

What's up on the Mexican border?

By S.F Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Aaron Bobrow-Strain, an associate professor of politics from Whitman College in Walla-Walla, appeared at Fishtrap House Jan. 29 to deliver a talk on U.S./Mexico border relations. Fishtrap invited Bobrow-Strain to lecture in conjunction with its "Big Read" event focusing on the novel, "Into the Beautiful North." The professor also lectured to several school classes at Joseph and Enterprise earlier in the day.

The standing-room-only lecture focused on the evolution of U.S. border policy as dictated by economics/employment, drugs and even 9/11. He asserted that only recently did U.S. politicians invent and promulgate the idea of illegal immigration as a problem.

Bobrow-Strain argued that until relatively recent times, the U.S. did little to maintain border integrity, although he cited anomalies such as 1915-16

during the Mexican Revolution when Pancho Villa raided several U.S. border towns although that incident focused on "acts of war" rather than immigration itself. He also mentioned two waves of U.S. expulsion of Hispanic people during the Great Depression and the early 1950s recession.

After a brief border history, Bobrow-Strain's lecture focused on what he labeled the "invented" border crisis. Although 1965 saw a severe curtailment of opportunities for Hispanic legal immigration, the border remained relatively open. The year 1986 saw the first real immigration reform when President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act which granted amnesty to several million Hispanics illegally in the U.S. but also greatly increased border patrol funding.

Bobrow-Strain went to work near the border in 1993 for an organization with a mission of building trans-border

relationships. Bobrow-Strain developed relationships with people as varied as illegal immigrants, "coyotes" (the people who assist in illegal immigration), border patrol agents and others. He added that 1993 saw the first glimmer of massive changes to U.S. border policy.

At that time, California's governor, Pete Wilson, started a campaign against the "broken" border, which resulted in then-President Bill Clinton instigating a policy called "Prevention through Deterrence." The program tightened border security at major urban border crossings such as San Diego and El Paso, forcing illegal immigrants to use more dangerous desert and mountain routes, particularly in Arizona.

From 1995-2010, Arizona became ground zero for illegal immigration and drug trafficking. The U.S. spent \$220 billion, much of it to outside contractors, building 700 miles of border fence as well improving infrastructure, implementing hi-tech surveillance and increasing border personnel to 20,000 agents. In 2013, the U.S. spent more money on the border patrol than on the FBI, DEA, ATF, Secret Service and U.S. Marshal Service combined, with enough money left to run the National Park Service with still \$1 billion left over.

Bobrow-Strain asserted the border patrol, once described to him by a border agent as a job for people who flunked out of every other federal law



S.F. Tool/Chieftain

Professor Aaron Bobrow-Strain makes a point during his Fishtrap lecture.

enforcement agency, is today a highly trained, hyper-funded, highly empowered paramilitary agency that went from a police mentality to a war fighting mentality — particularly after 9/11.

According to Bobrow-Strain, results of border emphasis include racial profiling, lax observance of constitutional rights such as search and seizure and due process, as well as huge federal court backlogs

because of prosecuting immigration crimes.

Drug cartels took over much of the "coyote" business because it is so lucrative. Border crossing costs \$3,000 – \$5,000, up significantly from the \$1,400 of a few years ago. Also, many illegal immigrants borrow money from U.S. labor contractors to afford the crossing, often at such usurious interest rates they become little more than indentured servants.

Bobrow-Strain doubted the increased security affected the actual number of border crossings. Trends showing fewer illegal immigrants also correspond with high U.S. unemployment — historically a factor. Recent trends show an increase in illegal immigrants as the employment market stabilizes. "It's unlikely that the biggest buildup of law enforcement in U.S. history really had much of an impact on the flow of migration," he concluded.

Attendee Cathy Sterbentz said, "I learned a lot that I didn't know." She attended the event because her hometown of Hayward, Calif., is now predominantly Hispanic and she wanted some perspective.

Bobrow-Strain said he enjoyed the visit and lectures, particularly at the schools. "I was really struck by how the high school kids and some of the younger kids understand the idea of feeling like you want to stay in a place but kind of have to leave. We talked about how many of them are going to stay in this area. This is a town that has experienced a lot of outward migration and low employment numbers."

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Elks Lodge awards scholars

The Enterprise Elks selected Nikolai Christoffersen and Carsen Sajonia, both of Enterprise High School, as their 2015 Most Valuable Student Scholars. Each student receives a \$1,000 scholarship from Enterprise Lodge #1829 to use next fall for college.

Both Christoffersen and Sajonia advanced to the Oregon Elks Northeast District Scholarship contest on Jan. 3 in Hermiston, and both received 1st place awards in the district competition as well.

Sajonia is the daughter of Brian Sajonia, of Arizona, and Teresa Sajonia, of Joseph. Christoffersen is the son of Nils and Anette Christoffersen of Enterprise.



Sajonia



Christoffersen

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