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Images From the Battleground

Ranchers 75 miles from Tucson say bad border policies have resulted in a daily invasion of drugs, death, pollution and violence

By [LEO W. BANKS](#)

Lyle Robinson's Tres Bellotas Ranch sits in a cradle of hills right on the Mexican border. It's a pretty place. Sprawling Mulberry trees shade the brick house and oak trees--*bellotas* in Spanish--decorate the surrounding landscape. This time of year, during the monsoon season, the oaks drop acorns that cowboys and others working this land, 13 miles southwest of Arivaca, have prized as summer snacks for centuries.

It hardly seems possible that such a peaceful-looking spot could be the scene of anything momentous. But it is.

Everyone in America has a stake in what's happening on the Tres Bellotas. Everyone in America should know about the events that play out daily on this remote ground, and on neighboring ranches, because they explain our present and foretell our future.

This is a place where all the rhetoric from the president and his government about homeland security crumbles to pieces on the hot ground. The Tres Bellotas is a battleground in the relentless, ugly, nonstop invasion of drugs and illegals across our southern border.

It will happen again tonight. Robinson knows this, because two invaders showed themselves earlier on this beautiful July morning, shortly after breakfast. Walking openly, without fear of harassment, the two men walked from Mexican soil into the United States through the wide-open international border gate 200 yards below Robinson's home.

They were rolling a tire that needed air, and reaching the house, they asked one of Robinson's cowboys for permission to use the ranch compressor.

These men, *coyotes* making final preparations for a night smuggling run of either drugs or people, displayed no menace. They were polite. So was Robinson's cowboy. He said by all means, *muchachos*, fill your tire.



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An illegal alien dump site two miles northeast of Lyle Robinson's ranch house.



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Border patrol checks on an overturned smuggling vehicle on Tres Bellotas Road, July 28, 2005.

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But it was a Vito Corleone kind of request, one the cowboy couldn't refuse.

Robinson's ranch has no phone, no electricity and is, in his own words, a no man's land, where surviving means doing what's necessary, including maintaining cordial relations with the bad guys.

If they want air for their tire, you give it to them. If they want water, you're better off handing it over, because if you say no, they may break a water line to get it. If they want you to open the gate across the dirt road that runs between your home and your horse corrals, you open it. Why fight it? If you refuse, they'll just cut the lock.

Six months ago, Robinson looked out his window and saw something incredible--a traffic jam on the Tres Bellotas, with 15 pickup trucks backed up at this second gate, 150 feet from his house. The pickups sagged under the weight of the illegals they carried, probably 20 in each, 300 in all.

When Robinson walked out, the *coyote* asked him to open the gate to let them pass. Robinson did so, and off the group went, driving north.

So this long convoy of invaders entered the United States by driving through two open gates, encountering no law enforcement to check papers. Or screen them for infectious diseases. Or punch in computer codes to learn if they were criminals. Or search for chemical or biological agents. Or search for suitcase nukes. Or check the names against terror-watch lists.

Or even wave howdy. In other words, they encountered fewer obstacles than commuters in American cities face driving home from work in rush-hour traffic.

But they don't just enter through the wide-open gate below Robinson's house. His land abuts Mexico for six miles, and the invaders routinely cut holes in the four-strand barbed-wire fence separating the two nations.

They break into the country so often along this stretch that Robinson can't keep up with the fence repairs, an ongoing nightmare in which he is far from alone. It happens at many spots along our southern border.

Tom and Dena Kay, Robinson's nearest neighbors on the U.S. side, have five miles of border with Mexico, and smugglers cut holes in their fence about every three days.

A drug smuggler on horseback, pulling a pack mule, can make such a hole in 10 seconds with a wire cutter, usually without dismounting. He leans over, snips the first three strands, then coaxes his horse over the bottom wire. He's in. If he's driving a truck, he can enter even faster than that, simply by ramming down the fence and barreling on through, which Tom Kay says happens just as often.

This goes on almost daily, 75 miles southwest of Tucson--invaders from countries around the world coming across this international boundary in a time of war, a time when nuts would like nothing



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An Arizona Department of Transportation official checks an abandoned smuggler vehicle on Jarillas Ranch.



Leo W. Banks

Lyle Robinson points out smuggling trails on his property.

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better than to sneak into this country and murder Americans on a grand scale.

The Border Patrol doesn't release a by-nation breakdown of those it arrests, and the agency is particularly tight-lipped about arrests of special interest aliens, known as SIAs. These are individuals from the list of about 35 countries the U.S. considers terror threats. But the *Weekly* has obtained SIA arrest figures from a federal law enforcement source who asked to remain anonymous.

From 2000 through 2003, plus the first nine months of fiscal 2004, agents in the Tucson sector, and the Arizona office of the Yuma sector, arrested 132 SIAs. The numbers include 10 from Afghanistan, seven from Iran, 12 from Yemen, 11 from Pakistan and three from Iraq.

Using the common estimate that the Border Patrol only catches one out of every three who cross, or as some believe, one of every five, we can calculate that upward of 660 individuals from terror-threat nations have crossed into our country through Arizona.

Those SIA arrest figures, by the way, include six individuals from Saudi Arabia, the country that produced 15 of the 19 Sept. 11 maniacs.

Homeland security?

Along the border south of Arivaca, you'd best stand back when you utter those words, because the subject tends to make folks spitting mad. Even Robinson, a silver-haired, soft-spoken gentleman, gets a fire in his eyes when he talks about it.

"It's a joke," says the 67-year-old, semi-retired veterinarian. "Homeland security doesn't exist."

The *contrabandistas* have tainted life and corrupted hearts in Arivaca since before its founding as an American town in the 1870s. The trade is like a dirty fingerprint on the landscape, and a good bit of it runs along the Tres Bellotas Road, a dusty roller coaster that wends through canyons and rock washes from Arivaca down to the border.

It's rough country, all hills and horizon, and perfectly empty, unless you count soaring turkey buzzards, dust billows in your rearview, and the white-and-green Border Patrol trucks perched on intermittent hilltops.

Robinson and his wife, Mollie, knew the road running past their new home was a favorite of smugglers when they bought the place in 1969. But just in case they didn't, they received a dramatic reminder a few days after passing papers.

As they sat with the previous owner on the back porch, a proud young couple enjoying their first days on their new property, a station wagon roared up from Mexico. "Oh, there goes a marijuana load," said the previous owner in the most matter-of-fact voice possible.

Robinson admits to being a "little surprised" at the welcome, but not floored. The couple had seen the prevalence of drugs in their previous home, Gallup, N.M., and figured they couldn't escape it no matter where they went.

Even so, even sitting right on the border, they felt completely safe at the Tres Bellotas. "The first 30 years here, we had so few problems," says Mollie. "But the last six years, things have gotten really out of control with these illegals."

One day in 2003, Robinson and one of his cowboys rode their horses to a hilltop close to the house. To their shock, they saw an estimated 300 illegals congregated in the draw below. The riders watched as the mob divided into groups of 30 apiece, with one man, presumably a *coyote*, taking

charge of each one as they prepared to walk north.

"I rode down and talked to them," says Robinson. "They weren't nervous or acting as if they were doing anything illegal at all. But seeing all those people on my land, and the way they acted, that's when I knew things had changed around here."

From then until now, the smugglers have all but taken charge, hijacking a way of life.

The hilly terrain offers abundant hiding places, says Border Patrol spokesman Gustavo Soto, and the Arivaca area's proximity to Altar and Sasabe, both right across the line in Mexico, make it a frequent crossing ground for drug and people smugglers. "The smugglers have built an infrastructure in those towns, which they use as staging areas to come across," says Soto. "They're trying to get to Highway 286 or I-19 up to Tucson, and the Arivaca road runs between those two highways."

On this hot summer day, as he rumbles across his land in a Jeep, Robinson talks about what it's like to live in the crosshairs of the invasion. The indignities include Mexican soldiers camping just south of the international gate below his house, a supposed show of force in the drug war. They come about every two months.

But these fellows make lousy neighbors. To kill time during the long days, they holler and fire off their weapons just for fun, filling the afternoon air with the rat-tat-tat of gunfire and scaring Robinson's horses.

Once-pristine canyons, narrow, shady oak and rock gorges, have become depressing dumping grounds for tons of feces, trash and personal items. "I don't really have anything against these illegals," says Robinson. "But it really gripes me how dirty they are, and they have no respect for private property."

The trash includes clothing--leather and denim jackets, Wrangler jeans and more--some of which is still usable after a good washing. Cowboys in the Arivaca area often add to their wardrobes by cruising these dump sites, and now, when Tres Bellotas cowboys go out riding, they joke, "See you later; we're going shopping."

In one of these dumps, Robinson found a hat with an Islamic crescent on it, and he rode up on a dead body, a young man, naked, a full water bottle right next to him. When dehydration sets in, people sometimes go mad and tear off their clothes before death. Two bodies have been found on his property this summer alone.

In his corral, Robinson has what he calls his "marijuana horse," an animal that smugglers turned loose. The pregnant mare has hideous open sores on her back from being forced to haul bails of marijuana without a saddle blanket. "There's not much I can do for her now," says Robinson. "Maybe her colt will be healthy."

It never ends.

One night two years ago, Lyle and Mollie were driving home on with a couple from Washington state in the car, the man a friend of Lyle's from his days at Colorado State University Veterinary School.

They encountered a high-speed chase on Black Mesa, 4 1/2 miles north of the ranch. A pickup filled with illegals was heading south, the Border Patrol in pursuit, when the smuggler suddenly wheeled off the Tres Bellotas Road into the desert. Robinson theorizes that *coyotes* about to be captured often become reckless, hoping to intentionally injure the illegals they're hauling, which they can then blame on the Border Patrol.

The smuggler truck sailed headlong through the darkness into a barbed wire fence. The top wire snapped up over the cab, then down, scalping a woman sitting in back. The wire literally removed her scalp from the middle of her forehead to halfway back on the top of her head. She was with her son, about 8 years old.

As Robinson tells this story, he's sitting at his kitchen table after a lunch of iced tea and enchiladas. Mollie is cleaning up at the sink. The sliding-glass door to the front porch is open, and an easy, warm wind blows in through the screen, bringing with it a faint whiff of the horse corrals and the chirping of birds.

It seems a scene of ultimate tranquility. But hanging over all of it is a sense of horror at what the invasion has brought to this land.

A visitor asks how his Washington guests reacted to stumbling upon the Wild West in modern-day Southern Arizona. "They'd never seen anything so exciting in their lives," Robinson says with a grim chuckle.

But it gets wilder still.

At 11:30 a.m. on April 22 this year, a Mexican helicopter landed in the Robinsons' backyard. Arivaca resident R.D. Ayers had driven to the ranch that morning to visit his injured dog, then under Dr. Robinson's care.

Ayers describes stepping outside the house to see what he describes as "a military Huey-type helicopter" circling, at the same time that a truck from the Tucson Fuel Co. was pulling into the yard. The Tres Bellotas gets its power from diesel generators, and that fuel has to be delivered.

As he approached the chopper, Ayers says six men in black, commando-type uniforms stepped out. Five had ski-type masks over their faces, and they wore body armor and carried automatic rifles. On their sleeves, Ayers saw the word, Mexico.

They stood in a defensive posture around a sixth man, their leader, who identified himself as a member of the Mexican police. He pointed aggressively to the fuel truck and asked what it was doing there. Ayers, in Spanish, told the man he was in the United States, not Mexico, and that he had no business in this country and needed to leave.

But the commander refused to listen and began walking toward the truck, at which point Ayers placed himself between the commander and the truck, again telling him to scram. After a few minutes, the tense confrontation ended when the commander ordered his troops into the chopper, and they split back across the border.

Ayers suspects that the Mexicans--one of Robinson's cowboys identified them as *federales*, Mexican federal police--were escorting a drug shipment to Tucson, and wanted to haul it in the fuel truck. Or they wanted to steal the fuel. The chopper had followed the truck much of the way down Tres Bellotas Road.

"Men with fully automatic weapons and masks don't just show up to say hello," says a still-outraged Ayers, owner of a backhoe company and a former EMT in Arivaca. He added that if he'd had his gun, he might've fired on the invaders. "I wasn't going to back down. This is *my* country."

These drug incursions occur with some regularity along the border. The Kays and Robinson say they're personally aware of three such incursions this summer alone, and it's worth noting that the men who recently shot two Border Patrol agents near Nogales also wore black, commando-type gear.

But this episode, like the others, has disappeared into the vapor of national security. Tucson Fuel refuses comment. The Border Patrol won't talk about it, saying its agents got to the Tres Bellotas too late to learn much of anything. The FBI in Tucson took a report the same day and forwarded it to Washington, but they're not talking, either.

As for Robinson, he was gone from the ranch that day, holding a veterinary clinic on the Tohono O'odham Reservation--ironically enough, under a contract from the Department of Homeland Security. "I really don't know what happened," he says. "But I know my cowboys were so scared, they hid in the barn."

The driver of the fuel truck arrived at Tom and Dena Kay's ranch, eight miles north of the Robinson place, between noon and 1 p.m. that day.

"He was still shaken up, really wild-eyed," says Dena, who put in the first call to the Border Patrol. Ayers had tried to call, but when he got atop Black Mesa, the only place in the immediate area where cell phones work, the call wouldn't go through. He suspects that smugglers had jammed the signal.

At the moment, the Kays' Jarillas Ranch is a bustle of activity. Tom Kay, 63, is working the controls of a forklift with-on-the-ground help from his two cowboys, Roberto Triana and son, Peter. They're preparing a huge stack of railroad ties for eventual transportation to job sites around the 13,000-acre spread.

The solar-powered ranch house, located back from the clearing where Tom and his hands are working, sits on a rise above Tres Bellotas Road, shielded from its wildness by distance, some apple trees and a strong security gate.

After moving here in January 2003, the Kays spent six months re-doing everything about the house, except for two fireplaces that remain untouched. They sandblasted paint off the ceilings, installed a saguaro-rib ceiling in a hallway, and out front, beneath a tall pine tree, they built a rock wall around the manicured front lawn.

But the most telling touch is the sign hanging on the porch. Instead of the traditional *Mi Casa Es Su Casa*, so common on ranch-country homes, this message perfectly reflects the Kays' stance toward the illegals and smugglers who threaten their Eden. It reads, *Mi Tierra Es Mi Tierra*--my land is my land.

It's a manifesto, a hope and a bit of a prayer in a place where the invasion never stops, and its perpetrators receive, in the Kays' view, encouragement and welcome from water-in-the-desert "do-gooders."

On Arivaca Road on July 9, the Border Patrol busted two members of the self-described border-help group No More Deaths, alleging that they violated the law by transporting three illegals. Standing beneath the big pine tree outside her house, her bull mastiff, Ruby, bustling at her feet, Dena can't contain her delight that the Border Patrol has finally taken a stand against the group, which she says "entices people into our country to die."

"They put these crossers at the mercy of the *coyotes*, who rob and abandon all of them, and rape and abuse women," says Dena. "On the Fourth of July weekend, they found several bodies near here, and I hold these do-gooders morally responsible for every one of those deaths. They're so damn self-righteous, and they don't want to hear about all the damage the illegals are doing. They don't know how we're forced to live and don't want to find out.

"I invite all these so-called Samaritans to publish their home addresses so the illegals can go to their homes and defecate on their property and pound on their doors in the middle of the night and see how they like it."

Dena, 61, grew up at the Tucson's Tanque Verde Guest Ranch--when it was still a working ranch--taught English at Rincon High School and worked for 15 years as executive director of a domestic abuse advocacy center in Cortez, Colo.

In the latter job, she dealt with several women whose battering husbands, illegal aliens, had been deported to Mexico. Within a few months, they were back doing it again, and from that, she knew how easy it was to sneak back and forth across the line.

Beyond that, she and Tom had little first-hand knowledge of how overwhelming illegal immigration had become, and how dangerous. But an episode early in their time at the Jarillas Ranch initiated the Kays into the nightmare.

Dena was driving home along the Tres Bellotas when she turned a corner and ran smack-dab into 15 pickup trucks stuffed with about 25 illegals each. They were heading toward Arivaca and Interstate 19. When the lead truck saw Dena's vehicle, the driver jammed the brakes, then all the trucks began making U-turns on the narrow road, blocking her in.

"Here I am trying to get home at night, and there are hundreds of illegals and smugglers blocking my path," says Dena, who was unable to move for five minutes. "I didn't have my gun, and I'm thinking, 'Oops, I hope you guys don't want to steal my car.'"

The episode ended peacefully when the trucks got turned around and headed south.

On other occasions, the Kays have watched in astonishment as smuggler vehicles have rolled past in broad daylight, packed with human cargo. In one case, they saw a parade of pickup trucks with invaders sitting all around the edge of the rear bed, their arms locked so they wouldn't fall off. More stood in the bed, and they were packed in so tightly, it seemed impossible to breathe. Still more were packed into the double cabs like a fraternity stunt.

The site provided a stunning visual lesson in the economics of people smuggling. The Kays figure that each cab-and-a-half truck carried at least 50 people. According to Border Patrol estimates, each illegal pays \$1,500 for transportation north. That's a grand total of \$75,000 per truck. For, say, 15 trucks, that's a stunning \$1.1 million.

"When I see those trucks, I think of slave ships passing in a harbor 300 years ago," says Tom.

The trucks sometimes roar down the rocky, gouged-out Tres Bellotas Road at night, with their lights off, at 50 mph. Dena says the nighttime racket can be especially loud during the Border Patrol's shift change, a time the *coyotes* know well. She has even seen mothers cradling babies, six months to two years old, at the roadside, after apprehension by the Border Patrol, and the babies are vomiting violently.

"I'm sure they have shaken-baby syndrome from driving this road at such high speeds," she says. "But as soon as they're released into Mexico, those mothers will be back with their babies to try again. They have no clue about the brain damage they've just caused their children."

Dena praises the Border Patrol's efforts to try to control illegal vehicle traffic on the road. "But they're overwhelmed," she says. "The illegals come at them from every direction."

The problems they cause are constant. The Kays have repeatedly had their outside water spigot left on, leaving no water for them to use their bathroom or shower. Neighboring ranchers have found stock tanks fouled by shampoo, soap and toothpaste deposited by invaders who use them as their personal bathroom sinks.

As Dena sits in her spacious living room, the summer light pouring in through the arched windows, she rattles off these episodes with some emotion, but not much. She's a thin woman with a gravelly voice and a fierce determination, a trait she acquired while running the women's center.

There, she testified against spousal abusers in court, in spite of their vows to come after her if she did. "I've had my life threatened a number of times," Dena says, shrugging. "I guess I got used to it. When you've been a victim's advocate, you learn not to give up."

She needs that kind of mettle living outside Arivaca, an unincorporated town of about 2,000 people.

On a Sunday night in early July, the Kays were alerted to something going on outside the house by the frantic barking of their four dogs. When Dena opened the door, she saw three illegals, in aggressive postures, one of them bare-chested. They asked for water. In Spanish, Dena responded, "You don't want water. Get the hell out of here. I'm calling *la migra*."

Like most ranchers, the Kays have given water to polite illegals in need. But these fellows were bad news. When they didn't respond to Dena's demand to hit the road, she told Tom, in a voice loud enough for the invaders to hear, to get her gun. Those words did the trick. "Unless they hear *la pistola*, they won't leave," Dena says.

Shortly afterward, to make sure they were gone, Tom went down to the gate and saw two trucks, presumably carrying the same men, coming down the road toward Arivaca, their lights off. As they passed, Tom aimed his flashlight into one of the cabs, and the men waved at him. Tom thinks those trucks might've carried drugs, but he didn't get a good enough look to be sure, and the Kays can only guess what those three men had planned while approaching their home.

Right now, Tom has just come into the living room, taking a break from working the railroad ties. A lifelong team roper in rodeo competitions, he spent 15 years running a sign company and athletic clubs in Tucson, his hometown, before spending most of the '80s and '90s in Colorado. He operated a small ranch there and ran a manufacturing company. But he's never had to run a business under the conditions he confronts every day on the border.

About a year ago, Tom was out riding when he witnessed a running gunfight in which automatic weapons-toting gangsters blasted away at each other on National Forest land on the U.S. side of the border, and the fight continued onto the Mexican side.

And in June this year, Roberto and Peter saw a second gunfight, also with automatic weapons. This one ended with two bodies being dumped into the bed of a pickup truck, which then fled into Mexico.

Surprisingly, Tom doesn't consider the violence of the drug smugglers his biggest problem. It's how ridiculously easy it is for them, and people smugglers--the two often work together, sometimes within the same gang--to invade American territory. They simply cut the fence, or run it down, and they're in.

But that also lets his cows *out* into Mexico, and that explains the railroad ties.

In two places, Tom is replacing cuts in his border fence with cattle guards--the ties will line the pits below the steel guardrails--hoping the smugglers will drive or walk across the guards, rather than cut his fence.

It's a desperate measure, giving bad guys ready access through America's back door. But Tom and Lyle Robinson, who also plans to install border cattle guards, say it's the only way they can maintain control over their livestock. At up to \$1,000 a head, every animal that drifts into Mexico threatens

their ability to stay in business.

"I talked to the Border Patrol and the Forest Service about the fence cuts, and they said there's nothing they can do," says Tom. "They said do what you have to do."

Border Patrol spokesman Soto says the agency is aware of the repeated fence cuts, and has no objections to ranchers installing cattle guards.

But if the agency knows about these constant border break-ins--a clear and present threat to national security and American sovereignty--why can't it be stopped? "We have a heavy presence in that area, but it's extremely difficult to control," says Soto. "In cases like this, we rely on ranchers to tell us the crossing patterns on their property. We don't have agents holding hands along the border. They're responding to other calls."

When his cattle do drift into Mexico, Tom sometimes contacts the Mexican brand inspector in Sasabe, Sonora, for help. But that's time-consuming, and Tom knows that if he sees fresh tracks and doesn't follow them right away, his animals might next appear on somebody's dinner plate in Sonora. To get them back, he saddles up and rides into Mexico with Roberto and Peter to find them.

In addition to being a national security nightmare, the fence cuts represent another fundamental outrage--the invaders are severely restricting how American citizens can use their property. Tom has two pastures abutting the border, Lyle Robinson three, and both say they can only use this land if they have cowboys available to ride the border fence at least once a day to keep the fence up.

The cost? Taking into account all the fences on his property, including the border fence, Tom spends at least one-third of his time looking for and fixing breaks.

"Two or three times a week, I have to send my cowboys to the border to make sure my fence is up, and it's an all-day job," he says. "All of this is expensive. If I make \$40,000 a year running this ranch, every bit of that profit goes to repairing the damage these people do."

Why stay on land that American law enforcement can't or won't secure? After all, some around Arivaca already have left. In August 2001, Don Honnas and his wife, Carolyn, sold out after almost 41 years, in part due to illegals and drug smugglers.

As they reached their late 60s, the Honnases tired of sleeping with pistols under their pillows, suffering through 25 break-ins at ranch buildings, listening to their dogs bark all night and seeing two of their dogs poisoned. One of their biggest worries, remarkably, was the liability they might incur if one of their dogs bit an illegal, and the illegal sued.

"But the hardest part was when you call law enforcement, and they tell you they have nobody to send," says Honnas, now living in Sahuarita. "It was a difficult decision to get out, but we had to make a move."

For Tom Kay, running a ranch as big as the Jarillas has always been a lifelong dream, and he'll suffer through the dangers to keep it. "I'm very watchful and alert when I'm out working, but I'm not afraid," he says. "How could you be afraid and go to work every day? I'm not *going* to be afraid."

Whenever he rides his land, Tom carries a .44-caliber Magnum pistol on his saddle for self-defense, and for predatory lions. And when Dena goes for walks, she brings Ruby, the bull mastiff, and her pistol.

As far as she's concerned, the gun isn't optional. This is especially so in light of Border Patrol statistics showing that the common assumption about who is sneaking across the line and why--the harmless illegal only looking for work--has shifted significantly in recent years.

From Oct. 1, 2004, through July 24 of this year, Tucson sector agents arrested 375,000 illegals--37,000 a month. Of that 10-month arrest total, more than 28,324 had criminal records, 283 for sexually related crimes. Given this, and the effort it takes to reach their isolated house from the road, the Kays consider anyone who shows up at their door at night a threat. But they also know that should a confrontation go bad, American law enforcement will probably come after *them*.

"We've all been warned to not even show a gun to an illegal," she says. "A woman here did that a while ago, just showed it, didn't point it, and the FBI came to her house and warned her not to do it again, because it's a federal crime to threaten an illegal. But if I'm alone, what am I supposed to do? I can't scream, because no one will hear me."

Robinson is also sadly aware of whose side his own government is on when it comes to defending himself.

"Any rights we might have to protect our property or make an arrest have been taken from us," says Robinson, who usually doesn't carry a gun and doesn't particularly like them. "As far as I'm concerned, the smugglers can run anything they want through my ranch, and I'm not going to get up at night and look at them, and I'm sure not going to confront them. It's not my job. Besides, if I tried, and somebody got shot, I'd be the one to get arrested. The ACLU would probably take the case, and we'd lose our life savings."

It's early afternoon at the Tres Bellotas, and the sun is blazing over the desert. Out here, the intense summer heat keeps everyone's eyes focused on the sky for buzzards, because buzzards might mean a dead body, or body parts. Lions and coyotes sometimes descend on the corpses of illegals, leaving the death site a scatter of arms, legs or even a head.

Robinson has something he wants to show a visitor and pilots the Jeep up a steep hill less than a mile from his house.

The view from the peak would qualify for a postcard, if it weren't for the mass of litter and glass shards gleaming in the sunlight, and the smuggling trails that spider-web across the landscape. Some are so pounded down, they look like roads.

On this wind-swept peak, Mexican land visible across the pathetic little fence below, Robinson stands silently, examining what can only be described as a heartbreaking scene. He doesn't react to the debris and the environmental damage, at least openly.

But friends say the daily insults, the trampling of American law and sovereignty, the trashing of his property and especially the unwillingness of his own government to stop it, eats at his gut. Now, there's the latest chapter in the invasion--the helicopter landing. Robinson says he thinks about it often.

"I've never felt personally threatened living here until that Mexican helicopter landed," he says. "I know these Mexican drug people have access to helicopters, and if they get mad at me, what's to stop them from flying over the house and dropping a bomb and getting rid of me in seconds flat? Who'd care? The American government sure doesn't care. It makes me think how vulnerable I am."

As Dena Kay says, "There's nothing Lyle can do. If he fights back, the smugglers might burn his house, or he'll get up in the morning and find all his horses poisoned."

In addition to ratcheting up the stakes, the chopper incident did something else--it cut off Robinson's fuel supply. Tucson Fuel informed him that it would no longer deliver diesel to the ranch. Another company made one delivery and quit, citing the lousy condition of the road. The Border Patrol has

helped by delivering fuel, and they've offered to provide an armed escort if Robinson can find a company willing to deliver. But Robinson hasn't decided what he'll do. He's thinking of buying a tanker to deliver his own fuel, and installing solar power. But that still won't give him phone service, except with his cell from atop Black Mesa, a 20-minute drive away.

Two years ago, he and Mollie got an expensive satellite phone and used it for several weeks, until all of their calls began mysteriously routing through a Mexican operator in Hermosillo. Even Verizon's technical people couldn't explain it.

Then a Border Patrol agent told the Robinsons what they already suspected: It's the smugglers again. They'd probably jammed the signals. The Kays say the same thing. At times of heavy night traffic on the Tres Bellotas, their cell phone--they have no land line--sometimes stops working for no apparent reason.

But Robinson doesn't spend a lot of time calling the Border Patrol. Even when he's certain a group is coming through --such as tonight's tire rollers--he usually won't call it in.

"If I were to call the Border Patrol, they'd say thank you and probably do nothing," says Robinson, adding that he'd have to drive up to Black Mesas several times a day to report suspicious sightings. "I'd be on the phone all the time and be frustrated all the time. I can't let it control me and affect my health. It'd ruin me."

And by the time the Border Patrol arrived, the threat would likely have passed. When Dena Kay called to report the helicopter incident, it took the Border Patrol four hours to get to the Tres Bellotas.

As Robinson sees it, the Border Patrol leaves his ranch largely undefended.

Even though the agency has had a horse patrol unit living at the ranch at times this summer, Robinson says that's unusual. More normally, agents come to the ranch in the morning looking for tracks, then either depart altogether or retreat to peaks miles back from the ranch to sit in their trucks and watch.

This allows the invaders unfettered access through Robinson's property, and it burns him up.

"Even though I'm only 200 yards from the border, my position is these illegals should never get here," says Robinson. "If you had real homeland security, they'd never be able to reach my ranch. But they're pouring across the line while the Border Patrol sits back on the hills, waiting to arrest them father back. I'm left here on my own, and it's like a taking of my property."

No phone, no fuel, and usually no Border Patrol. No man's land. So why stay?

It's the easiest question of all: It's home. The Robinsons raised their four children at the ranch. Most of their memories are on this land, and so are their hearts. They even have a ranch graveyard, the final resting place for several family members.

But Mollie admits it hasn't been easy, even from those first days in 1969. She had difficulty adjusting to the isolation, and took comfort in the biblical passage from Luke, in which Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Mollie did that then, and she and Lyle are doing the same thing now, keeping their hands on the plow and asking God, through their prayers, to keep them safe. It's what they have instead of homeland security.

Everyone in America has a stake in those prayers being answered.

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