

Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border

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Abstract

This article examines U.S.–Mexico border security in both the pre- and post-September 11th, 2001 periods. It argues for and then employs a constructivist approach to better understand the socio-political context in which the United States has formulated policy solutions for certain defined threats or risks—namely undocumented migration, drugs, and terrorism. It explains how these phenomena are treated as security issues on the border, a process that involves the rhetoric and symbolism of political projects concerned with identity, power, and order. This analysis is accomplished through an evaluation of both policy changes and public discourse. The article contends that, in response to a number of transnational threats, a gradual merging of societal and state security has occurred in both periods. The piece concludes with some thoughts on the place of this approach within border studies and the future of U.S.–Mexico border security.

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Introduction

Security issues are complicating and accelerating the transformation of many international borders. We often think of security as an issue or arena of power, of the military and police forces, of defense hardware and troop deployments, of

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intelligence and conflict. And indeed it is. International Relations (IR) and other disciplines have traditionally focused on these aspects of security which have an important role to play on the U.S.–Mexico border as well as in other contentious settings around the world.¹

This article, however, operates from a different, yet complementary, approach. It sets out to probe the ways in which security is “constructed” in this dynamic and important region that is both barrier and bridge to many transnational flows, including trade, migrants, and narcotics. “Constructed” is not taken to mean only how *physical* security—such as agents, fortifications, surveillance and the like are deployed—but also the nature of the *social* environment in which actors, like United States government elites and federal agencies, formulate solutions and then take security actions against perceived “threats” or “risks.” The underlying perspective that informs this research accepts that even these material structures and policy manifestations have and are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted. This context provides agents, such as states, with certain understandings—and thus constitution—of their interests vis-à-vis different security threats. This approach is meant to supplement, not replace, competing approaches to the examination of border security (such as rationalist, institutional, or mainstream neoliberal/neorealist perspectives) by shedding light on dimensions of the problem sometimes overlooked or de-emphasized by such work.

To get at how the process of constituting interests works, an analysis of public discourse can be useful to help unlock the social context of border security. Discourse is understood as the defining “scripts” of international politics: public documents, speeches, legislation, and other symbolic resources. More specifically, this article is interested in the genesis of security “problems” on the frontier and the knowledges or solutions which the dominant U.S. policy discourse on border control has authorized to solve them. Accordingly, a brief theoretical context for the three concepts under use here—migration, security, and constructivism—opens the discussion.

The second component of the article then evaluates how undocumented migrants, or so-called “illegal aliens,” are constructed as one of these security problems. The argument is made that the process is connected to danger, identity, power, and public order. An empirical look at official state discourse on migration and border control helps build these connections within the general politics of security on the U.S.–Mexico border. Again, such an analysis is meant to complement mainstream studies of security. A similar approach is then applied in the third section of the essay to border security in the post-September 11th era, with its somewhat new focus on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. In both periods, the article maintains

¹ Confusion often results in the varied and sometimes inconsistent usage of the terms border, boundary, and frontier in Political Geography and International Relations and other disciplines. A border, in its deployment here, refers to a legal (constructed) political line of difference—commonly an interstate boundary (hence it is used interchangeably here with boundary). A frontier or borderland, alternatively, is seen as a zonal space that encompasses the limits and junctions of various political, social, and cultural communities.

that we have seen a gradual merging of societal and state security in response to transnational threats. Some thoughts on the place of this approach within border studies and the future of U.S.–Mexico border security conclude the piece.

Theoretical background

Undocumented migration: the scope of the issue

To begin to evaluate the connections between migration, security, and discourse, it is important to understand exactly what migration across the U.S.–Mexico frontier is all about. Unfortunately, migration as a process is a somewhat “under-theorized and little-studied” phenomenon (Massey, 1998a: 286). Despite this fact, it is a large-scale occurrence: over one million new immigrants are admitted each year to the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2004). In addition, an estimated 8.7 million unauthorized migrants were living in the U.S. in 2000, including 3.9 million Mexicans (Martin, 2002).² The U.S. Border Patrol is on track to intercept over 1.2 million unauthorized migrants on the U.S.–Mexico frontier in FY2004 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004).

Given its mass impact, we can best begin to examine migration from a systemic or structural perspective underpinned by at least three points (Cornelius, 1998; Massey, 1998b, 1999; Sassen, 1998).³ First, migration is partly spurred by an existing asymmetrical economic order which was further consolidated under neoliberal globalization (especially through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)) and development needs in Mexico. The NAFTA model raises aspirations and possibilities for would-be migrants. Moreover, NAFTA and globalization themselves have created a transnational economic structure that serves the interests of large multinational firms such as agribusinesses. Such neoliberal economic interests actually tend to *favor* the existence of illegal immigration because labor is generally more valuable when it is cheap and undocumented. They also have a role in helping direct geoeconomic public policy towards neoliberal governance regimes that unevenly impact the U.S.–Mexico frontier, despite sometimes contradictory security efforts at the international boundary (Coleman, in this issue).

Second, migration is not solely a phenomenon of the single individual. Instead, it can be best understood in the context of networks: family, friends, transnational human smuggling cartels, and these global economic structures. Flows of individuals—and the important funds (remittances) they earn—travel in different directions across the U.S.–Mexico border. Such networks in turn spur further migration cycles. Finally, new U.S. border deterrence or security policies actually help create a one-dimensional migration (*immigration*) dynamic by making it more

² Some estimates place this figure even higher, in the 10–12 million range.

³ The three points mentioned here do not solely account for all illegal immigration dynamics; political instability, natural disasters, economic downturns, and other factors can all drive immigration at different times and levels.

risky, costly, and generally difficult for migrants in the U.S. to return home for visits as they have diminished expectations of making it back.

Given these factors and their deeply entrenched nature—most of which are beyond the control (or in some cases are potentially the interest) of governments—symbolic politics on immigration and border security come into play. Official state discourse in particular helps connect migration with ideas of danger, risk, and order in the public imagination. In other words, migrants have in some cases been constructed in the discourse as a “security” problem. The realities of the post-September 11th era now mean weapons of mass destruction, terrorists and transnational criminal networks are increasingly defined as border security problems as well.

Security

What do scholars and policymakers mean when they talk about “security?” This question, of course, focuses much rethinking about the concept in a variety of academic disciplines today. As [Barry Buzan \(1991: 7\)](#) has said, security is an “essentially contested concept”. Some analysts suggest security increasingly operates in non-military areas such as the environment or economy. Others are interested in the traditional military dimensions of security practices. Still others, drug flows, corruption, transnational crime and other law and order issues.

The first concern here is on undocumented migration. The negative framing of migration as a “threat” and security issue is based partly on a move in the post-Cold War era from concerns about military security to “societal security.” Using that term invokes the work of Ole Waever and others in the Copenhagen School of International Relations ([Waever, Buzan, Kelstrup, & Kemaitre, 1993](#)). While not unchallenged, their work has opened up productive new avenues in security studies ([Campbell, 1993](#); [Hansen, 2000](#); [McSweeney, 1996](#)).

Beginning by asking what makes something a threat or a security problem, those writing in this vein argue “security concepts arise, to a great degree, out of discursive practices within states, and only secondarily, among states” ([Lipschutz, 1995: 9](#)). As Lipschutz continues, “security moreover is meaningless without an ‘other’ to help specify the conditions of insecurity”. That “other” is constructed and understood partly through discourse. In regards to these discursive practices, Waever focuses on what he calls “speech acts” made by state elites to “securitize” issues (like drugs or migration). “By definition,” he writes, “something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so” ([Waever, 1995: 54](#)). The very act of declaring something a security threat is what is key. In addition, when an issue is securitized, it becomes raised to a new category of importance on the political agenda, thereby justifying extraordinary policy responses.

Moreover, security can be a *relative* issue, open to debate and interpretation. It may be contested, as [Buzan \(1995\)](#) notes, because moral, ideological, and normative influences can make some empirical data problematic. Note, however, that this approach does not imply that real material security problems do not exist “out-there.” Rather, the approach is concerned with the meanings and implications

attached to any securitized issue. For example, numerous states, including France and Great Britain, have nuclear capabilities; this alone does not make them security threats. Instead, the political context of danger and threat makes some nuclear states more worrisome (and thus “securitized”) than others. Similarly, undocumented migration has traditionally been less of a security concern for Mexico than it has been in the U.S. for a variety of reasons.

How something becomes securitized can be partly traced through discourse. What is of interest here is how a discourse—especially at the elite or state level—regulates the debate and defines the “problem” or “threat” to a state or society’s security and importantly what solution can and should be implemented. The fact that new differences, and threats to societal security, such as drugs or migration are now on the table, indicates an expansion of previously state/military-centered security agendas to encompass issues that may be seen as somehow jeopardizing certain notions of society or culture—in particular national identity—which have traditionally not been approached in this way (Ackleson, 1999; Nevins, 2002). This development also suggests a need for scholars to reconsider extant mainstream theories, for example on migration, in light of such securitization.

The argument made later in this article is that societal and state security have thus become increasingly merged under U.S. border control policies, both in the pre- and post-September 11th periods, although in somewhat different ways. Moreover, in the process, traditional military logic—and solutions—were applied in the 1990s to non-military problems like migration or drugs, presenting a number of real problems—the effects of which have been seen on the U.S.–Mexico border. The threat of terrorism in the post-September 11th era has interestingly consolidated this relatively *uncontested* security approach at the frontier. This point will be elaborated in the sections that follow.

Constructivism

A number of scholars working outside the mainstream of their disciplines on these and many other issues—comprising border studies or border theory—have insisted on thinking of borders beyond traditional geopolitical assumptions and instead as active, constructed forms of limits, of identity, and culture (Anzaldúa, 1987; Barth, 1969; Hicks, 1991; Johnson & Michaelsen, 1997; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Paasi, 1995; Palafox, 2000; Pellow, 1996; Welchman, 1996). This scholarly opening allows for an approach here that probes the connections between security problems, perceptions, and discourse: constructivism. Constructivism is not really a theory, but rather an approach to social inquiry based on two assumptions: (1) the environment in which agents/states take action is social as well as material; and (2) this setting can provide agents with understandings of their interests, thus helping constitute them (Checkel, 1998; Jepperson, Wendt, & Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1992, 1999).⁴

⁴ These scholars also seek to question the materialism and methodological individualism present in much social science work.

The first assumption reflects a view that material structures are often given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted. The case of nuclear weapons is again illustrative. Constructivists would argue that it is not such weapons themselves that matter. The U.S. does not fear the large quantity of British nuclear weapons; however, the possibility that Iran might come to possess them causes tremendous concern.

The second assumption involves the fundamental nature of human agents and states, in particular, their relation to broader structural environments or contexts. Constructivists stress a process of interaction between agents and structures; mutual constitution is the ontological basis; neither unit of analysis—agents or structures—is reduced to the other and made ontologically primitive (Giddens, 1984). Such an insight allows us to probe interest and identity formation: agent interests can emerge from and are endogenous to interaction with structures.

The analysis here follows Waever (1995) by arguing security is a socially constructed concept, having meaning only within the social environment or context in which it rests and is defined. Again, this does not imply threats do not really exist in the material world—for example suggesting that terrorists or terrorist threats do not exist except in discourse. It does argue, however, that we cannot think of them as having some sort of objective reality apart from our socio-political construction.

Loosely following this approach, Andreas (2000), Nevins (2002), Koslowski (2000), Bigo (2001), and Ackleson (1999), among others, have demonstrated the constructed nature of migration and security, in part a process propelled by political actors, such as bureaucrats, security professionals, and political elites looking for new roles after the Cold War. Conflicting identity patterns (national and ethnic) that were connected with perceptions about migrants in the U.S. and Europe, became the social pivots upon which state policy was constructed and continues to rotate. As will be illustrated in the following empirical sections, this has been the case on the U.S.–Mexico border both before and after September 11th, 2001.

The question then becomes from what perspective or setting are migrants or terrorists considered a “real” security threat at the U.S.–Mexico border and why? In other words, how are analysts and policymakers defining security on the frontier? What structures constitute American or Mexican interests in this matter? How do concerns about terrorism impact the discourse on migration? When thinking about these questions, it is worth remembering, as Buzan (1993: 43) has pointed out, with security, “what is perceived [or portrayed] as a threat, and what can be objectively assessed as threatening may [or may not] be quite different”. To begin to investigate this, let us look at the pre-September 11th discourse on undocumented migration in relation to the U.S.–Mexico border.

The pre-September 11th discourse on undocumented migration across the U.S.–Mexico border

Today’s security policies on the U.S.–Mexico border were not created *de novo* but rather emerge from a gradual intensification of certain measures dating from the late

1970s. These were modified and strengthened in the early 1990s as various agencies of the U.S. government became increasingly involved in security efforts there for reasons discussed below. The relatively open nature of that boundary has long provided opportunities for determined laborers and narcotics to cross illicitly and meet American demands for both. The need to counter these “risks” territorially is reflexive: recall from the discussion of migration above that the “hazards” to be combated (in this case undocumented workers) are the partly product of development and industrialization (the need for inexpensive labor in the U.S.) itself.

A number of authors, including Dunn (1996), Nevins (2002), Andreas (2000), and Ackleson (1999) detail U.S.–Mexico border security policy in late 20th century. The basic picture they formulate is as follows: to combat cross-border flows, particularly narcotics and migrants, the U.S. drew on selected local initiatives in the late 1970s and 1980s to develop a wider, high-profile, high-intensity campaign which, by the early 1990s, sought to “seal”—or at least project the image it had sealed—its international boundaries (Purcell & Nevins, in this issue). Costing billions of dollars, much of the regulation manifests itself through agents on the ground, high technology, and other security measures such as fencing. Relying on a dominant narrative that places faith in the power of technology and manpower to guide and regulate international borders, policymakers borrowed solutions from the military and directly applied armed forces and equipment in an attempt to bring America’s borders under “control.” As Coleman (in this issue) points out, these efforts constitute a tension between geopolitical security measures and a “debordering” geoeconomic strategy that seeks market neoliberalization.

The discursive roots of this strategy can be found in early high-level reports and analyses. For example, one initial germ of the narrative is a then-confidential 1993 analysis conducted by Sandia National Laboratories (1993) (a U.S. national science laboratory known for nuclear weapons research) under authorization by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (U.S. Department of Justice, 1974).⁵ This report became influential in congressional policy circles and with some federal agencies and military departments active on the border in anti-narcotics (the “War on Drugs”) strategies. The analysis advised:

Significant improvements in border control could be achieved by introducing new or improved technologies and that the application of these could lead to reduced manpower and significant control of the Southwest Border (Sandia National Laboratories 1993: ES-2).

Also consider what the 1997 *National Drug Strategy* report (which detailed presidential strategy for the border) advised four years later in terms of border security:

⁵ A much earlier analysis of the issue was conducted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in 1974, but this received little attention as the focus on the border only emerged after the Cold War. See U.S. Department of Justice (1974).

The use of technological resources...has moved the Border Patrol into the 21st century of law enforcement. These devices enable field managers to more effectively apprehend and accurately track the crossing patterns of illegal entrants (McCaffrey, 1997: n.p.).

Also helping to define the discursive parameters for action in the 1990s were the legislative blueprints for border security policy, which can be traced to several important texts in Washington, D.C. The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), in particular, was the landmark authorization for border securitization, earmarking hundreds of millions of dollars for Border Patrol agents, security systems, and fortifications.⁶ In conjunction with official policy documents, public statements from officials, and symbolism, these texts helped weave a dominant discourse that emphasized control and represented the new policy as a success.

As a microcosm or lens into this discourse and border securitization process, consider “Operation Blockade,” later renamed “Operation Hold the Line.” This was the vanguard U.S.–Mexico border control initiative, and it became the model for U.S. policy as a whole in the 1990s. It was turning point in how the border tended to be reconstructed in the wake of the Cold War: as a “problem” conduit for a variety of defined “threats” to the United States—narcotics, undocumented economic migrants, and, more generally social instability and poverty—in other words, societal insecurity.

“Operation Blockade” was initiated in 1993 in El Paso, Texas as an endeavor to close the border to undocumented workers attempting to enter the U.S. Most entrants come from economically desperate areas of Mexico seeking low-paying, unofficial work in the agricultural or service sectors in the U.S. The newly installed Border Patrol Sector Chief for El Paso, Texas (and now U.S. Congressman) Silvestre Reyes began this initiative that spread 450 Border Patrol agents along the border on a 7-day-per week, 24 hour-a-day watch. In effect, he adopted and applied a “line-watch” strategy he utilized in south Texas years earlier. According to Border Patrol spokesman Doug Mosier, Reyes (1993: 1) initiated the operation as

a response to El Paso resident outcry of crime and danger attributed to illegal Mexicans.

Reyes proclaimed it “an overwhelming success of historical proportions” pointing to figures that indicated detentions of undocumented workers—importantly in urban El Paso itself, but not the surrounding areas—fell to about 140 a day from a typical average of 1000 a day (Sheppard, 1994: 1A). The INS, while initially giving only tacit approval to Reyes, later turned to model their frontier-wide efforts on “Operation Hold the Line.” They began intensive surveillance designed to deter unauthorized migrant crossings. These initiatives utilized high-technology systems, such as electronic sensors, and deployed agents to monitor the border in new ways to try and deter undocumented migrants from even trying to cross.

⁶ Division C of U.S. Public Law 104-208, 104th Cong., 2d sess., 30 September 1996.

Reyes and the INS won popular and political support for the work, including vast increases in operational budgets to bolster security resources, including the hiring of more agents and direct military assistance. From 1993 to 2000, for example, the Border Patrol more than doubled from 4000 to 9000 agents while the overall INS budget increased from \$1.5 billion to over \$5 billion in this period (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003).

What were some of the discursive elements used as speech acts to define the security problem and justify this solution? As one example, in discussions, Border Patrol officials often emphasized the “disorder” and “chaos” caused by undocumented workers entering the U.S.–Mexico borderlands:

There is a very serious havoc that can be reeked by unchecked illegal immigration (Mosier, 1996).

The Border Patrol was clear about the rhetorical and material implications of the policy:

Operation Hold the Line was very simple—very symbolic of what we were trying to do and the name stuck (Mosier, 1993).

The Border Patrol’s spokesman, representative of numerous Border Patrol agents and indeed many El Pasoans, also promotes the *perceived* “success” of the recent initiatives in similar terms:

I think people are very happy...[we] are cleaning up of a lot of problems—that was a positive effect of having the Operation (Mosier, 1996).

Another Border Patrol chief responded similarly:

Chaos reigned on the border. Not today (Veal, 2001).

The discourse created a dichotomy of “chaos” versus “order;” the border needed to be “controlled” by reconfiguring difference and separation, in effect, securitizing the frontier. As Reyes (1993: 1B) put it,

There was a disorder here when people were running around here which is scary to people.

Reyes was not the only elite to articulate the problem of order in these terms. In dramatic rhetoric, Alan Bersin, then U.S. Attorney General’s Special Representative for border issues—former President Clinton’s “Border Czar”—also expressed this central component of the discursive strategy, complete with nationalist zeal:

[O]ur duty and responsibility is to manage the border satisfactorily, to manage it away from the epic of lawlessness that has characterized that border for the 150 years that the American Southwest has been a part of the United States, as contrasted with the northern half of Mexico (Bersin, 1997: 16).

In addition to all of this, several key events that occurred away from the U.S.–Mexico border in 1993 also acted to foment anti-immigrant sentiment, further pushing societal/state security concerns and a national political project of border

control. The first bombing of the World Trade Center in that year was linked to, among others, individuals who had received amnesty or had overstayed their visas; so too was the killing of two CIA employees. There was also considerable outcry that year about several hundred unauthorized Chinese who attempted to reach the U.S. on the *Golden Venture* boat. These events, and the discourse that accompanied them in the popular press and in the political realm, had repercussions which fueled some of border security strategies discussed above (Francis, 1993: 20; Kwong, 1997; Purcell & Nevins, in this issue).

Public discourse and political symbolism, combined with these material developments, have thus served to help reconstruct America's southern border through the securitization of migrants as a threat. Moreover, by invoking elements of national myth, by drawing firm symbolic, material, and rhetorical boundaries between "us" and the alien "other," and by relegating and presenting the "problems" of disorder and poverty to the border, securitization policies had an effect on American identity and the idea of separation and ultimately helped define the problem as one impacting societal security.

As one resident put it,

We have to confront the fact that this isn't one big community anymore. And pretty soon, there will be a wall to remind us about that (Vela, 1993: 3).

While the overall border security of the 1990s has been quite visible, it remains unclear if undocumented migration has been actually reduced through the new measures. The U.S. Congress' investigative arm, the U.S. General Accounting Office (1997), issued a study warning INS claims that policy had reduced undocumented migration were "inconclusive". By analysis of apprehension data, it indeed is unclear if overall flows of migrants diminished because of the security build-up. Nevins (2002), for example, has identified the failings of such a law enforcement scheme in his analysis of Operation Gatekeeper, pointing in part to migrant adaptability, strong U.S.–Mexico ties, and the free trade/security paradox.

Taking the discussion back to the realm of discourse and security, it becomes clear that elite speech acts worked to help construct migrants as a security threat in part to justify and expand border control operations. Supporting this view, Edelman (1985) and Bigo (2001) have demonstrated the way in which federal agencies both receive and help define a "threat" or "problem" (such as migration) and then construct particular solutions. This occurs despite the fact that such threats are often complex and ambiguous. Are migrants, for example, really threats or actually vital boons to the economy?

Recalling the interest/structure dynamic available in a constructivist account, Edelman and Bigo's contention that interests—budgets, operational, power struggles, resource competition, and bids for power—also help drive the process of securitization seems somewhat valid. This is clearly illustrated in El Paso in the case of Reyes. Reyes was indeed successful in attracting increased attention and funding for border control operations; Congress approved funding for thousands of more agents and enhanced Border Patrol operations. Even the then-head of the INS called the operation "an extraordinarily successful innovation" (Meissner, 1994: 10A).

Congressman Lamar Smith, chairman of the U.S. House Subcommittee on Immigration, praised Reyes and his insights in a committee meeting on border security and “Hold the Line”: “Securing our Nation’s borders against illegal immigration is the first priority of our immigration policy...It took the insight of a single person to change our whole outlook on this issue...Silvestre Reyes” (1996: 1).

In addition to this account, as [Purcell and Nevins \(in this issue\)](#) argue, it is also possible to understand U.S. border enforcement in the 1990s as a project “designed...to manage state–citizen relations and to preserve the political legitimacy of the state”. Such a dynamic, they argue, cannot be simply reduced to capitalist accumulation or the authority often created by capital–labor social relations. This appraisal of state–citizen relations connects to arguments made here and elsewhere about how political symbolism and national identity can be advanced through discourse ([Ackleson, 1999](#)).

When considering the construction of U.S.–Mexico border security prior to the September 11th attacks, then, three primary conclusions emerge: first, the U.S. developed a state and societal security problematic that focused on a newly defined threat—structural flows of undocumented migrants—who tended to be seen as presenting social problems of “disorder” and “chaos.” New forms of boundary surveillance—technology and manpower—were the defined solutions in the discourse. Second, as [Andreas \(2000\)](#) has asserted, the political and social representation of U.S. borderlands under the new measures is to some extent one of image while actual policy effectiveness is in question. Third, the construction of this security threat relied on particular social contexts of interests and identity. Built on popular and political support, these border security initiatives continued through the 1990s, leading into the post-9/11 measures discussed below.

The post-September 11th discourse on U.S.–Mexico border security

The tragedies of September 11, 2001 marked the end to the post-Cold War era. Numerous researchers and commentators from around the world have engaged in much debate about the meaning of these events and what has followed. For example, [Jervis \(2002\)](#), [LaFeber \(2002\)](#), [Mearsheimer \(2002\)](#), the [Schlesinger Working Group on Strategic Surprises \(2002\)](#), and many others have explored the implications of terrorism, U.S. hegemony, empire, intelligence, inequality, foreign policy and other international order questions—many of which revolve around security. There are a number of promising research projects currently underway that attempt to come to terms with this shifting international landscape and the changing nature of conflict and security. For example, security is being rethought by some scholars as a more fluid and broad concept and practice ([Barnett, 1997](#); [Waever et al., 1993](#)). Others are utilizing approaches based on the concept of “risk” to understand security and social change ([Beck, 1992, 1999](#)). Still others have developed work on globalization and complexity theory ([Held, 1999](#); [Hirst, 2001](#); [Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998](#)). Many researchers are currently probing terrorism and the future of war itself ([Coker, 2002](#); [Evans, 2003](#); [Renner, 2000](#); [Van Creveld, 2000](#)).

While scholars continue to sort out the meaning of the new international security environment, it has become clear that one chief prong of the U.S. response to terrorism is being directed at its immigration policy and its borders. Recent border security policies and the discourse which helps formulate them must be seen, however, in the larger context of changes dating from the late 1970s, some of which are discussed above. Both in the pre- and post-September 11th periods, societal and state security have been merged in the dominant discourse. As this section will further illustrate, the current response has situated a terrorist threat at U.S. borders, despite an apparent tension: the 9/11 terrorists entered the country on tourist or student visas legally and then violated the conditions of their admittance (some of the hijackers did, however, enter with fraudulent passports). U.S. border and immigration policy changed rapidly after the attacks. A vastly increased federal presence on U.S. boundaries is one of the most visible signs of the changes. U.S. Border Patrol and Customs agents were placed on “Level 1” alert after the attacks, checking every car and person entering the country. National Guard units worked to supplement regular INS and Treasury officials at border crossings. The potential for additional military deployment—especially should another attack occur—is latent: two weeks after the attacks, the U.S. House passed an amendment to the defense authorization bill calling for the use of military personnel to help patrol both borders with Mexico and Canada. In addition, proposals have circulated in Congress to expand the Border Patrol to 15,000 or perhaps 20,000 officers (Seper, 2002). To expand the border security apparatus, the Bush administration’s FY2005 budget seeks \$400 million in new funding for border security, as outlined in the Administration’s budget request for the Department of Homeland Security, which totals \$40.2 billion, 103% over the 2001 level (Ridge, 2004b).

Residents of communities near U.S. borders have felt the direct effects of these U.S. actions. As alert levels are raised, physical scrutiny is intensified, creating long backups of up to several hours at many border crossing points. This has crippled trade and commerce, depressing local border economies; retail sales in El Paso, Texas, for instance, have been off in some cases up to 50%, prompting local officials to appeal for emergency economic relief from Congress. Any effect, however, on migrant flows, remains unclear: while initially declining in the year following September 11th, 2001, migrant flows across the frontier are now up; for the first five months of fiscal year 2004, apprehensions were up 12% compared to the same period in fiscal year 2003 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004).⁷

The attacks, however, could not have shifted the political agenda on immigration and border softening more dramatically. The tenor in Washington has, not unexpectedly, moved from a positive orientation for border liberalization and immigration reform (consolidated in early 2001 through the high-level meetings

⁷ While interpretations vary on the explanation of the initial post-9/11 reduction, the increased security since September 11th, coupled with an economic downturn in the US, appear to be the driving reasons behind the decline that lasted approximately two years. More recently, potential residency requirements to obtain regularized status—should any reforms be put through in Washington—improving economic conditions, and a seasonal increases are also possible explanations for the current influx.

between Presidents Fox and Bush as well as some Congressional support for a new guest worker program) to a heightened *attempt* to seal boundaries, revealing a geoeconomic and geopolitical tension (Coleman, in this issue). Only in early 2004 did any potential opening on migration reform—through the guise of President Bush’s guest worker program—even appear to be even a remote political possibility.

Clearly non-discursive violence (the terrorist attacks) have changed official perception and policy, but in addition, some of the altered political agenda can also clearly be traced in the discourse on the new threat of terrorism and the somewhat changed perception of migrants and U.S. borders in several political narratives. In some ways, the image of those who hate the United States and are willing to wreak destruction on its citizens has displaced, at least temporarily, the picture of hard-working men and women in pursuit of the American dream. The U.S.–Mexico border is now seen as a conduit for terrorist movement, regardless of the fact that no evidence exists that terrorists have yet to enter the U.S. from Mexico nor has a realistic appraisal of the possibilities or pitfalls of full control there been properly considered.

The securitization framework can again help us make sense of how the threat of terrorism coming through the U.S.–Mexico border was partly discursively constructed. Consider just five among many recent examples of recent speech acts by elites which have served to help securitize the U.S.–Mexico border as a conduit for weapons of mass destruction and terrorists:

Attorney General John Ashcroft: “The menace of terrorism knows no borders, political or geographic” (2002).

The Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus: “The time is right to call for troops on the border in order to protect our national security interests” (2002).

Representative Tom Tancredo (R-Colorado): “The defense of the nation begins with the defense of its borders” (2001).

Representative J.D. Hayworth (R-Arizona): “In these trying times, border security is synonymous with national security” (2004).

The U.S. State Department: “We are faced with a more diffuse and insidious threat...by our open borders” (Taylor, 2001).

“Fighting terrorism” along the border has become both a national-security objective and a justification to continue and expand 1990s-style border security policies that primarily targeted migrants and drugs. Increasingly, as Bigo (2002) has pointed out, the lines of internal and external security continue to blur. Now military deployment *internally* (formally an external security concern) appears to be an open option. The tie was made, for instance, in October 2001 by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He argued that it might be desirable to give federal troops more of a role in domestic policing to prevent more terrorist acts: “In certain cases we can do more than anyone else in the country because of the special capabilities that we have” (Wolfowitz, 2001). Those roles could be varied, such as helping local law enforcement in the event of a terrorist

attack to patrolling the nation's borders to nab undocumented migrants (Swarns, 2004b: A14). A new willingness to engage the military is evident among some law enforcement officials in the borderlands.⁸

Moreover, parallel internal security efforts are being undertaken—in states such as Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Colorado, and Virginia—to empower police to be immigration agents (Swarns, 2004a, 2004b: A14). As Joe Greene, assistant commissioner of investigations for the then-Immigration and Naturalization Service put it, this is “a big deal, it’s revolutionary...there’s a role in homeland security for an appropriate mix of the INS with the support of local and state law enforcement officials” (Branom, 2002). In August 2004, the Department of Homeland security gave Customs and Border Protection officers expanded powers of “expedited removal,” e.g., deporting undocumented workers within 100 miles of the international border without a hearing (Koring, 2004: A2; Swarns, 2004a). While this has been a fairly common practice for Mexican citizens at ports-of-entry, the new powers extend to other nationalities and deeper into the United States. These two developments underscore the contention here about the gradual merging of societal and state security in the U.S. vis-à-vis the border and defined threats.

Furthermore, we can see a blending of the construction of threat in transnational undocumented migrant flows *and* the border as conduit for terrorism. While this blending occurred occasionally in the 1990s—particularly in the wake of the events of 1993—today it is of course much more pronounced (Nevins, 2002). The newly established Department of Homeland Security, for example, has placed border security high on its agenda, and in its discourse has now linked migration and terrorism. In Ridge’s “action plan” which outlines border strategy, the border is described as a “a conduit for terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, illegal migrants, contraband, and other unlawful commodities...The new threats and opportunities of the 21st century demand a new approach to border management” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2002). As the plan goes on:

America requires a border management system that keeps pace with expanding trade while protecting the United States and its territories from the threats of terrorist attack, illegal immigration, illegal drugs, and other contraband.

Similarly, Representative Tancredo—and other interest groups in Washington—are making this link, specifically tying a terrorism threat to undocumented immigration:

We can’t protect ourselves from terrorism without dealing with illegal immigration...To reduce the likelihood of future attacks, Congress has a responsibility to take concrete action to ensure immigration laws are enforced (Tancredo, 2002).

⁸ This sentiment was expressed by Drug Enforcement Agency, Border and Customs Protection, and Department of Defense officials interviewed in El Paso by the author in April 2002.

Bush's guest worker program, as it is currently constructed, can in fact be seen to fit into a national security rationale of electronically documenting all foreign nationals to try and screen out threats.

Along with additional material resources, Ridge has indicated he is willing to deploy the military as well as more technology as solutions to create, in his words, a "seamless border." What and how this could be achieved remains to be seen; it appears it will take the form of the "Smart Borders" program: technological solutions designed to quickly screen out terrorists and WMDs while at the same time facilitating the movement of legitimate goods and people (Ackleson, 2003). However, as Ridge (2004a) has himself conceded, we "can't guarantee a foolproof system".

On an alternative discursive level, the use of the U.S. military on the border has some borderland residents worried they will become casualties in the new "war on terrorism." Approximately 1600 military personnel were deployed following the attacks, including assets to assist in air patrols and intelligence-gathering operations (Tedford, 2002). This has brought renewed concern among some border residents of militarization, the kind that tragically ended the life of an American citizen in 1997 (Smith, 1998). Some groups, particularly ethnic minorities, remain concerned about civil liberties violations. Ultimately, the open question of what happens to the border should another terrorist attack occur remains a daunting prospect.

Despite lingering questions, in the final analysis, the U.S. is constructing the border as a security threat and in the process projecting an image that its measures are working. As one Department of Homeland Security official put it,

Heightened security at our land border crossings has provided a strong defense against terrorists seeking entry into the U.S. through our ports-of-entry (Fasano, 2002).

Returning to the tension identified earlier in the paper, the Department of Homeland Security has at the same time recently indicated no chemical materials, explosives, or terrorists have yet to be seized at the U.S.–Mexico border since 9/11 (Gilot, 2003).⁹

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that a complex web of factors impact the definition and policy deployment of "security" on the U.S.–Mexico border, at least in terms of undocumented migration control and terrorism prevention. As a *complement* to mainstream analyses, a constructivist, discourse-oriented account can help us make partial sense of this web of factors. It can add to a growing body of voices in border studies/border theory that have opened up these issues to new, critical perspectives and approaches. Such a method may offer an additional way to open the study of the transformation of borders beyond strategic and traditional geopolitical avenues, as Newman (1999) has advised.

⁹ Tom Ridge indicated this during his remarks made in El Paso, Texas (4 December, 2003).

The socio-political context of major U.S. policy decisions to securitize the frontier, beginning in late 1970s, escalating in the 1990s, and now continuing in the post-September 11th era, suggests the force identity, fear, and image can have as political projects. This article contended the “speech act” concept illuminates how threats, risks, and security—as modes of self-defense and national interests—are being discursively deployed to securitize the U.S.–Mexico border as a conduit for terrorist and migrant incursions. In the case of migration, as illustrated in the discourse of “Operation Hold the Line,” the regulation of the border in the 1990s was designed partly to present an image of “order” and “control” of the defined and perceived threat: migrants (and to a certain extent drugs). The image persists despite strong empirical evidence that flows were not diminished under the new policies and that prevailing socioeconomic conditions and policies press for, and often win, relatively open borders.

This article has also demonstrated that the line between societal and state security in the United States has gradually been blurred over the past two decades, particularly vis-à-vis the U.S.–Mexico border. This trend continues, albeit in slightly different ways, in the post-September 11th, 2001 period under concerns about “homeland” security in the face of terrorism. Using a constructivist or discursive framework, it is evident that this move, and the fairly vast material build-up of resources devoted to border security following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 is accompanied by and advanced in part through the context of protection against other defined threats: terrorist incursions across the U.S.–Mexico border. As the article argued, the boundary has been defined in the discourse by elites as a “diffuse threat” which must be “secured” against. Increasingly, populations away from the border are also subject to scrutiny and surveillance. Thus, the prevailing constructions of security today track in some ways the format of the pre-9/11 discourse on the U.S.–Mexico border and uncontrolled undocumented migration, even if the specific threat is somewhat different. Whether the new security practices and the gradual blurring of societal and state security has made the United States safer remains a matter of contentious political debate.

Returning to the insight that security is a *relative* idea, some of the policy and discourse changes have occurred despite the fact that many security analysts point out the threat from terrorism is wide and not simply limited to the fairly porous U.S.–Mexico or U.S.–Canada borders; terrorists can easily enter the country through a variety of means: legally, illegally, or ship their weapons of destruction through unsecured sea ports, for example. Again, the social context and constructivist approach can provide us clues into this selective process.

It should be emphasized, however, that this sort of analysis does not in any way imply terrorist or other dangers do not exist. Instead, it seeks to better understand the process of securitization and consider realistic security goals for the frontier as part of a broad, informed and cooperative policy on terrorism and its political antecedents. As we look to such policy solutions, we need to realize that fully sealing any U.S. land or sea border to such incursions is truly possible nor practical or even desirable. Therefore, alternative initiatives, such as layered or “virtual” border control—where people and cargo are cleared away from the

physical boundary—bilateral and multilateral cooperation on border management, and proper intelligence-driven security initiatives may be more effective in the long-run.

In looking at border security politics and critically evaluating the speech acts which accompany policy development, some attention also needs to be paid to the negative affects of securitization. With the image of migrants changing, for example, some voices in popular discourse and political interest groups have used recent events to call for curbing general immigration altogether. Similarly, the protection of civil liberties and interdependent border communities are important goals that can be hindered by the wrong sort of securitization. The dominant discursive construction of the security, both in terms of migration and terrorism at the U.S.–Mexico frontier, has at the minimum increased U.S. *perceptions* of risks, danger, and ultimately separateness and difference. It has tended to merge societal and state security. And it translates into a new vision for the U.S.–Mexico borderlands: despite the economic and social interests in closer, more seamless ties, division appears to be at least the short-term fallout from securitization and the threat of terror. Ironically, this outcome may occlude the cooperative and progressive construction of real economic, social, and political security on the frontier.

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