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In the debate on securing the Southwest border, critics are quick to dismiss much of the violence that continues drawing innocent people into the cross-fire and often point to misleading statistics that suggest the danger is overstated and conditions are improving. The U.S.-Mexico border might have more infrastructure, technology and personnel than ever before, but the reality is that the Southwest border, for all the improvement, remains largely open and unprotected.

Among the President and Democrats in Congress, there's been strong criticism toward growing calls to put border security before any aspect of immigration reform. Their claim is that the border is secure enough to begin moving forward with legislation to legalize millions of illegal immigrants.

It's an argument that's also being accepted by many in the media, with the latest headlines touting misleading figures that indicate the number of people caught trying to enter the U.S. illegally is at a low-point ---- an obvious byproduct of an underperforming economy. One newspaper editorial even went so far to say, "these are relatively quiet times at the border."

To say that this is a relatively quiet time at the border is completely disingenuous and overstates security improvements on both sides of the border. Because of drug violence alone, there have been an estimated 46,000 deaths in Mexico since 2006. That is an average of more than 9,000 deaths a year, many of which are reported to have occurred near the border or along major smuggling routes that funnel directly into the U.S.

Meanwhile, more than 5,000 complaints have been filed with Mexico's Human Rights Commission against its own security forces. Even so, with the support of the Obama Administration, Mexico remains a primary recipient of U.S. foreign aid, mainly through the Merida Initiative, which provided \$143 million in taxpayer money last fiscal year to Mexico for enforcement.

And in November, U.S. authorities announced the conclusion of a six-month investigation that

uncovered one of the most sophisticated drug tunnels ever found beneath the California-Mexico border. A record 32 tons of marijuana was confiscated, with an estimated street value of \$65 million.

All this shows that the border is still a very dangerous place.

In fact, it was reported by the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office that operational control exists along 44 percent of the Southwest Border and only 15 percent is airtight. This is definitely an improvement from where things were just a decade ago, but there's still a long way to go.

When it comes to illegal immigration, border security must be the first priority and considered separately from the nation's immigration policy. Only when an enforceable border is created ---- using a combination of infrastructure, technology and personnel ---- should Congress weigh the option of reform without the prospect of blanket amnesty.

For the President, Congress or even the media, making a case for immigration reform based on political calculations is a bad move. Doing so ignores the real danger posed by an unprotected border and its detrimental effect on the entire country.