

Constitution-Free Zone

How Rights Are Eroding Inside America's 100-Mile Belt

WRITTEN BY
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Millions of Americans live and travel each day inside a legal gray area where protections against unreasonable searches, seizures and other civil-liberties safeguards are weakened. Known informally as the “100-mile border zone,” this band of territory stretches roughly 100 miles inland from U.S. land and coastal borders and covers about two-thirds of the population. Civil-liberties advocates warn the zone functions as a de facto constitution-free area, where property rights, speech rights and Fourth Amendment protections are tested—and often bypassed.

What the 100-Mile Zone Means

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Border Patrol exercise expanded authority inside the interior zone. Agents operate interior checkpoints, board buses and commercial carriers, and conduct searches and questioning without the same warrant requirements that normally apply elsewhere. That authority places major population centers, interstate travel corridors and entire states inside an area where ordinary movement can trigger heightened federal scrutiny.

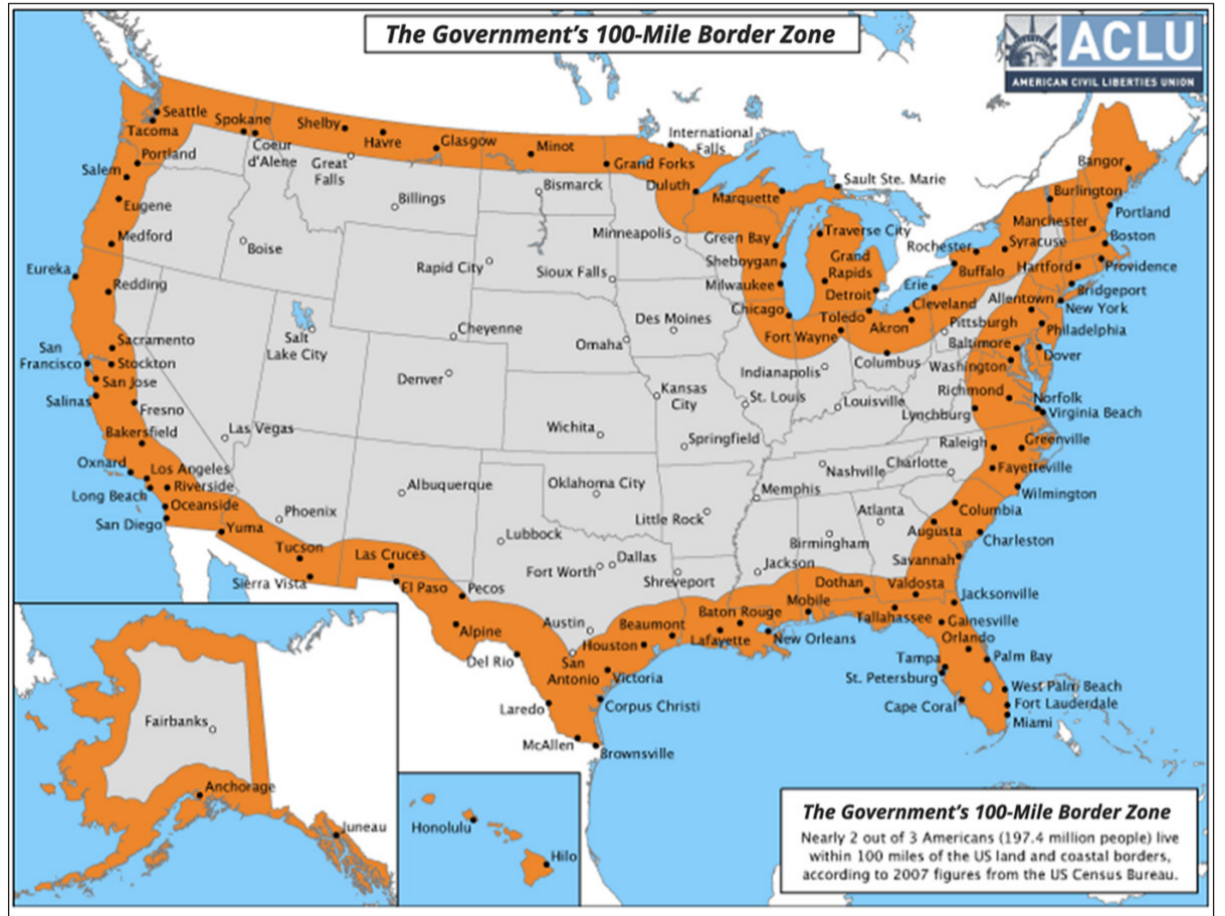
How These Powers Are Used in Practice

Interior bus boardings, road checkpoints and warrantless searches—often justified as anti-smuggling or immigration enforcement—have produced videos, complaints and lawsuits documenting intrusive encounters with U.S. citizens and lawful residents. Civil-liberties groups and policy researchers collect and analyze those encounters, arguing that many raise serious Fourth Amendment questions about profiling, probable cause and geographic exceptions to constitutional protections.

Surveillance, Data-Sharing and BOLO Lists

Beyond physical checkpoints, agencies have expanded data collection and cross-agency information sharing. “BOLO,” short for “Be On the Lookout,” is a law-enforcement alert used to flag people, vehicles or content for attention. During the pandemic era critics say lists of flagged social-media posts and accounts were shared with tech platforms and other agencies—raising First Amendment concerns and the prospect of administrative content suppression.

Federal contracts for location and mobility data, license-plate readers, drones and other technologies make interior surveillance routine, effectively diluting the practical protections of warrants for residents and travelers inside the 100-mile belt.



Map of USA constitutional free zone

Property Rights, Search and Seizure, and Everyday Privacy

Expanded interior authority affects property owners. Checkpoints and searches sometimes extend to private land near borders, and law enforcement's use of aerial surveillance, cell-site data and plate readers can take place without the warrants typically required outside border contexts. Critics say this normalizes warrantless intrusions and shifts the burden of proof away from government and toward the citizen.

Speech, Information and the Chilling Effect

When government actors flag or request removal of online content—whether framed as misinformation, public-health guidance or national-security enforcement—dissenting speech can be suppressed without transparent due process. Observers warn this creates a chilling effect on researchers, journalists and ordinary citizens and undermines public debate and accountability.

Legal Pushback and Civic Remedies

Litigation, FOIA requests and public campaigns are pushing back. Nonprofit groups and civil-liberties lawyers are challenging checkpoint practices in court, pressuring carriers to refuse warrantless boardings, and demanding disclosure of surveillance contracts and data-sharing agreements. “Know your rights” guides for passengers and motorists are being distributed for encounters with CBP and other agents.

The Argument for Balance

Supporters say expanded interior authority is necessary to combat trafficking, smuggling

and cross-border crime. Opponents respond that national security cannot be a blanket justification for diluting Constitutional protections for law-abiding residents. The debate is both legal and political: who sets the limits of enforcement, and what level of public oversight should constrain emergency or border-related powers.

What Citizens Can Do

Learn basic rights for encounters with CBP and other agents and carry concise documentation of those rights.

If safe, record interactions and note names and badge numbers, then seek legal counsel after intrusive stops.

Support transparency initiatives and litigation that demand disclosure of surveillance contracts and internal policies.

Raise the issue with local and federal representatives to press for legislative constraints and oversight.

The 100-mile belt may be out of sight for many Americans, but its reach touches everyday life—on highways, buses and in communities near international borders and coastlines. The critical question is whether security and enforcement can be reconciled with constitutional guarantees—or whether the slow expansion of exceptional zones will permanently weaken the civil liberties the Constitution was written to protect. 🏛️