

From towers to walls: Trump's border wall as entrepreneurial performance

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Abstract

The pledge to build a “great”, “beautiful” southern border wall was a cornerstone of Donald J. Trump’s 2016 presidential election campaign. This paper analyzes Trump’s border wall project as an example of performative statecraft, suggesting that the wall works better rhetorically, than as a barrier against unauthorized cross-border movement. Identifying Trump’s performative statecraft as “entrepreneurial”, we argue that his border wall discourse differs from that of earlier presidents in the way Trump meshes the performance of the border wall as a protective device with his own performance as an entrepreneur and developer. Trump’s border wall discourse accentuates his personal skills as an entrepreneur, and makes these skills relevant to his key campaign promises: to “Make America Great Again”, and defend the nation against transnational crime. Despite Trump’s radical reformulation of US asylum policy, enhanced pursuit of unauthorized immigrants, termination of Obama-era programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and disturbing but short-lived family separation and ‘Zero-Tolerance’ detention scheme, the border security policies of President Trump are not as novel as his promotional campaigns would have us believe. In fact, Trump’s border control strategies have continued many of the measures introduced by earlier presidents. The novelty of the Trump presidency lies in the strong focus on the new US–Mexico border wall, and fervent attention to the physical attributes and instrumental functions of the wall. Much more than a fence, Trump’s proposed border wall is a grand, awe-inspiring monument to national security, and to Trump’s entrepreneurial statecraft. It also works as a visual aide for Trump’s plan to “Make America Great Again”. Border walls stand as testimony to the power of the state, and the determination of those who defend it. Trump’s border wall would be no exception.

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Introduction

When Donald J. Trump announced his bid for the presidency, he promised that as the future president of the United States, he would build a great wall on the southern border and have Mexico pay for it, adding: ‘nobody builds walls better than me’ (The Washington Post, 2015). The alleged purpose of the new wall was to protect the safety of American citizens by keeping out unauthorized immigrants and drug cartels. Indeed, when Trump announced his candidacy, he justified the need for an impenetrable border wall in no uncertain terms: ‘[when] Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...] They’re sending people that have lots of problems [...] They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people’ (The Washington Post, 2015).

Throughout his election campaign, Trump stigmatized unauthorized migrants from Mexico and highlighted the threat of drugs and violence by Mexican cartels. His insistence on the urgency of border control was complemented by a protectionist approach to economic policymaking. Trump planned to ‘Make America Great Again’ by persuading American companies to keep jobs and operations within the USA, and renegotiate trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Pitting the USA against threatening external ‘others’, Trump’s protectionism went hand in hand with his vision of border security. Trump’s pledge to build a strong southern border wall played a key role in his presidential campaign. His border control strategies provoked outrage, years into his presidential term. His wall funding proposals continue to stir up controversy.

The southern border wall has become Trump’s signature project. Despite his radical reformulation of US asylum policy (Chishti and Bolter, 2020; Meissner et al., 2018), enhanced pursuit of unauthorized immigrants, termination of Obama-era programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and disturbing but short-lived family separation and ‘Zero-Tolerance’ detention policies (Britzky, 2018; McCullough and Essig, 2018), we argue that Trump’s border security policies differ less from those of his predecessors than his promotional campaigns would have us believe. In fact, Trump’s border security policies have continued many of the strategies of earlier presidents. The novelty of the Trump presidency is a fixation on the need for a strong border wall, and fervent attention to the physical attributes and instrumental functions of the wall. Much more than a fence, Trump’s wall has the appearance of an awe-inspiring monument to national security. It also works as a visual aide for Trump’s plan to ‘Make America Great Again’.

As this paper will demonstrate, Trump’s promotion of the ‘strong border wall’ is a performative move. We define Trump’s border wall performance as entrepreneurial, because Trump promotes himself as a uniquely qualified builder and entrepreneur, in tandem with his promotion of the wall-building project itself. In other words, Trump’s discourse on the border wall highlights his own entrepreneurial skills and qualifications as a ‘wall-builder’, as much as it underscores the need for a strong border wall.

Discussing the protective potential of a new border wall, this paper suggests that the instrumental role of Trump’s proposed wall is less significant than its role as a performative tool by which Trump’s success as an entrepreneur is made relevant to his presidency. We look at Trump’s border wall project as a telling example of the performative politics of border security, and a vivid illustration of the use of a border wall for performative

statecraft. The performative approach helps explain why Trump has put so much emphasis on the security of the US–Mexico border, and why the construction of a physical barrier is his go-to solution. Importantly, this paper highlights how Trump’s border wall project differs from performative moves under former presidents. While Trump’s border wall is not strikingly different in its spatial manifestation from previous border fencing/walling endeavors, Trump’s border discourse is unique in the way it weaves together Trump’s ‘successful’ entrepreneurship, the performance of the border wall, and the strength of the USA.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The first section explains the performative approach to borders and statecraft. The second section offers an overview of US border politics before Trump. The third section sums up Trump’s border security approach and discusses similarities and differences with the approaches of earlier US presidents. The fourth section sheds light on Trump’s border wall project. The fifth section describes the performative role of the border wall project, and explains why we define the southern border as a site of Trump’s entrepreneurial performance. The final section summarizes and discusses the implications of the study.

Borders and performative statecraft

Borders are political and social constructions that delimit the exclusive territorial authority and sovereign power of states (Newman, 2011), marking the limits of state sovereignty (Jones, 2012). Manifesting norms about territorial inclusion and exclusion (Newman, 2003), borders perform exclusionary functions by dividing and protecting ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Oomen, 1995). They are thus symbols of inclusion and exclusion that are produced and reproduced in societies (Laine, 2016). They reflect inherent tensions between openness and closure; freedom and control; mobility and immobilization (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015: 57).

With increasing mobility, persistent border porosity, and the rise of border-free zones such as the Schengen area, the ‘borderless’ future has been debated for decades (Ackleson, 2011; Anderson, 1995; Paasi, 2011). Some scholars contend that the principle of state sovereignty is eroding (Castells, 1991; Oomen, 1995), while others argue that borders are gaining importance, although their functions are changing (Andreas, 2003; Newman, 2003). Poignant examples of the continued significance of border control is the proliferation of border walls in the post-Cold War era, especially after 11 September 2001 (Rosière and Jones, 2012; Vallet, 2016), and the unprecedented scale of border closure during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the appearance, discourse, or spectacle, of a ‘strong border’ is not the same as an efficient border, in an instrumental sense. Nor should the high volume of border wall construction and securitizing discourse be equated with the expansion of state power (Brown, 2010). Considering the magnitude of unauthorized migration, the ever-increasing efforts to restrict cross-border movements are testament to the sovereign power of states (De Genova, 2010). However, as liminal zones located on the fringes of law and lawlessness, borders are also spaces of vulnerability, for state actors as well as border crossers (Longo, 2018).

Besides their instrumental function as barriers, towering border walls and tall fences have a performative function, convincing citizens that their government takes security seriously (Vallet and David, 2012). In their performative capacity, monumental, impenetrable, intimidating border walls testify to the underlying tension between states determined to define and control, and ‘restless bodies’, characterized by ‘spectral sovereignty’ (De Genova and Peutz, 2010: 2). Border walls are specifically designed to project a ‘theatricalized and spectacularized performance of sovereign power’ (Brown, 2010: 26), and yet, they ‘reveal a

tremulousness, vulnerability, dubiousness, or instability at the core of what they aim to express—qualities that are themselves antithetical to sovereignty and thus elements of its undoing’ (Brown, 2010: 24). The impression of a strongly walled border seems to be more important than the utility of the border wall as a barrier or exclusionary mechanism (Vallet and David, 2012).

This paper examines the performative as well as the instrumental significance of the US–Mexico border wall envisaged by Donald Trump. Following Mitchell (1991), we understand practices at the border such as fencing, patrolling and surveillance as boundary-making devices that are constitutive of the state (Mitchell, 1991). Put differently, as states are constituted by the ordering and administration of borders, border practices play a key role in statecraft (Devetak, 1995). Statecraft thus includes the practices of state agents, inside the state and at its borders, to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens (Nevins, 2002). This can be understood as a ‘boundary-producing political performance’ (Campbell, 1992: 67) in which the state is reproduced by the inscription of boundaries that are markers of inside and outside (Devetak, 1995). From this perspective, the border is constructed in a material sense, but also functions as an ideological institution whereby parameters are set for who should be kept in and out, as such, defining the parameters of illegality (Nevins, 2002).

As Rose-Redwood and Glass (2014) put it, the state’s structural effects are discernable through the performance of its sovereign power. In the words of Borg (2015: 35), the ‘state’ emerges as an effect of an ensemble of practices that involves ‘the imposition of an inside/outside boundary of differentiation constituting an effective outside (the foreign, the different, the alien) that can be deployed in the negative affirmation of an identity at the same time as effecting a certain forgetfulness as to the arbitrariness of that very practice’.

Border policies have an expressive dimension by perpetuating moral boundaries, in addition to their instrumental goal of keeping out entities and people deemed ‘undesirable’ (Andreas, 2000). From a utilitarian perspective, the objective of border control is to stop unauthorized movement across the border. From a performative perspective, on the other hand, border control is ‘a ceremonial practice, not only a means to an end but an end itself’, while its enforcement is a ‘ritualistic performance’ directed at a wider audience (Andreas, 2000: 11). Border control is an exclusionary practice with a performative dimension that evokes the purity of a mythic past while also drawing a sharp line between inside and outside (Doty, 1996). Border walls thus function as physical barriers that simultaneously mark ideational distinctions between inside and outside; civilized and uncivilized; orderly and disorderly (Jones, 2012).

As described by Brown (2010: 121), border walls feature

the enemy [...] as raiding, invading, coming to take or plunder what is rightfully the nation’s own — its safety, security, peaceful or prosperous way of life, its jobs, its wealth, its First World privilege, its civilized existence or liberal democratic values.

De Genova (2013) posits that ‘spectacles of migrant illegality’ are rendered visible by border and immigration law enforcement through images and discursive practices that justify the necessity of exclusion. De Genova views contemporary borders as ‘effectively everywhere’, since not only borders, but the entire territory of the state becomes a regulatory zone in which illegal immigration is controlled (De Genova, 2013: 1183).

In the face of a dislocated, ungrounded border, the rigid, immovable, heavily grounded border wall brings the border back into place. Custom-built for scenes of exclusion, the purpose of the border wall is not only to impede, but to deter, impress, and dissuade.

The border wall stands as testimony to the power of the state, and the determination of those who defend it. Donald Trump's border wall would be no exception.

From a performative perspective, politics is seen as a set of practices that are intended to create a new situation or mobilize a set of effects through language or other forms of media (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). Performativity is a 'discursive mode through which ontological effects (the idea of the autonomous subject or the notion of the pre-existing state) are established' (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007: 40). Importantly, the lens of performativity differs from that of constructivism by focusing on both linguistic and material dimensions of discourse (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007).

Our study builds on the literature on the performative role of border control (Andreas, 2000; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Brown, 2010; Laffey, 2000; Nevins, 2002; Paasi, 2011). We contribute to this literature by investigating the performative role of Trump's border wall, with a focus on the significance of Trump's entrepreneurial experience. While Trump's border politics share instrumental as well as discursive similarities with that of earlier US presidents, this paper highlights the uniqueness of Trump's border wall project as an expression of entrepreneurial performativity.

An overview of US border politics

President Trump's strategy of reinforcing the US–Mexico border is in many respects similar to that of his predecessors. The Carter Administration set out to thwart undocumented immigration by erecting fences along the southern border, and patrolling parts of the border with helicopters (Dunn, 1996; Nevins and Dunn, 2008). The Reagan Administration increased the number of border control agents (Nevins, 2002). After completing the San Diego border fence, the Clinton Administration launched a series of border control operations, including 'Operation Hold the Line' (launched 1993 in El Paso), 'Operation Gatekeeper' (launched 1994 in the San Diego sector), 'Operation Safeguard' (launched 1994 in the Tucson Sector) and 'Operation Rio Grande' (launched 1997 in South Texas) (Akers, 2001; Nevins, 2002; Nevins and Dunn, 2008). In 1996, President Clinton authorized the extension of the US–Mexico border fence, emphasizing the importance of protecting the nation against unauthorized immigration and drug trafficking (Jardine, 1998).

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, homeland security became a top priority for US policymakers. The US–Mexico border suddenly gained importance as a matter of national security, while undocumented immigrants from Mexico were treated as potential terrorists (Newman, 2006). The deployment of border patrol agents increased significantly, and in March 2002, the USA and Mexico agreed to construct a 'smart border' (The White House, 2002). The 22-point agreement included integrated infrastructure investment, novel use of technology to rapidly exchange customs data, and the development of a joint US–Mexico Advanced Passenger Information exchange system to identify individuals who might pose a risk to the USA before they could enter the country (The White House, n/d). In order to stop unauthorized entry of Central Americans to the USA, Mexican authorities stepped up the control of their borders with Guatemala and Belize, imposing more checks on railways and roads, and improving checkpoints at border crossings (Isacson et al., 2015; Stratfor, 2017).

President George W. Bush adopted the Secure Fence Act of 2006 to construct 700 miles (1126 km) of high-security fencing and additional checkpoints on the US–Mexico border (Brown, 2010; The White House, 2006). The subsequent construction work caused a diplomatic rift between the USA and Mexico, disrupting border security cooperation between the two countries. The fencing also triggered vociferous opposition from residents on the US

side of the border. Local communities along the border protested against the Act on the grounds that the border security infrastructure would have detrimental effects on livestock, wildlife mobility, irrigation, and commerce between the two countries (Sung, 2007). South Texans voiced their criticism towards the proposed border wall in city council meetings and protests under the banners ‘The river is what connects, not divides us’ and ‘No wall between amigos’ (Sundberg, 2013: 54). The Texas Border Coalition, including mayors, county judges, and business leaders, also voiced their objections. Despite fierce opposition from the Mexican government and local landowners and activists, the Secure Fence Act was implemented.

The Obama Administration completed the remaining border fences as envisioned by the Secure Fence Act, and increased the number of border agents from 10,000 in 2004 to 20,700 in 2010 (Obama, 2011). As of 2010, 1200 National Guard troops were also deployed along the border (Mason, 2010). The Obama Administration worked closely with Mexico to prevent drug trafficking across the border. As a result of these efforts, illegal drugs seized by the Department of Homeland Security increased by 31%, and the number of seized weapons increased by 64% from 2008 to 2011 (Obama, 2011). In 2011, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Mexican military started joint operations against drug cartels (Thomson, 2011). US authorities also started to use drones to track the activities of Mexican cartels (Thompson and Mazzetti, 2011).

The erection of ‘high-security’ fencing on the US–Mexico border failed to deter undocumented immigration from Mexico (Masse et al., 2002). While the construction of new fencing in California made unauthorized crossing more difficult, trafficking routes moved to the more dangerous desert areas in Arizona, causing migrant deaths to increase significantly (Boyce et al., 2019; Sundberg, 2013). Contrary to expectations, border fencing encouraged the trafficking economy, and fused drug trafficking with human trafficking (Brown, 2010; Verisk, 2017). Between 1990 and 2016, drug cartels dug more than 200 tunnels under the US–Mexico border. Concomitant with the construction of fences and militarization of the border in the 1990s, tunnels became more sophisticated. Cartels also started to use drones, catapults and joint drainage systems between border towns to smuggle illegal goods (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

Immigration-related prosecutions peaked in 2013, during Obama’s presidency, when as many as 100,000 were prosecuted annually (TRAC, 2017). While prosecution increased, Obama also offered temporary protection against deportation to unauthorized immigrants who entered the USA as children, under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. As a part of the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), adopted in 2014, Obama also established the Central American Minors Program (CAM), offering refugee status to children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras whose parents were lawfully residing in the USA.

Prior to the Trump presidency, the US–Mexico border was the site of a mixture of exclusionary and cooperative state practices, succinctly described by Coleman (2005: 200) as a ‘strategic terrain where countervailing projects of statecraft come to bear on one another’, – a contentious meeting ground where customs and immigration policing competed with free trade interests. The result of this competition was a ‘constitutive tension between a rebordering national security territoriality and a debordering geography of participation in open markets and trade networks’ (Coleman, 2005: 189). Trump’s economic protectionism and hostility against open markets was set to disrupt, or even eradicate, this meeting ground. In the world of Trump, free trade considerations would no longer be in the balance against national security. Trump’s ‘America First’ policy involved cancelling free-trade

agreements signed by earlier presidents, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, and renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Border security under the trump presidency

Within days of assuming office, President Trump acted on his promise to prevent unauthorized immigration and drug trafficking, and build a new border wall. Among his first executive orders was Border Security and Immigration: Enforcement Improvements, to 'secure the southern border of the United States through the immediate construction of a physical wall' (EO 13767) (The White House, 2017a), followed by orders to support federal law enforcement against transnational organized crime and international trafficking (EO 13773) (The White House, 2017b), and to establish a task force on crime reduction and public safety with the mandate to reduce unauthorized immigration, drug trafficking, and violent crime (EO 13776) (The White House, 2017c). The Executive Order on Border Security and Immigration (EO 13767) emphasized the critical importance of achieving 'complete operational control of the southern border', noting how transnational criminal organizations 'operate sophisticated drug- and human-trafficking networks and smuggling operations on both sides of the southern border', contributing to violent crime and drug-related deaths. The executive order thus directs the Secretary of Homeland Security to take immediate actions to plan, design, and build the border wall (The White House, 2017a).

In the wake of these executive orders, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increased arrests of undocumented immigrants who were not previously targeted for deportation (Woody, 2017). The Trump Administration cancelled the DACA program (Edelman, 2017), and terminated Temporary Protection Status for 195,000 El Salvadorians, 46,000 Haitians, 8,950 Nepalese, 2,550 Nicaraguans, 1,040 Sudanese, and 57,000 Hondurans who had entered the USA fleeing from natural disasters (Young, 2018).

In December 2017, the Trump Administration pulled the USA out of the UN Global Compact on Immigration, which is a non-binding declaration that supports safe migration and the rights of refugees and immigrants. Then US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, justified the withdrawal from the UN Global Compact, stating: 'America is proud of our immigrant heritage and our longstanding moral leadership in providing support to migrant and refugee populations across the globe [...] But our decisions on immigration policies must always be made by Americans and Americans alone' (Wintour, 2017).

On 3 April 2018, Trump announced plans to station the National Guard to the Mexican border, in order to tackle unauthorized immigration and narcotics trafficking from Central America. Trump justified the militarization of the border by stating:

[w]e have very bad laws for our border [...] Until we can have a wall and proper security, we're going to be guarding our border with the military. That's a big step. We really haven't done that before, or certainly not very much before. (cited in Davis, 2018)

Between April and June 2018, the Trump administration enforced its most controversial immigration policy to date; a 'Zero-Tolerance' policy on the US–Mexico border in which US authorities separated children from parents or guardians on their apprehension at the border. While adults were prosecuted and held in federal detention centers, children were placed under the supervision of the US Department of Health and Human Services. Announced by Attorney General Jeff Sessions on 6 April 2018 (Department of Justice, 2018), the policy met with mounting criticism as more than 2634 migrant children were separated from their parents in a matter of weeks (Flaherty, 2018). Following widespread

criticism, Trump signed an executive order ending family separations at the border on 20 June 2018 (Shear et al., 2018).

In October 2018, a so-called migrant caravan consisting of thousands of people left Honduras and crossed into Guatemala, and then Mexico, in a collective attempt to enter the USA (Escalona, 2018). Describing the ‘caravan’ as an invasion of the USA, Trump threatened to close the US–Mexico border and cut financial aid to countries that allowed the caravan to cross their borders (BBC, 2018). On 29 October 2018, while the refugees were still hundreds of miles away from the US–Mexico border, the US Department of Defense informed that 5200 troops would be deployed to the southern border (Clark, 2018). By portraying the refugees as a national security threat, Trump turned their approach into a justification for a strong border wall, using words like ‘invasion’ to securitize the event and dehumanize asylum seekers (Escalona, 2018).

In 2019, the Trump Administration radically shifted US asylum policy by signing agreements with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador that allowed the USA to refer asylum seekers to these countries to apply for asylum. The agreement has so far been implemented only with Guatemala. In January 2020, US officials stated that, in an expansion of the policy, some Mexican asylum seekers would be deported to Guatemala. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other human and immigrant rights groups have reacted against the new asylum policy by filing a federal lawsuit, on the grounds that Guatemala does not have a functioning and fair asylum processing system, and that it is a risky country for asylum seekers (Sands, 2020).

The radical asylum policies introduced by the Trump Administration represent a clear departure from the policies of earlier administrations. When it comes to border control, however, there is considerable continuity between the current and earlier US administrations. The deployment of troops along the US–Mexico border is similar to measures adopted under ‘Operation Gatekeeper’ during the Clinton presidency. Trump’s security-oriented discourse on the protection of the southern border and the use of ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric also bears similarities with the discourse of earlier US presidents.

Acknowledging the range of immigration and border policies introduced by President Trump, this paper contends that the performative role of Trump’s border wall is just as significant as its instrumental role, if not more so. The vital importance Trump has placed on the border wall as protective device serves to simultaneously accentuate the relevance of Trump’s expertise as an entrepreneur. The wall also exemplifies how Trump will restore the USA as an economic power, by defending the country against external threats. All of these key messages are brought together in Trump’s border wall discourse. In the following sections, we look closer at Trump’s border wall project, examining how Trump’s entrepreneurship figures in his border wall discourse.

Trump’s border wall project

During his presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly focused on the need to erect a new border wall to thwart unauthorized immigration and narcotics trafficking. In his speeches, the border wall project conveyed not only Trump’s determination to protect the border, and the significance of the border wall as a means to restore America’s greatness, but also the entrepreneurial experience of Donald Trump himself, and his ability to build the wall. As Trump explains, ‘I am a builder. I build great buildings [...] I would build a border like you’ve never seen before. Nobody’s climbing over’ (Nixon and Qiu, 2018).

Unlike his predecessors, Trump has kept a strong focus on the wall’s characteristics, using terms such as ‘impenetrable’, ‘magnificent’ and ‘great,’ conjuring up images of determination,

strength and resolve. At a 2015 campaign rally, Trump stated: ‘We’re going to build a wall, and it’s going to be impenetrable, it will be a real wall’ (Nixon and Qiu, 2018). During the Republican presidential debate in 2015, Trump declared: ‘As far as the wall is concerned, we’re going to build a wall. We’re going to create a border. We’re going to let people in, but they’re going to come in legally’ (Time, 2015). At another 2015 rally, Trump noted:

We’re going to build a wall. It’s going to be a great wall. And it’s going to have big beautiful doors in it because we’re going to have people coming into our country, but they’re going to come into our country legally. (Nixon and Qiu, 2018)

In the 2016 Republican presidential debate, Trump warned: ‘our country is in trouble [. . .] we have a tremendous problem with crime. The border is a disaster, it’s like a piece of Swiss cheese’ (The Washington Post, 2016). In another speech, Trump described his border wall project as follows (New York Times, 2016):

On day one, we will begin working on an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall. [. . .] We will use the best technology, including above and below ground sensors [. . .]. Towers, aerial surveillance and manpower to supplement the wall, find and dislocate tunnels and keep out criminal cartels.

Soon after Donald Trump took office as the 45th President of the United States, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) published a solicitation for prototypes of the new border wall, containing aesthetic as well as functional design requirements (Townsend, 2017). According to the solicitation document, the height of the wall must be ‘physically imposing’, nominally 30 ft and minimum 18 ft high, while the north side of the wall (facing the USA) must be ‘aesthetically pleasing in color, anti-climb texture, etc., to be consistent with [the] general surrounding environment’ (US Customs and Border Protection, 2017: 2). Furthermore, there are requirements for features that prevent scaling or climbing over the wall, and digging or tunneling under it for a minimum of 6 ft below the lowest adjacent grade, and to deter the creation of a physical breach of the wall ‘larger than 12 inches in diameter or square using sledgehammer, car jack, pick axe, chisel, battery operated impact tools, battery operated cutting tools, Oxy/acetylene torch or other similar hand-held tools’ (US Customs and Border Protection, 2017: 2).

When the prototypes were completed, Trump visited the construction site to inspect the prototypes and oversee testing. Addressing the media at the site, Trump criticized opponents of the wall, stating: ‘[f]or the people that say no wall, if you didn’t have walls over here, you wouldn’t even have a country’ (The Guardian, 2018). As of February 2020, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, announced that the construction of 122 miles of the border wall was completed thus far. In his State of the Union address in the same month, Trump stated that ‘[a]s we speak, a long, tall, and very powerful wall is being built’ (quoted in Kumar, 2020).

A review of Trump’s speeches and press statements on the border wall shows that his focus on the characteristics of the border wall runs parallel to his promise to ‘Make America Great Again’. In 2016, comparing the southern border wall with the Great Wall of China, Trump stated:

China built a wall that’s 13,000 miles long 2,000 years ago. My ambition is for ours to be much higher [. . .] So we are going to have a real wall. It is going to be beautiful. It is going to be a big wall. (Factbase 2016)

This statement highlights how Trump associates the construction of a new southern border wall with American power and greatness. By highlighting the ‘impenetrability,’ ‘beauty,’ and ‘greatness’ of the border wall, Trump accentuates his resolve to protect the country. In other words, while the border wall is proposed as a mechanism to protect the USA from unauthorized border-crossing, it also manifests Trump’s determination to ‘Make America Great Again’.

The long-term and steady decline in low-skilled immigration from Latin America to the USA (Hanson et al., 2017) highlights the significance of the southern border wall as a performative tool, rather than a functional instrument of exclusion. Statistics compiled by the US Customs and Border Protection (2019) also show a sharp decline in the number of unauthorized border-crossers apprehended on the US–Mexico border during the past decades. In 2000, the number of unauthorized immigrants apprehended on the southwestern part of the border was more than 1.6 million. In 2019, the number of apprehended border-crossers was only 851,508. On the other hand, an increasing number of Mexicans and Central Americans have entered the USA with a visa and stayed illegally after their visa expired (Passel and Cohn, 2018). No matter how tall and impenetrable they are, border walls cannot prevent people from overstaying their visa.

In addition to unauthorized immigration, the prevention of drug trafficking is another important pillar of Trump’s border policy. In a 2017 interview with Associated Press, Trump justified the construction of the new border wall as follows: ‘The drugs pouring through on the southern border are unbelievable. We’re becoming a drug culture, there’s so much. And most of it’s coming from the southern border. The wall will stop the drugs’ (Associated Press, 2017).

Trump’s argument ignores the fact that most narcotics are transported across the US–Mexico border through legitimate ports of entry, in passenger vehicles, tractor trailers, buses and cargo trains, through sophisticated underground tunnels, or in small private airplanes (Bergman, 2018; Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; US Department of Justice Drugs Enforcement Administration, 2018). Barriers between crossing points can do little to prevent illegal drugs from entering into the USA. Nor can fencing prevent cartels from illegally transferring money from the USA to Mexico, through sophisticated money-laundering techniques such as trade-based deals (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

Indeed, former Department of Homeland Secretary Janet Napolitano emphasized the futility of a border wall against unauthorized crossings by stating that ‘[y]ou show me a 50-foot wall, and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder’ (quoted in Longo, 2018: 3). Similarly, former Attorney General of Arizona, Terry Goddard, touched upon the illogicality of the border security debates, noting that the construction of a wall ‘provides a false sense of security, the illusion that we are doing something to remedy border problems’ (quoted in Longo, 2018: 3). In a similar vein, Thad Bingel, a former senior official of the US Customs and Border Protection, underlined that: ‘[e]very wall can be circumvented. People can go under it, they can go over it. [...] No one should go into this with the idea that if you just build the right kind of wall, no one will get through’ (Graham and Midgley, 2017). John F. Kelly, Trump’s secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, stated that as the border wall alone would not solve the problem of border security, close cooperation between US and Mexican authorities is necessary (Kayyem, 2017).

To sum up, unauthorized crossing of the US–Mexico border has been decreasing for decades. Nevertheless, President Trump, like his predecessors, has continued to stress the need for a more tightly controlled, better walled southern border, despite well-founded questions about the utility of a wall as a means to prevent unauthorized immigration. Against this backdrop, why did Donald Trump choose the southern border wall as his

signature presidential project? The following section explores this question by investigating Trump's discursive use of the border wall.

The border wall as entrepreneurial performance

The performative approach to border security helps explain why President Trump has repeatedly emphasized the security crisis at the US–Mexico border, why he spectacularized the caravan crisis by depicting the migrants as invaders, and why the construction of a physical barrier is his go-to solution. As Butler (1995: 134) points out, a performative act 'brings into being or enacts that which it names,' underscoring the constitutive or productive power of discourse. A performative approach to politics thus centers on the confluence of discursive and material practices that are intended to bring a 'new situation into being, or to mobilize a certain set of effects' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 102). Practices and policies become performative 'to the extent that they succeed at bringing into being the very effect that they proclaim' (Rose-Redwood and Glass, 2014: 2). The emphasis on success at 'bringing into being' is also a key characteristic of entrepreneurship.

Donald Trump's manifestly entrepreneurial approach to border management is the perfect example of performative politics. During the 2016 presidential campaign, the border wall project was an opportunity for Trump to play up his strengths as an accomplished builder, and hence distinguish himself from his rival, Hillary Clinton. Trump has portrayed both Hillary Clinton and his 2020 rival Joe Biden as career politicians who are incapable of getting things done. Trump's proficiency as a successful entrepreneur is key to his presidential brand as well as his border wall construction project.

Trump emerged as a public figure in 1979, when he started the construction of Trump Tower in Midtown Manhattan. The NBC reality series 'The Apprentice', hosted by Trump for 14 seasons, was filmed in the Trump Tower. Trump's appearance in 'The Apprentice' helped him build a global reputation as an unbeatable entrepreneur. Trump has adopted an entrepreneurial approach to politics as well. In his book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, he describes his six-week, \$3 million renovation of the Wollman Skating Rink in New York, after the City of New York had spent six years and \$12 million without completing the project, as a 'simple, accessible drama about the contrast between governmental incompetence and the power of effective private enterprise' (Feloni, 2018; Trump and Schwartz, 1989).

When he launched his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump stood out from earlier presidential candidates by his lack of experience as a politician. Far from apologizing for his inexperience, Trump argued that his skills as a businessman were an asset that would make him more capable than other incumbents to the Oval Office. Trump promised that he would run the White House like he ran his companies (Associated Press, 2016). During his first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton in 2016, Trump claimed that past administrations had wasted the country's resources and declared that the USA needed a businessman like himself to solve the country's infrastructure problems (McGee, 2016). In another campaign statement, he argued that he would steer a result-based leadership in the White House by negotiating better trade deals, decreasing the country's trade deficit and increasing domestic production, decreasing taxes on business, and recruiting job-creation experts (Valet, 2016).

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump insisted on the urgent need to build a new border wall, and asserted that he was supremely capable of building such a wall, having numerous construction projects to his record. Building on the rhetoric of his predecessors, in which the US–Mexico border also served as a barrier between 'us' and 'them', Trump added two new dimensions. Firstly, he conflated the need for more protection against external

threats with the aim of restoring American greatness. Secondly, he meshed border security with the promotion of his own skills as a successful entrepreneur, builder of towers, and potential builder of walls. The southern border wall thus set the stage for the entrepreneur-as-president: Donald J. Trump.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump not only played up his skills as an entrepreneur, he also stressed the importance of entrepreneurship for effective statecraft. Along the same lines, his border wall project functioned performatively to frame his result-based leadership and entrepreneurial skills as a means to fulfil his campaign promise to ‘Make America Great Again’. Distinguishing himself from previous presidents by focusing on his entrepreneurial qualifications, Trump also brought forward a novel border wall discourse, with statements such as: ‘I am a builder. I build great buildings [. . .] I would build a border like you’ve never seen before. Nobody’s climbing over’ (Nixon and Qiu, 2018), ‘nobody builds walls better than me’ (The Washington Post, 2015), and ‘China built a wall that’s 13,000 miles long 2,000 years ago. My ambition is for ours to be much higher’ (Factbase, 2016). These statements illustrate how Trump has linked successful US–Mexico border control with his own skills as an entrepreneur and builder.

Just as the building of Trump Tower manifested Trump’s success in the world of business, Trump’s ambitious border wall project demonstrates his vision of security and the revival of American greatness. Trump’s continuous battle to secure funding for the wall allowed him to play the role of a president who works hard to achieve results, despite heavy opposition. In December 2018, Democrats in the House of Representatives rejected Trump’s request for \$5.7 billion to construct the border wall. This was followed by a government shutdown during which President Trump announced his intent to declare a national emergency to deal with the ‘crisis’ at the border (Bredemeier, 2019; Pengelly and Lartey, 2019). In February 2019, Trump finally declared a state of emergency, and tried to use the emergency situation to secure funding for the border wall, amid fierce opposition from Democrats and the American Civil Liberties Union (Paletta et al., 2019).

Throughout his first presidential campaign, Trump portrayed illegal immigrants as ‘the dangerous other’, crafting a narrative of the border wall as a barrier that would successfully end unauthorized border crossing, maintain order in the USA, and protect Americans against threats from the ‘disorderly’ South. Illegal immigration was a central theme of Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016 (Allen, 2019). Trump’s border security discourse, highlighting the distinction between the national ‘us’ and the alien ‘them’, presents a typical narrative of the need for a strong border wall as a protective device, reminiscent of the narratives of earlier US presidents. However, Trump’s border wall discourse differs significantly from that of his predecessors. Firstly, Trump’s discourse is distinct in that he highlights the importance of his own skills as an entrepreneur and developer for the border wall construction. Secondly, Trump also links the securitization of the southern border to his protectionist strategy to revitalize the American economy. Finally, Trump’s narrative stresses the entrepreneurial aspect of statecraft, essentially reimagining the role of the US president.

The wall was a focal point of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Years after his election, it continues to serve as an iconic image of Trump’s unique brand of statecraft. Trump’s proposed border wall is more than a physical barrier against unauthorized border crossing. Trump has repeatedly highlighted how his entrepreneurial skills enable him to build a strong border wall, to protect Americans, and simultaneously ‘Make America Great Again’. Thus, the novelty of Trump’s border wall discourse lies not merely in his use of a binary opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the performative constitution of the US–Mexico border, which is a common theme of US presidential discourse. Rather, the novelty of Trump’s border

discourse lies in the way he meshes his own entrepreneurship with national security and US economic power, rendering the border as a key performative site of border control as well as statecraft.

Conclusion

Borders are crucial sites for the performance of state security (Jones, 2011). Earlier border fencing experiences and trends in unauthorized immigration and drug trafficking suggest that the protective capacity of a new wall on the US–Mexico border would be limited. In this context, Trump’s border wall serves as a conspicuous example of performative statecraft. Interpreting the performative function of Trump’s border wall through the prism of his entrepreneurship brings further insight into Trump’s unique brand of presidential performance.

Donald Trump’s border wall construction project represents a distinctly entrepreneurial approach to border control as performative statecraft. In his campaigns for the presidency, the border wall project allowed him to highlight his experience as an entrepreneur and builder of towers, and how his unique experience made him supremely qualified as a wall-builder. From a performative perspective, the border wall served as a backdrop or set for Trump to play up his strengths as the ‘successful entrepreneur and developer’. Simply put, if a border wall was the best solution to America’s problems, Donald Trump was the man who could build it the best.

We have shown that Trump has used the border wall construction project as an opportunity for him to excel as an entrepreneur-president. Trump’s portrayal of the border wall project highlights the need for an entrepreneur like Trump himself to accomplish the successful construction of a strong southern border wall. Once completed, the border wall would serve as a monument of Trump’s political and entrepreneurial success. Trump’s narrative further promotes the idea that a strong southern border wall is necessary to protect the nation from security threats, while also supporting the country’s economic revitalization. Portraying himself as the wall-builder *par excellence*, Trump essentially replaces statesmanship with entrepreneurship as the key measure of successful statecraft.

Trump’s performance of presidential statecraft predictably highlights his entrepreneurial qualifications, where the building of the wall represents Trump’s performance as a president and the wall itself is an awe-inspiring, invincible barrier that would simultaneously safeguard the nation and revitalize American greatness. Trump’s brand of statecraft uniquely exploits the performative aspects of the construction of a ‘strong’, ‘great’ and ‘beautiful’ southern border wall, which Donald J. Trump, the successful developer, entrepreneur and builder of high-rise towers, is uniquely capable of accomplishing.

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