the walkers into the helicopters.

What did Mexico do to prevent the walkers from making the tragic passage across the desert? Nothing. Instead of feeding its citizens, the Mexican government was selling much of its crops to the United States. Then, the United States would turn around and resell the crops to Mexican distributors at a higher price. Eventually, Mexican citizens could not even afford the beans they were harvesting themselves. For Mexico, "it was easier for a Sinaloa farm to get the beans to California than to Veracruz—and more lucrative"¹⁵—a twisted cycle, motivated by greed.

Nevertheless, Mexico actually believed it was doing something to stop its citizens from crossing the border. At Sasabe, Sonora, the Mexican government placed a sign that reads: "For the Coyotes Your Needs Are Only A Business And They Don't Care About Your Safety Or the Safety of Your Family. DON'T PAY THEM OFF WITH YOUR LIVES!!!"¹⁶ This warning is a total joke. Words are not going to stop people from leaving, actions are. Providing jobs, security, and food will keep people from leaving the country. The Mexican government also ordered the army to patrol the borderlands, although they are nowhere to be found. The coyotes have paid off the Mexican army. In this cycle of corruption and greed, the Mexican government and the coyotes are complicit.

Urrea introduces the coyotes shortly after capturing the incompetence of the Mexican government, as demonstrated by the senseless crop cycle. Ironically, Urrea blurs the lines between the government and the coyotes. The Mexican government and coyotes are described as "fat" and "enjoying a comfortable life."¹⁷ For example, Don Moi, a known local, is "a walking ad for the [American] good life."¹⁸ He drives in his big American car, smoking American cigarettes, talking on his fancy cellphone, and patting his fat Mexican belly.¹⁹ His real name is Moises Garcia but people called him "Don" or Sir and Moi for short. Don Moi is one shady cat but the People of Veracruz, desperate to flee their dire circumstances, perceived him as a "Robin Hood figure."²⁰ He represents the link to the good American life, or in other words, what the Mexican government has failed to provide for them—food and security. Don Moi, like the government and the coyotes, unforgivingly exploits his victims.

In the world of coyotes, there are also guides. Here, Jesus Antonio Lopez Ramos, a/k/a Rooster Boy, a/k/a Mendez, was the nineteen-year-old guide that led the 26 walkers into the desert. He had a rabbit tattooed on his right arm and a punk rock hairstyle, with red hair hanging over his eye like a rooster. Mendez is undeniably complicated. He is an anti-hero and a sinister guide, ultimately deserting the dying walkers. However, Urrea also likens Mendez to the walkers: desperate, invisible, disposable, and "willing to do what it takes."²¹ Mendez's dream was to earn enough money to buy his family a home. Surprisingly, Mendez is also portrayed as a Christ figure. Urrea writes, "Jesus led the walkers

gathered by Moses into the desert called Desolation. Jesus has the inevitable birthday of December 25.”²² In the Christian faith, Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity: a strange irony that plagues Urrea’s comparison. In *The Devil’s Highway*, Mendez is convicted for inadvertently killing 14 walkers and endangering 12 of them. In other words, the U.S. symbolically sacrifices Mendez for the inhumane conditions at the U.S.-Mexican border: not too Christlike. Mendez’s trial is yet another example of the “politics of stupidity that rules both sides of the border.”²³

In the politics of stupidity, both sides evade accountability on immigration policy: “an idea nobody can agree on.”²⁴ After the walkers’ ill fate, Mexico’s commentators and government officials said “America was to blame!”²⁵ In America, the government put the blame on one individual. This one individual was Mendez. While Mexico has no solid immigration policy, the U.S. has created this notion of illegality around immigration.²⁶ Illegal, “the alarming word that squats, fat, and sinister, in the corner...shades of murder, rape, pillage, thievery.”²⁷ Conservatives call immigrants criminals, yet undocumented immigrants have no Sixth Amendment right to counsel in removal proceedings.²⁸ “Inflammation sells.”²⁹ In Mexico, the coyotes pay the military to look the other way. For both sides, the border is a money problem. It is a business. As America enjoys “lower wages, cheaper product, unclaimed federal taxes, unclaimed state taxes, and unused social security,”³⁰ Mexico also reaps the benefits of immigration. For example, “Arizona [alone] gets \$8 billion in economic impact annually from their relationship with Mexico. Mexico makes \$5 billion.”³¹ In Arizona, Mexican immigrants help keep the minimum wage down, buy an estimated \$4.18 billion in products, spend approximately \$1.5 billion annually on mortgage and rent, and pay about \$57 million annually to Arizona’s banks and institutions for remittance money sent to Mexico.³² When *The Devil’s Highway* was published, remittance money sent from Arizona to Mexico reached \$486 million.³³ In 2019, remittances from Mexican immigrants reached a record \$36 billion.³⁴

Either way, what both sides fail to acknowledge is that the border is a problem affecting both sides. After all, just as the United States has immigration, so does Mexico.³⁵ There are families from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, and Honduras crossing Mexico’s two borders.³⁶ If both the U.S. and Mexican governments can agree on similar immigration policies and come up with a humane solution, they can help refugees, and hold larger criminal organizations accountable for exploiting immigrants.³⁷ While it may be difficult to come to the right solution, both governments need to act immediately. Uttering empty words and putting the blame on illegality will only further embolden coyotes and guarantee that “the border remains a fluid, mutating, stubbornly troubling, enthusiastically lethal region.”³⁸ These are the politics of stupidity.

On the American side of the border, citizens complain about immigration, yet they need immigrants. Many Americans think all immigrants are Mexican.³⁹ But, the reality is that “immigration, the drive northward, is a white phenomenon.”⁴⁰ White Europeans began immigrating before Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Chinese, and others.⁴¹ In the 1880s, Americans needed cheap labor, so they hired the Chinese.⁴² “Jobs opened, word went out, the illegals came north.”⁴³ Americans panicked and began deporting the same Chinese men they invited to build their railroads.⁴⁴ So many contradictions: We need you but we do not want you in our schools, our hospitals, our courts. We want your taxes but we must deprive you of all benefits.⁴⁵ Immigration policy is a complete contradiction.

As Urrea states, “the stories never stop coming.”⁴⁶ People will continue dying of hyperthermia in the desert, children will be separated from their parents, women will become victims of sexual abuse, and innocent walkers will be abandoned by someone like Mendez. What Urrea underscores in his vivid and visceral prose is that we cannot abandon these immigrants who so desperately need our help. Immigrants make the agonizing journey across the border to flee violence and hunger. Advocates (like the author of this review) must fight for President Biden’s immigration reform bill.⁴⁷ Congress especially needs to consider the thousands of immigrants who have been

residing in the United States for years, paying taxes, and boosting the economy. It is imperative to realize that “the border itself, that Mexican border, is a metaphor for all the separations between us as human beings...There are so many barriers and borders between us. People are separated from each other.”⁴⁸

Years since his influential book was first published, Urrea continues to remind the world that the situation at the border has not changed and that “the big beasts and the little predators [will] continue to feed on the poor and the innocent.”⁴⁹ This is perhaps the central theme of his scorching and relentless narrative, a book that has become a classic for immigration scholars and anyone interested in policy change.

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1. Luís Alberto Urrea, *The Devil's Highway*, Little Brown & Company 214-15 (2005). ↵
2. A coyote is person who smuggles immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. *Id.* at 60. ↵
3. Urrea, *supra* note 1, at 20. ↵
4. *Id.* at 216. ↵
5. *Id.* at 233. ↵
6. *Id.* at 35. ↵
7. *Id.* at 50. ↵
8. *Id.* ↵
9. *Id.* at 158. ↵
10. *Id.* ↵
11. *Id.* at 165. ↵
12. *Id.* ↵
13. *Id.* at 166. ↵
14. *Id.* at 166-67. ↵
15. *Id.* at 45. ↵
16. *Id.* at 55. ↵
17. *Id.* at 47. ↵
18. *Id.* ↵
19. *Id.* ↵
20. *Id.* at 50. ↵
21. *Id.* at 70. ↵
22. *Id.* at 68. ↵
23. *Id.* at 215. ↵
24. *Id.* at 223. ↵
25. *Id.* at 198. ↵
26. *Id.* at 230-31. ↵
27. *Id.* at 224. ↵
28. 8 U.S.C. § 1362. ↵
29. *Id.* at 229. ↵
30. *Id.* at 217. ↵

31. *Id.* at 218. ↩
32. *Id.* at 218-19. ↩
33. *Id.* at 218. ↩
34. Austin Fast, Mexican Workers in Arizona Send Home Huge Amounts of Money Amid Pandemic, FRONTERAS (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://fronteradesk.org/content/1623699/mexican-workers-arizona-send-home-huge-amounts-money-amid-pandemic>. ↩
35. Urrea, *supra* note 1, at 44. ↩
36. *Id.* at 44. ↩
37. Pat Morrison, Column: Novelist Luis Alberto Urrea on the Joy Behind the Ugliness of the Border Planet, Los Angeles Times (Mar. 13, 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-ol-patt-morrison-urrea-border-mexico-20190313-htmllstory.html> (discussing the layers of complexity and beauty at the U.S.-Mexico border); see also Krista Tippett, Luis Alberto Urrea What Borders Are Really About, and What We Do with Them, ON BEING (July 12, 2018), <https://onbeing.org/programs/luis-alberto-urrea-what-borders-are-really-about-and-what-we-do-with-them-jul2018/> (describing the border as a place where people can share cultures, impart wisdom, and foster friendships). ↩
38. Urrea, *supra* note 1, at 223. ↩
39. How America’s Idea of Illegal Immigration Doesn’t Always Match Reality (NPR Mar. 8, 2017, 4:07 PM), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/08/517561046/how-americas-idea-of-illegal-immigration-doesnt-always-match-reality>. ↩
40. Urrea, *supra* note 1, at 8. ↩
41. *Id.* ↩
42. *Id.* ↩
43. *Id.* ↩
44. *Id.* ↩
45. *Id.* at 216-17. ↩
46. *Id.* at 227. ↩
47. First 100 Days of the Biden Administration, American Immigration Lawyers Association (Mar. 19, 2021), <https://www.aila.org/advo-media/issues/all/first-100-days>. ↩
48. Pat Morrison, Column: Novelist Luis Alberto Urrea on the Joy Behind the Ugliness of the Border Planet, Los Angeles Times (Mar. 13, 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-ol-patt-morrison-urrea-border-mexico-20190313-htmllstory.html>. ↩
49. Urrea, *supra* note 1, at 224. ↩

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