
Constructing the American Migrant Crisis

Securitization amidst Polarization

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Abstract: Using the Copenhagen School's (1998) securitization framework and Scott Watson's (2009) amendments, this paper demonstrates how Donald Trump used securitizing language to construct a national crisis, emanating from the southern border of the United States, that resisted saliency in a starkly polarized political climate. Key facilitating factors, including the frame resonance of xenophobic attitudes towards Mexican migrants and the institutionalization of migrant securitization throughout US history, caused his rhetoric to resonate with the far-right. However, political opposition and public opinion polls showed significant audience rejection of Trump's securitization efforts. The conclusion notes consequences of migrant securitization and prospects for the Biden administration.

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“Yes, many who come across the [US-Mexico] border are workers. But among them are people coming to kill you and me and your children.”

- Congressman Tom Tancredo (R-Colorado), February 2006¹

“We do have a crisis at our border. It is one of morality.”

- Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan), July 2019²

In the United States (US), populism and polarization have revived the debate surrounding an alleged ‘migrant crisis.’ During his presidency, Donald Trump used securitizing language to construct a national crisis emanating from the southern US border which resisted saliency in a starkly polarized political climate. This paper examines the episodic securitization acts advanced by Trump, facilitating conditions that caused his rhetoric to resonate with the far right, and ultimately, his failure to completely sway public opinion. Using the Copenhagen School’s securitization framework,³ and Scott Watson’s amendments,⁴ this paper shows how the media and political opposition impacted the efficacy of Trump’s securitization initiatives. Furthermore, key facilitating conditions are examined, including frame resonance of xenophobic attitudes towards Mexican migrants and the institutionalization of migrant securitization throughout US history. Finally, the conclusion discusses implications of securitizing migrants and considers prospects for the Biden administration.

Securitization Theory

In 1998, the Copenhagen School (CS), including scholars Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, proposed a framework for the process of securitization. According to the CS, securitization occurs when an audience accepts an issue as security relevant, therefore beyond the

¹ Quoted in Joseph Nevins, “The Ideological Roots of the Illegal as Threat and the Boundary as Protector,” in *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010). Page 119.

² Quote from C-SPAN, “Conditions at Immigration Detention Facilities,” Video, 3:19:48, July 10, 2019.

³ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, “Chapter 2,” *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998

⁴ Scott D. Watson, “Migration and Securitization,” in *The Securitization of Humanitarian Migration: Digging Moats and Sinking Boats*. Vol. 74; (New York: Routledge, 2009).

scope of the political realm and the rules governing it.⁵ A securitizing move occurs when a securitizing actor frames an issue as an existential threat and deserving of an extraordinary response.⁶ For an issue to be successfully securitized, the securitizing actor must persuade their audience to accept their viewpoint.⁷ The salience of a securitizing speech act depends on three facilitating conditions, according to the CS: the adherence of the speech act with the grammar of security; the authority possessed by the securitizing actor; and the qualities of the alleged threat.⁸ Should the audience accept the claim, the securitizing actor is then permitted to breach political norms in responding to the constructed crisis. However, securitization will be unsuccessful if the audience does not consider the issue as existential.

Watson makes essential contributions to the CS framework, which are important to threat construction and endorsement by an audience in a polarized political context. He notes three key actors that influence the securitization process: the media, the political opposition, and the judiciary.⁹ According to Watson, the media shapes societal understandings of ‘us’ and ‘others’ and, in Western democracies, is often dominated by the views of political elites.¹⁰ Both the media and political opposition can amplify the voice of a securitizing actor, refute securitizing claims, and/or advance their own securitizing claims.¹¹ The judiciary can also influence public opinion by confirming or denying the legality of securitizing acts.¹² As will be shown, the social and political capital of these actors is especially important in a populist leader’s attempt to persuade a polarized audience to accept a perceived threat as legitimate.

Securitization in the Trump Era

Donald Trump embodies the securitizing actor criteria outlined by the CS. During his tenure as US president, Trump was one of the most powerful actors in global politics. He is a long-standing multi-billionaire,

⁵ Buzan et al., “Chapter 2.”

⁶ Ibid, 24.

⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁹ Ibid, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 22.

¹² Ibid, 23.

with far reaching networks of business connections, making him one of the most renowned economic and political elites worldwide. Further, he achieved fame and celebrity status even before his presidency, through his television and movie features and cameos. Therefore, Trump's speech acts have enormous reach—especially given his frequent use of and large following on Twitter. As of December 2020, he controlled the 6th most followed Twitter account with 88.7 million followers.¹³

His securitizing speech acts are innumerable, but several key snapshots showcase the securitizing narrative he constructed throughout his candidacy and presidency. In his 2015 presidential election campaign announcement, immigration at the southern US border was one of the first agenda items addressed. He said of Mexican migrants: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."¹⁴ Trump continued to reinforce this stereotype of the Mexican migrant well into his election to office and presidency, promising the construction of a new, more heavily reinforced wall along the US-Mexico border.

During his *Address to the Nation on the Crisis at the Border* in January 2019, Trump portrayed the southern border as a gateway for drugs and immigrants that represented an existential threat to the American people: "More Americans will die from drugs this year than were killed in the entire Vietnam War."¹⁵ By forging a link between the casualties of drugs and war, he invoked a sense of supreme emergency. He also stated: "In the last two years, [Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency] officers made 266,000 arrests of aliens with criminal records, including those charged or convicted of 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes, and 4,000 violent killings. Over the years, thousands of Americans have been brutally killed by those who illegally entered our country, and thousands more lives will be lost if we don't act right now."¹⁶ Trump's emphasis on these jarring statistics demonstrated a concerted effort to associate migrants with violent crime and illicit drugs. The immediate call to action expressed in existential terms was an attempt to convince the public to allow extraordinary action.

In February 2019, these speech acts culminated in Trump's *Presidential Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency*

¹³ On January 8, 2021, Trump was suspended by Twitter following the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol.

¹⁴ Quoted in "Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time*, June 16, 2015.

¹⁵ Quoted in Dana Farrington, "Transcript: Trump's Address on Border Security And Democratic Response," NPR, January 9, 2019, para. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 8.

Concerning the Southern Border of the United States, effectively circumventing Congress's decision not to fund the construction of a border wall.¹⁷ As an act outside the bounds of normal political conventions, Trump's declaration constituted a securitizing act. So, the question remains, did the public grant the President permission to proceed in this manner? Certainly, Congress did not. An investigation of facilitating factors (the media, the political opposition, and the features of the issue) and public opinion will determine whether securitization ultimately occurred.

The media

In any society, the mass media play a crucial role in the circulation of information. In a democracy, it is furthermore understood that the mass media have a responsibility to inform the public of relevant and recent events, remain objective, cover multiple perspectives of an issue, and provide a space for debate and dialogue. However, in the case of populist leadership, messaging in the mass media can be skewed. Trump's catchy rhetoric and Tweets were attention grabbing and supplied the media with frequent, entertaining content despite being littered with disinformation.

As Fleuriet and Castellano argue, “‘the border’ is the primary discursive frame to talk about immigration and national security” in the United States.¹⁸ They explain that, in the media, the concept-metaphor of ‘the border’ is invoked when discussing immigration policy—particularly in the context of the southern US border.¹⁹ The majority of Americans do not live at the border and do not witness quotidian life in the borderlands; therefore, the media exercises a high degree of influence in constructing the image of ‘the border’ in the American consciousness. This is evidenced by the discrepancy in opinion between borderlands and interior residents

¹⁷ National Security and Defence, February 15, 2019.

¹⁸ Jill K. Fleuriet and Mari Castellano, “Media, Place-Making, and Concept-Metaphors: The US-Mexico Border during the Rise of Donald Trump,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 6 (2020): 881.

¹⁹ *Ibid*

on the topic of migration and immigrants; Americans residing in southern border states are more likely than residents of interior and northern states to view immigrants as strengthening American society (65% vs. 57%) and as benefiting the country with hard work and skills (67% vs 58%).²⁰

In their media analysis of the shifting frames of ‘the border’ during Trump’s rise to power, Fleuriet and Castellano found that “Trump’s campaign employed the concept-metaphor of ‘the border’ strategically, consciously crafting the US-Mexico border imaginary to generate fear through a blending of national security concerns, xenophobia towards Mexicans, criminalization of immigration, and an idea of the border as porous.”²¹ However, while the media was dominated by the centrality of the border to national security during Trump’s campaign, there was a small but pertinent shift in local media frames. In 2016-2017, counterframes referencing binational social, environmental, and economic linkages between the US and Mexico emerged out of border communities.²² New understandings of the issue were presented in terms of the region, landscapes, and communities that faced complex challenges regarding additional wall construction.²³

Fleuriet and Castellano’s analysis indicates that Trump’s framing of the border as a lawless and insecure place resulted in a stronger theme of border securitization and militarization in the media. However, some borderland locales resisted this misrepresentation of the borderlands, focusing instead on the ruptures and potential insecurity produced by placing physical barriers within a highly economically and socially integrated region. Therefore, the media was able to provide a platform for alternative viewpoints which contradicted Trump’s portrayal of the border. For the most part though, Trump’s rhetoric had a high degree of saliency within the media, amplifying his securitization speech acts especially in populations abstracted from the borderlands.

The political opposition and desecuritization

The political opposition, namely the Democratic Party, represents a spectrum of migrant desecuritization efforts. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer’s response to the

²⁰ Diana Orcés, “When Asked About Immigration, Americans Living at Southern Border Offer Surprising Response,” PRRI, April 9, 2020.

²¹ Fleuriet & Castellano, 890.

²² *Ibid.*, 887-889.

²³ *Ibid.*, 888.

President's *Address to the Nation* in January 2019 aimed to keep border security within, rather than beyond, the realm of politics. Notably, President Trump and the Democrats agreed that border security was a pertinent issue, underlining bipartisan agreement on the threat of transnational crime. Crucially, Pelosi and Schumer focused on securitizing the objects—rather than the subjects—that they considered actual threats to America's national security: "We all agree we need to secure our borders, while honoring our values ... The fact is: the women and children at the border are not a security threat, they are a humanitarian challenge ... President Trump... must stop manufacturing a crisis..."²⁴ Thus, Pelosi emphasized the victimization of migrants at the border but did not frame them as criminals or an existential threat to the nation. Schumer added: "Democrats and the President both want stronger border security. However, we sharply disagree with the President about the most effective way to do it ... We can secure our border without an expensive, ineffective wall. And we can welcome legal immigrants and refugees without compromising safety and security."²⁵

Further to the left on the polarized US political spectrum stands social democrat and member of Congress Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The media paid particular attention to the drama unfolding between Ocasio-Cortez and Trump, both of whom were fiery and uncensored in their rhetoric and used social media to rally their political bases. During the Trump presidency, the two represented the stark polarization within the state apparatus.

On June 17, 2019, Ocasio-Cortez sparked controversy with a Tweet stating: "This administration has established concentration camps on the southern border of the United States for immigrants, where they are being brutalized with dehumanizing conditions and dying."²⁶ By drawing parallels between the conditions in US border detention facilities and Nazi concentration camps, Ocasio-Cortez challenged the dominant frame construing Americans as victims of the 'migrant crisis.' The tweet relates the persecution of oppressed minorities during the Holocaust with that of migrants at the US-Mexico border, underscoring the insecurity produced by Trump's attempted securitization of migrants.

²⁴ Nancy Pelosi quoted in Dana Farrington, "Transcript: Trump's Address On Border Security And Democratic Response," NPR, January 9, 2019, para. 39-41.

²⁵ Chuck Schumer quoted in Dana Farrington, "Transcript: Trump's Address On Border Security And Democratic Response," NPR, January 9, 2019, para. 47-52.

²⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Twitter post, June 18, 2019.

The speech acts of American Democrats reveal an effort to desecuritize migrants and so, in the case of the ‘migrant crisis,’ they represent desecuritizing actors. While Pelosi and Schumer toe the party line, advocating for border security that more effectively targets transnational crime, Ocasio-Cortez vehemently pushes for the dissolution of the Department of Homeland Security altogether. Determining if these desecuritization arguments by the political opposition were more persuasive than Trump’s securitizing speech acts requires a look to public opinion and consideration of other facilitating factors.

Public Opinion on the US-Mexico Border and Immigration

According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, 65% of Americans felt that the Trump administration was mishandling the situation at the Southern US border.²⁷ An overwhelming majority of Americans (86%) said it was important to increase the number of judges hearing asylum cases, indicating that Americans were unhappy with the number of migrants awaiting trial.²⁸ Likewise, there was resounding support (82%) for providing safe and sanitary facilities for migrants.²⁹ The survey also indicated that most Americans (69%) believe that illegal migrants are not more likely than documented US citizens to commit serious crimes.³⁰ Therefore, a significant rupture existed between public opinion and the securitization acts of the Trump administration, suggesting a failed attempt at migrant securitization.

Interestingly, the study also found that about as many Americans agree with the Democratic Party (40%) on illegal immigration as the Republican Party (39%); 19% said they do not align with either party’s stance.³¹ This confirms what another study found earlier in 2019: Democrats and Republicans have never been so polarized on the issue of immigration.³² Hence, there is no clear indication of an overwhelming majority of the American public supporting or opposing migrant securitization. It is evident, however, that there are two defined and starkly divided camps.

²⁷ “Public’s Priorities for U.S. Asylum Policy: More Judges for Cases, Safe Conditions for Migrants,” Pew Research Center, August 12, 2019.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bradley Jones, “Majority of Americans Continue to Say Immigrants Strengthen the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, July 27, 2020.

This polarized political context presents a challenge to the application of the CS framework which suggests that an issue can only be fully securitized once it has been accepted by the public. Although public opinion polls suggest that the majority of the American public is not content with Trump's handling of the situation at the border, his words and actions found a support base in the far-right as well as smaller pockets along the political spectrum. For further insight on how migration has been accepted as a legitimate threat by a significant portion of American society, the remainder of this analysis will assess two facilitating factors: recurring frames and institutionalization of migrant securitization.

Facilitating Factors: Recurring Frames & the Institutionalization of Migrant Securitization

The CS securitization framework asserts that facilitating factors can aid or hinder a securitizing speech act. In the case of Trump's securitization of migrants, I put forth that there are two key facilitating factors: recurring historical frames and the institutionalized nature of migrant securitization in the American context. Over the past several decades, efforts to securitize Mexican migrants have recurred, taking different forms and justified with economic, territorial and racial rationales. As we will see, these sentiments are primarily based in nativist attitudes that remain deeply entrenched in arguments to securitize migration today. Over time, each of these rationales has contributed to the institutionalization of migrant securitization.

Economic frame

To begin, it is important to grapple with the economic element of migrant securitization. Nevins examines how anti-foreigner sentiment has been linked to labour organization throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. He states: "whereas labor has at times favoured strong immigration restriction, capital has largely championed an 'open door.'"³³ In times when the US economy has flourished, the American capitalist class has invited immigration programs. An example of such an initiative was the Bracero Program, which ran from 1942 to 1964 and facilitated the admittance of agricultural labourers from Mexico. This program was ideal for American business owners who, in employing Mexican migrants, did

³³ Joseph Nevins, "The Ideological Roots of the Illegal as Threat and the Boundary as Protector," in *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 122.

not have to adhere to the higher labour standards expected by American labourers. However, when the economy went into recession or depression, migrants were the primary scapegoat, considered to be straining the country's resources.³⁴ Raids and mass deportations of migrants ensued to placate American labourers who feared migrants had saturated the workforce, taking 'American jobs' and burdening public services. Operation Wetback (1956) is just one example of efforts to expel Mexican immigrants due to a perceived threat to the American economy.³⁵

Territorial sovereignty frame

The influx of migrants from Mexico has also been interpreted as a threat to American territorial sovereignty. In a discussion over immigration policy in the late 1920s, Harry H. Laughlin, a *eugenics advisor* to the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee, said that the volume of Mexicans migrating to US territory was so excessive, it would "almost reverse the essential consequences of the Mexican War."³⁶ Laughlin hereby inferred that an increase of Mexicans in the United States constitutes a threat to the country's territorial boundaries—not to mention the fact that the House requiring a eugenics advisor indicates the racist rationales behind immigration policies during this time period.

In the 1990s, several initiatives to reinforce the border and regulate migration occurred in the American South: Operation Hold the Line in El Paso (1993); Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego (1994); Operation Safeguard in central Arizona (1995); and Operation Rio Grande in South Rio Grande Valley (1998). Simply the names of these operations evoke a sense of impending invasion. In California, Operation Gatekeeper and Proposition 187 (also known as the Save Our State Initiative) were ballot initiatives that sought to regulate immigration and exclude undocumented immigrants from using public services. These initiatives had the support of several influential individuals, including then-Governor Pete Wilson and several anti-migrant groups. In her letter to the *New York Times*, Linda Hayes, Southern California media director for Proposition 187, said:

³⁴ Joseph Nevins, "The Ideological Roots of the Illegal as Threat and the Boundary as Protector," in *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Quoted in Nevins, 131.

By flooding the state with 2 million illegal aliens to date, and increasing that figure each of the following 10 years, Mexicans in California would number 15 million to 20 million by 2004. During those 10 years about 5 million to 8 million Californians would have emigrated to other states. If these trends continued, a Mexico-controlled California could vote to establish Spanish as the sole language of California, 10 million more English-speaking Californians could flee, and there could be a statewide vote to leave the Union and annex California to Mexico.³⁷

Thus, the migration of Mexicans to the US was constructed as an existential challenge to the sovereignty of border states, as well as American ‘culture,’ languages, and freedoms. This ‘invasion’ rhetoric was frequently employed and circulated by the media, Nevins points out, contributing to anti-Mexican hysteria.³⁸ In effect, the American public was willing to accept the securitization of migrants, and Proposition 187 was passed into law. Notably, the Supreme Court overturned the law, claiming that it was an overstep on the constitutional jurisdiction of federal authorities.

Racial frame

Underpinning both the economic and territorial sovereignty threat constructions is the racial frame. Nevins highlights the strong notion of nativism that has marked US immigration policy and securitization efforts, defined as not only anti-immigrant sentiment, but as “opposition to socio-cultural difference [that] involved rejection of internal ‘minorities’—who allegedly threaten, in this case, the American way of life—as well as of ‘foreigners.’”³⁹ Migrants have frequently been construed as a threat to the ‘pure American race’ and Anglo-culture. From 1910-1920, *The Reader’s Guide* listed 19 articles on the ‘Mexican Problem;’ from 1920-1930 this increased to 51 articles, which focused on Mexican “crime rates, state of housing, low wages, low rates of literacy, and disease.”⁴⁰ Immigration

³⁷ Quoted in Joseph Nevins, “Producing the Crisis: The Emergence of Operation Gatekeeper” in *Operation*

Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2010: 93.

³⁸ Joseph Nevins, “The Ideological Roots of the Illegal as Threat and the Boundary as Protector”

in *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2010: 142.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 131.

policy from the early 20th century justified the exclusion of migrants based on race. Quota systems and head taxes gave preference to migrants from European origins. Immigration policy, then, was explicitly racist, and acted as a mechanism for maintaining the ‘purity’ of the American ‘nation.’ The frame of Mexican migrants as racially inferior has clearly continued to inform popular perspectives on who constitutes the ‘ideal’ immigrant. President Trump’s remark about “shithole countries”⁴¹ was one such example, expressing a preference for immigrants from predominantly white European countries, such as Norway, over those from African and Latin American countries.

Taken together, the economic, territorial, and racial elements of the immigration question have been long standing factors in American imagining of the ‘ideal’ immigrant and highlight a deeply rooted desire to protect a white, ‘civilized,’ Anglo-culture. These persistent tropes have made Trump’s nationalist rhetoric resonate with some audiences, across the political spectrum but particularly the far-right, who have internalized nativist sentiments. Although not discussed in-depth here, this implicitly suggests that Trump’s migrant securitization efforts have depended upon and occurred alongside a discursive construction of the American ‘nation.’

Institutionalization of the Mexican body as a national security threat

As these frames about the threat of the migrant have been reiterated throughout American history, immigration policy has shifted and expanded alongside them. McCann and Boateng examine the convergence of systems of national security, criminal justice, international affairs, and immigration throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries.⁴² They note how immigration policies and programs have fluctuated with the degree of xenophobia in American society.⁴³ The War on Drugs (1971–present) and the War on Terror (2001–present) have been accompanied by legislation amalgamating criminal law and immigration systems, ultimately expanding the capabilities of intelligence services.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Quoted in Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, “Trump Decries Immigrants from ‘Shithole Countries’ Coming to US,” CNN, January 12, 2018.

⁴² Wesley S. McCann and Francis D. Boateng, *National Security and Policy in America: Immigrants, Crime, and the Securitization of the Border* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁴ See McCann and Boateng, especially “Securitization in the Age of Expansion (1945–1991)” and “The Post Cold War Era (1991–present)”.

The migrant experience became increasingly criminalized, and migrants themselves were categorized either as ‘legal’ or ‘illegal.’ There was also a move away from overtly discriminatory migration legislation towards more legalistic frameworks.⁴⁵ Rights-based immigration policies established in the 1960s were rolled back, and violations of immigration law came under the purview of criminal rather than civil law.⁴⁶ Sandoval-Garcia agrees with this evaluation, stating that “law enforcement has become the de facto policy in migration.”⁴⁷ In essence, legislation and immigration enforcement agencies have been established at times when anti-foreigner sentiment—equating migrants with intruders, criminals, terrorists, and threats to national security more generally—has peaked. Over time, this has culminated in institutionalized securitization of the migrant, which uses a legal framework to criminalize migrants and then advance technological capabilities to track and deport them .

Consequences and Implications

Based on this analysis, Trump’s *Declaration of a National Emergency at the US-Mexico Border* constitutes the latest episode in a longstanding history of migrant securitization in the US. This renewed push for migrant securitization is staunchly supported by Trump’s right-wing political base, especially given the frame resonance of the economic, territorial, and racial threat constructs historically attributed to the Mexican migrant. However, Trump’s episodic securitization efforts have not been endorsed by a clear majority of the American public which indicates that this has been a failed instance of securitization. This outcome can be attributed to the political opposition’s efforts to desecuritize migrants by exposing the inhumane treatment of people detained at the border. Nonetheless, the othering and criminalization of the migrant has been an ongoing project throughout US history to the extent that it is institutionalized, perpetually reinforcing the idea of the migrant as a threat to national security.

There are several consequences of this kind of securitization project. Sandoval-Garcia notes the paradox that occurs when migration

⁴⁵ Ibid, 82.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Carlos Sandoval-García, “‘Death Drop by Drop neither Hurts nor Angers Official Circles’: The Securitization of Migrations,” in *Exclusion and Forced Migration in Central America: No More Walls*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59.

control increases: “conditions are created which allow organized crime to extort, and at times end the lives of, those who attempt to reach the United States.”⁴⁸ As migration channels narrow, the safety of migrants is compromised; from 1998 to 2019, over 7,800 migrants died in the Southwest sectors of the Southern US border.⁴⁹

Furthermore, legal categorization of the migrant creates an exclusionary regime, reinforcing conditions for further marginalization. According to de Genova: “discursive formations that uphold and propagate the notion of migration ‘illegality’ persistently serve as veritable conditions of possibility for the larger sociopolitical procedures that generate and sustain this ‘illegality.’”⁵⁰ Migrants crossing the border without authorization are automatically criminalized. This serves to reinforce the stereotype of migrants as criminals. It also provides justification for the mistreatment of migrants and their subordination as second-class members of society.

Moreover, treating migrants as a security threat denies an investigation into the root causes of migration. US foreign policy and hegemony have been essential in creating the conditions that prompt large migration flows, intervening in and destabilizing other countries under the justification of the Wars on Drugs and Terror.⁵¹ Similarly, intervention and neocolonialism have bred the conditions for the emergence of actors like Al-Qaeda.⁵² In light of these analyses, it becomes clear that the underlying conditions prompting migrants from south of the border to seek livelihoods in the US deserve further analysis. In the Golden Triangle countries, the US has intervened often to the detriment of political stability and security. To understand the root causes of (in)security in the Americas requires an analysis of US hegemony and intervention in the region.

Future Considerations

Three developments will have an impact on migrant securitization in the US. The first is the COVID-19 pandemic. While mostly unacknowledged before, the volume of migrant workers in essential

⁴⁸ Ibid, 43.

⁴⁹ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year Southwest Border Sector Deaths (FY 1998 - FY 2019),” Department of Homeland Security, 2019.

⁵⁰ Nicholas De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1181.

⁵¹ McCann & Boateng, *National Security and Policy in America*.

⁵² Tarak Barkawi, and Mark Laffey, “The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies,” *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 329-352.

services positions has come to light. Unauthorized immigrants comprise nearly a quarter of America's food industries workforce (production, processing, retail, and distribution).⁵³ As Americans become increasingly aware of the vulnerable yet essential roles of migrants in the economy during a public emergency, this may alter their negative preconceptions about migrants. That said, the volume of migrants seeking asylum in the US is likely to increase in the coming years, as countries of the Global South face stalling economies due to or exacerbated by the current pandemic. Bearing in mind that periods of economic hardship have historically triggered an increase in anti-migrant sentiment, this trend is something to be wary of in the years ahead.

Secondly, the Movement for Black Lives campaign brought attention to and elevated the voices of persons identifying as Black, Indigenous, and peoples of colour. It also prompted criticisms of state security structures—the police in particular. Mass media and social media have been crucial for this movement. Extensive coverage of protests and police brutality against Black people have thrust the desecuritization debate into the mainstream. A broader public acknowledgement of systemic racism within security apparatuses may prompt a more critical review of immigration institutions and policies.

Finally, the recent election of President Joseph Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris represents a change of course for immigration policy. *The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants* advocates for reform of the immigration system, reversing Trump's border security policies, and addressing the root causes of migration.⁵⁴ Also of significance is the newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas. Mayorkas is the first immigrant and Hispanic American in history to head the Department. Nonetheless, the road ahead will be a difficult one to navigate. Trump left behind more than 400 executive actions aimed at stricter immigration control which Republicans, border patrol officials, and bureaucrats will defend.⁵⁵ In a highly polarized political environment, efforts to desecuritize may prove just as difficult to achieve as efforts to securitize.

⁵³ Jens Manuel Krogstad, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Jeffrey Passel, "Most Americans Say Immigrants Mainly Fill Jobs US Citizens Don't Want," Pew Research Center, August 26, 2020

⁵⁴ *The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants*, Biden Harris website, 2021, <https://joebiden.com/immigration/>

⁵⁵ Miroff, Nick, and Maria Sacchetti, "Biden Plans to Spurn Trump Immigration Restrictions, but Risk of New Border Crisis Looms," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2020.

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