

Navarrette: It's wrong to enable border crossers

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Body

Want to cross into the United States illegally while keeping track of the location of the nearest water station and the distance to your final destination?

There's an app for that.

I have mixed feelings. I would generally approve of instruments that help people survive dangerous situations. But when those people are illegal immigrants who brought their plight upon themselves by opting to enter the United States through a back door, I become less sympathetic. In fact, I become suspicious and I begin to question whether the makers of the gadget retrofitted with GPS technology are encouraging unlawful activity.

The device is the brainchild of Ricardo Dominguez, a professor of new media at the University of California-San Diego, who developed the idea along with fellow researchers at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology. Dominguez calls himself an "artist" part artist, part activist and he describes his invention as a humanitarian tool, not a political one. He says that it is meant to save lives and not to promote illegal crossings.

This argument would be more convincing if the phones weren't encrypted to avoid electronic detection by the **Border** Patrol.

Dominguez, who plans to distribute the phones to would-be **border crossers** through church groups and immigrant-advocacy organizations, insists he's doing nothing **wrong**. But he has also described himself as engaged in "civil disobedience" and asserted the ability of immigrants to move across **borders** safely as a "trans-global right." Sorry, professor, you lost me.

First, if individuals do have such a right, then why does it supersede the right of sovereign nations to control their **borders**? On its southern **border**, Mexico asserts its right to keep out Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Hondurans and anyone else from throughout Latin America. Wouldn't people in Central and South America have the same "trans-global right" to cross into Mexico that Mexicans assert with regard to the United States? If Dominguez really believes in a right to cross **borders**, maybe he should ship some of his GPS devices all the way to Guatemala so people there can use them to sneak into Mexico?

Besides, the whole principle of civil disobedience is about breaking an unjust law and accepting the consequences. Henry David Thoreau went to jail for not paying the Massachusetts poll tax to protest the Mexican-American War. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail in Birmingham to protest Jim Crow. If Dominguez really believes he's following in that esteemed tradition, then he's acknowledging that he's breaking the law. And this means he's acknowledging that he's helping people enter the United States illegally. That's a crime.

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While some people are complaining loudly that state tax dollars might have gone to fund this research, this doesn't bother me. University professors spend tax money on all kinds of controversial research, some to advance causes on the right and others to push agendas on the left. Why single out this instance?

What really bothers me is that Dominguez has, in the eternal drama playing out on the U.S.-Mexico border, gone from observer to enabler. It's one thing to lament illegal immigration into the United States and try to react to it in a firm, honest and compassionate manner while battling hatred, racism and ignorance. It's another to encourage more of it.

And why? Out of a sense of ethnic solidarity, an imaginary bond between a Latino academic and Latino immigrants? Because of a desire to grow, even by illegitimate means, the size of the Latino community in the hopes of increasing the political and economic power of the whole?

Latinos in the United States have it tough enough already. People are always assuming that when it comes to the immigration issue, our loyalties lie on the other side of the border. I usually dismiss those fears as flashes of paranoia. But this gadget says that, at least in some cases, those concerns aren't unfounded.

How unfortunate that, in trying to help illegal immigrants navigate their way across the U.S.-Mexico border, well-intentioned humanitarians could lose their bearings.

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