

History of The Texas Southern Border and JBSA National Defense Area (NDA) Support

The History of the United States government patrolling the Southern Border and how it has affected the military in San Antonio and JBSA. The first significant effort to restrict immigration occurred in the late 1800s when it established inspection stations at ports of entry. In 1924, the government officially created the U.S. Border Patrol to combat smuggling that arose from Prohibition. During the Great Depression, the country carried out the first mass deportations of Mexican nationals. To meet labor demands during World War II, the U.S. and Mexico established the Bracero guest-worker program in 1942, which brought over 4.5 million Mexican laborers to the U.S. by the time it concluded in 1964.

In response to a subsequent rise in illegal immigration, the government launched a special operation in 1954 and deported nearly four million Mexican immigrants. Congress enacted a major policy change with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended the national origin quota system. Throughout the 1970s, as illegal immigration increased, federal committees recommended employer sanctions and amnesty, though Congress took little action. After an economic crisis in Mexico in the early 1980s spurred further migration, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which penalized employers for hiring illegal immigrants but also granted amnesty to 2.7 million people.

In the 1990s, the Border Patrol adopted a new strategy of deterrence, launching operations like "Hold the Line" and "Gatekeeper" to fortify major crossing points and push migrants into more remote areas. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the nation intensified its focus on border security, creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003 and significantly increasing the Border Patrol's manpower, funding, and technological resources. This new agency merged several U.S. border inspection agencies, including those from the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the Department of Agriculture. This created a single, unified entity responsible for law enforcement at and between official ports of entry. As of fiscal year 2023, the Border Patrol had nearly 20,000 agents and encountered approximately 2.5 million migrants. The agency celebrated its 100th anniversary on May 28, 2024.

In June 2025, the Department of War and the U.S. Air Force issued a task order that directed relevant stakeholders to support the establishment of a National Defense Area (NDA) along the Rio Grande River. This order responded to a presidential declaration of a national emergency at the southern border. The mission aimed to protect United States sovereignty and territorial integrity from various threats, including unlawful mass migration, narcotics trafficking, and other criminal activities. The Secretary of Defense directed the Secretary of the Air Force to establish this NDA, which spanned approximately 250 miles in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties, Texas. Joint Base San Antonio (JBSA), through Air Education and Training Command (AETC), received the land, administered the NDA as an installation annex, and provided oversight for the mission. U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) assumed command and control of the

operational forces that patrolled the area in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security and other interagency partners. The Air Force funded the necessary signage, fencing, and buoys to delineate the new boundaries and established agreements to define the roles and responsibilities for all involved parties in securing the area.

U.S. Immigration Service Border Patrol May 1933

