NIXON'S WAR ON DRUGS AND THE RISE OF VIRTUAL BORDER ENFORCEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: This paper investigates the evolution of the United States–Mexico border from a historically symbolic boundary into one of the most fortified and technologically advanced frontiers in the world. Initial symbolic physical demarcations placed along the border, served to formalise the division between the two nations. However, recent decades have witnessed a significant transformation in border enforcement practices, characterised by the integration of digital surveillance mechanisms that strengthen traditional physical barriers. This study addresses this phenomenon by exploring the nexus between Nixon's War on Drugs and the digitalisation of the US–Mexico border during the Nixon Administration (1969–1974). By conceptualising the drug crisis as an existential threat, President Nixon's rhetoric framed these substances as the "enemy number one" starting his War on Drugs. This shaped a securitisation process that enabled the allocation of extraordinary resources to counter this new perceived menace. By employing the securitisation theory developed by the Copenhagen School, this paper analyses the role played by Nixon in framing the security threat to elucidate how this discourse justified the creation of virtual border control practices in the United States. The findings suggest that the securitisation of the drug crisis provided the necessary political and ideological foundation for adopting innovative digital surveillance technologies, a process that has since transformed border enforcement practices. This inquiry contributes to the academic debate on border digitalisation and offers a methodological framework for comparative studies on the virtual evolution of national boundaries.

Resumen: Este trabajo investiga la evolución de la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México, que pasó de ser históricamente un límite simbólico para convertirse en una de las fronteras más fortificadas y tecnológicamente avanzadas del mundo. En las últimas décadas se ha observado una transformación significativa en las prácticas de control fronterizo, caracterizada por la integración de mecanismos de vigilancia digital que refuerzan las barreras físicas tradicionales. El estudio que se presenta aborda este fenómeno explorando el nexo entre la Guerra contra las Drogas de Nixon y la digitalización de la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México durante la Administración Nixon (1969–1974). Al conceptualizar la crisis de las drogas como una amenaza existencial, la retórica del presidente Nixon definió las definió como el "enemigo número uno", iniciando así su Guerra contra las Drogas. Comenzó así un proceso de securitización que permitió asignar recursos extraordinarios para contrarrestar esta nueva amenaza percibida. Mediante el uso de la teoría de la securitización desarrollada por la Escuela de Copenhague, se analiza el papel desempeñado por Nixon al enmarcar la amenaza de seguridad, con el fin de dilucidar cómo su discurso justificó la creación de prácticas de

control fronterizo virtual en Estados Unidos. Los hallazgos sugieren que la securitización de la crisis de las drogas proporcionó la base necesaria para adoptar tecnologías innovadoras de vigilancia digital. Esta investigación contribuye al debate académico sobre la digitalización de fronteras y ofrece un marco metodológico para estudios comparativos sobre la evolución virtual de las fronteras nacionales.

Keywords: US–Mexico Border, Digital Surveillance, Securitisation Theory, War on Drugs, Nixon Administration

Palabras clave: Frontera EE. UU.–México, Vigilancia Digital, Teoría de la Securización, Guerra contra las Drogas, Administración Nixon

1. INTRODUCTION

The border separating the United States (US) from Mexico is amongst the largest boundaries in the world. An altogether of mountains, deserts, and rivers characterise the 3,141 kilometres' orography separating the two countries. The first physical demarcations of the border were introduced with the end of the Mexican American War of 1847 resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe (see Trist *et al.,* 2022). The political changes introduced by this Treaty were translated onto the territory by 52 stone mounds positioned from coast to coast along the entire margin (US Customs and Border Protection, 2019). Much changed since the symbolic separation demarcating the United State (US) southern limit. Today it has become one of the most fortified and technologically advanced borders that exist.

The virtual aspect of this border is of particular interest to the monitoring practices that countries worldwide engage in to secure their edges. In fact, the potential that contemporary surveillance systems have in terms of national edges' control has been subject to numerous studies until recent times (see Adams, 2001; Amoore, Marmura, & Salter, 2008; Heyman, 2008). Yet little is known on when and why specifically the US decided to intertwine the physical and virtual aspects of its boundaries to enhance the control over it. A puzzling hiatus especially considering the leading position the States have in terms of digitalised arsenal employed along the US-Mexican border combined with a rather meagre consideration of where it all started.

Research shows that there is a link between the Vietnam War and the US' implementation of virtual enforcement mechanisms along the US-Mexico border (see Barkan, 1972; Grandin, 2019; Rosenau, 2001). However, not enough attention has been granted to the link that unites these two separate events in US history. To be more precise, the nexus in question is Nixon's War on Drugs. It was by describing drugs as the enemy number one of the States and declaring a full out war on drugs in 1971 that the President managed to open a window for the digitalisation of the southern border. By addressing the following research question, this paper aims at filling this gap in the academic literature: How did the War on Drugs under the Nixon Administration contribute to the transition from a physical border control along the southern border to virtual enforcement mechanisms?

A valuable tool to find an answer to this question is offered by the securitisation theory. This theory was forwarded by the Copenhagen School and offers a theoretical framework that can be used to identify patterns in the securitisation process of an issue that awards extraordinary resources to counter it. In this research, these patterns elucidated by one of the School's main components Wæver (1995) are applied to Nixon's remarks on the War on Drugs and the subsequent investment in digital assets for the US' southern border.

This study sustains that the discourse that Nixon framed on drugs as a national threat enabled the US to advance in the virtualisation of the US-Mexican border. The timeframe subject of this paper's analysis coincides with the Nixon Administration's term, that is

from 1969 to 1974. Establishing at what time exactly and how the US managed to start its virtual border fortification is valuable to the academic debate. This is the case as the findings of this research can be used to compare the technological development on border studies in other countries during their initial phases of border virtualisation too.

In order to unfold the research with diligence, this paper is divided into the following sections. The first section gives space to the literature review on the most relevant theoretical approaches that have been adopted to conduct studies on virtual borders. The second section introduces the securitisation theory as the theoretical framework adopted by this study used to carry out its analysis. The third section summarises the operationalisation and methodology used to formalise this research. The fourth section is composed of the analysis of this study. In this section, the principles of the securitisation theory are applied to two emblematic speeches by Nixon. Thereafter, the resulting findings are commented based on the backing of secondary sources. The last section proposes a conclusion summarising the findings and considerations achieved throughout the present study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON BORDERS AND VIRTUAL SURVEILLANCE

There are a number of theories that are used to appreciate the diverse foundations of borders and its transformative patterns. With a specific regard to the virtualisation processes of borders, the scope of theories that apply reduce consistently. So as to identify what has been written on the relation of borders and its digitalisation according to political needs, four main theories manage to capture the attention. This section is dedicated to discussing these distinct academic contributions. Each of them adds a different vision to the study's research topic and can be used to understand its origin.

A more philosophical perspective on surveillance studies was pushed forward by Michel Foucault. While reviewing the theory of the French philosopher, Lemke (2015) stated that "Foucault's work on governmentality not only offers important insights for an analysis of the state, it also provides analytical tools to investigate the relationship between liberal and technologies of security" (p. 5). More precisely, the Foucauldian governmentality theory describes how states employ power through disciplinary techniques and surveillance rather than direct force (Lemke, 2015). This theory discusses the extraterritorial dimension of border control managed by state actors that can go beyond the physical demarcation of its own country.

This idea proves to be luring for understanding border digitalisation since it can be applied to state practices that counter national security threats by reinterpreting physical demarcations. The idea behind this theory is to try blocking specific risks before they reach the border. To be more precise, national laws can be used to forward governmental changes that would see the computerisation of security issues threatening national safety. In doing so, states can move towards an increasingly virtual surveillance system used to monitor and eliminate hazards before they manage to enter its territory (see Armstrong, 1992; Paden, 1984). This stream of actions highlights how conventional borders can change once virtual configurations are embedded in border control practices.

Foucauldian governmentality's theory, nevertheless, falls short when applied to the research of drug related border securitisation. Although the theory mentions the technological prominence in the making of borders, it is mainly directed to a study of surveillance and control instead of focusing on border securitisation *per se*. This theory is unable to explain why policymakers act when confronted with unpredicted events – such as was the case of the 1960s drug crisis in the US. Along these lines, Kerr (1999) came to the conclusion that the theory cannot "account for the changing limits of government, apart from noting the mere fact that government often fails due to unplanned outcomes" (p. 196). Hence, even though this Foucauldian governmentality has proven to be pioneering in the virtualisation of borders, it does not allow to give a comprehensive response to the research question orienting the present study.

Another relevant theory used to analyse smart borders is technological determinism. This theory bases its fundamentals on identifying technological advancements as social and political drives. Particularly, it underlines the importance that technology has in shaping policy changes. As Smith (1994) put it: "technology's power [is] a crucial agent of change [that] has a prominent place in the culture of modernity" (p. ix). The push that makes novelties happen is not driven by the people, according to this theory, but rather by technology itself. This, in turn, causes changes that are first presented onto the political agenda and then implemented by policymakers.

Border transformations are thus understood as being the result of technological advances instead of socio-political impulses. In this sense, the rise of electronic surveillance along with biometric tracking and remote sensing made virtual enforcement viable in the first place. Hence, linking this perspective to the research question of this paper, drug enforcement strategies evolved resulting from technological possibilities instead of policy decisions. Accordingly, US politicians were pushed rather than pushing for technological change to implement virtual border enforcement to counter drug influx into the country.

Although technological determinism manages to give relevant insights to the change in border-regimes, it has been pinpointed for oversimplifying this process. It is largely debated that the social and political members are capable of swaying technology too instead of being at its mercy. That is, a deeper understanding of technology has allowed to control it (Dafoe, 2015, p. 1049; Lynch, 2008). The digital aspect of borders, correspondingly, is not the result of technological drive but rather controlled by politicians. Hence, the adaptation of the southern border of the US during Nixon's term can be seen as taking on a clear technological turn. However, this turn was controlled by men-led actions thereby making it hard to rely on technological determinism for the research this paper proposes.

The digital composition of borders can also be understood by Nail's border theory. This theory offers a vision of the border that sees an ever growing mobile and dispersed quality in conventional physical borders. In Nail's (2016) opinion, "the border is not reducible to the classical definition of the limits of a sovereign state" (p. 2). Borders, the author noticed, are inevitably evolving towards informational, or digital identity affecting

a country's societal comprehension. This means that borders have adopted a virtual form since modern problems affect the cross-border movement of people and goods deemed for up-to-date responses. In the case of drug trafficking in the US, for instance, new methods adopted by Cartels demanded innovative actions taken on by US' border control to counter this trend. In the 1960s and 1970s, these actions boiled down to the transformation of borders into networked control spaces.

Border theory, therefore, eludes the conventional understanding of boundaries as such. Instead of exclusively focusing on the territorial and physical aspect of it, as Sharma (2023, pp. 163-164) elucidated, it is necessary to expand this conception to intangible assets composing states' boundaries. The implications that this theory forwards adds a new dimension to the power of governments. That is, borders have not to be seen as a simple line, but instead as a large area surrounding the physical demarcation (Nails, 2016). In fact, states can reach far beyond their physical boundaries by means of virtual enforcement mechanisms with the goal of securitising its borders. Practical models of this being the US Border Patrol databases and intelligence sharing networks that has largely been used to securitise its southern border. In the 1970s, these Border Patrol systems led expansions that paved the way for today's digital border enforcement structures.

Border theory forwards the idea that states can monitor movement beyond its own boundaries. Territorial delimitations, according to this conception, become less relevant for governments when taking actions related to border monitoring (Sharma, 2023. P. 164). Although keeping on representing an important aspect of border policymaking, governments tend to act beyond the territorial delimitation with the idea to intercept potential threats. Said differently, prevention becomes as relevant as physical deterrence. The pitfalls of this mentality are extraterritorial political interventions that have a high chance to harm international relations. This theory proves to be useful to understand the general change of US' southern border conceptualisation. However, it can be used to study societal separation while lacking a clear link to border security issues.

In order to understand borders from a security related point of view, the securitisation theory of the Copenhagen school has to be taken into account. Otukoya (2024, p. 1750) noticed that the creation of a security problem can be key for creating extraordinary resources used to protect a nation from an imaginary hazard. This theory is useful to understand how digital features are used to reinforce the physical aspect of the boundary. Here the focus is set on, amongst other things, movement sensors, video surveillance, and any other technological feature that is used to monitor the territorial border with greater effect. Therefore, it presents itself as being the suitable theoretical framework necessary to identify such patterns along the US southern border.

When looking at the beginning of the War on Drugs, manoeuvres such as Operation Intercept undertaken in 1969, were justified as a necessary deed to fight US' public enemy number one of that time. In this operation, new forms of electronic border surveillance started to be needed for the first time in US border regime history. These needs epitomise the founding pillars of the complex technological dimension that characterise the country's contemporary border. Given the close relation that this securitisation theory has

with the goals of this research, a deeper look at its composition has to be taken into account. In the upcoming section, the securitisation theory is summarised. This enables to find key indicators to comprehend how US' border securitisation changed during the Nixon Administration taking on a virtual aspect.

3. SECURITISATION THEORY AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Securitisation theory is a useful framework that can be used to understand border security in the US during Nixon's presidency. The overall function of this theory is to explain how issues come to lead a country's decision-making process on matters such as border control. Applied to the study this paper engages with, this theory appears to be of valuable help to understand the virtual enforcement mechanisms that the US have added to their southern physical border. It is by applying securitisation theory to this topic that the present study aims at elucidating the role that President Nixon played in contributing to a virtual border implementation. This section is dedicated to point out the main tenets of the securitisation theory to formally being able to apply them to the paper's analysis.

The Copenhagen school based its theory on five main pillars. The pillars in question are (1) securitisation as a speech act, (2) elite framing of threats, (3) audience acceptance requirement, (4) referent object identification, and (5) reversibility and de-securitisation. All these factors combined can be used in this paper's analysis to discover how the US' War on Drugs contributed to the transition from physical border control to virtual enforcement mechanisms. Before delving into the analysis, however, each indicator is summarised and contextualized so as to clarify in what way it is then used applied to the revision's case study.

Declaring an issue as a security threat constitutes a performative act undertaken by a government. With this conception of security, Ole Wæver – the mastermind of securitisation theory – uncovers a performative act that governments take on when indicating to the audience the presence of a security-related issue (Wæver, 1995, p. 52). It is by directing attention to a problem that an elite can engage in a performance that opens a window for exceptional policy measures meant to halt a given hitch. It is irrelevant whether this issue represents an ordinary problem or real threat to national security. What matters is the state representatives are granted with a considerable freedom of action by its audience thereby legitimising their actions. This is what is called the speech act.

Speech acts are based on the vertical creation of trust between state officials and citizens. A successful speech act depends on the extent to which a promise or a declaration is accepted by the public. State representatives make leverage on the feeling of trust which people delegate them with to create a new political reality whose existence depends on the conceived security issue. It is by employing speech acts that legitimation for taking actions to face security threats are disclosed. This legitimisation, in turn, allows the unblocking of state resources to be mobilised creating actions that go beyond normal procedures and allow the formation of extraordinary measures (Wæver, 1995, p. 53).

This practice, however, is not exempt from risk. Wæver (1995) emphasised that this is the case since it made it difficult to distinguish between the act and the real degree of threat a country face (p. 6). In other words, the state can become a victim of its own narrative giving too much importance to a matter that in reality does not pose a real hazard to the nation's security. In doing so, there can be a counter effect of compromising the country's security by focussing too much on an inexistent problem and neglecting its real priorities.

The second indicator retrieved in the securitisation theory is the elite's practice of framing threats. Securitisation theory underlines the influence that key actors have on shaping policy actions. This process is initiated by these selected few who have significant influence within higher political ranks. Once these individuals manage to create a threat narrative, they assume the power to define what can be defined as being existential dangers to the country's security. The result is a cohesive state action meant to tackle the problem that stemmed from the creation of that same narrative.

The authority that the elite holds, nevertheless, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows the creation of a swift state reaction (Wæver, 1995, p. 54). This is particularly positive as often states are bounded by convoluted bureaucracy that considerably prolong the implementation time of official measures. On the other hand, this dominance enables elites to bypass conventional democratic processes (Wæver, 1995, p. 54). This means that, by speeding up the normally slow policymaking process, only a selected few concentrate decision-making power in their hands. The implication of this concentration of power allows the elite not only to decide how to deal with security threats, but also to decide what has to be considered a menace and what not. Thus, the framing of security issues can easily be linked to strategic interests that elites have (Wæver, 1995, p. 54). In other words, elites can decide whether to act to guarantee public security or personal interests.

This brings us to the third indicator: the audience acceptance requirement. Securitisation moves, according to the Copenhagen school, depends on the acceptance by relevant audiences. The main audiences of interest to the elite are the public, legislative bodies, or international partners. All of them – independently or not – must trust the constructed threat narrative to be true for creating the *momentum* needed to take practical actions. These, in turn, Wæver (1995, p. 53) sustained allow finding a solution to the proposed threat. Without the acceptance of the audience, even the most compellingly enunciated security claims can falter. Hence, the non-acceptance of a security issue backfires and creates a process of desecuritisation. The effort of the elite would thus vanish at the expenses of their strategic interests (Wæver, 1995, pp. 53-54). This is why the audience acceptance requirement indicator proposes itself as an essential factor. It is needed to analyse in what way public approval or defiance to unusual procedures can authorise or dent the shift from traditional and democratic practices.

The fourth indicator composing the securitisation theory can be identified with the referent object identification. The process of securitisation needs a clear specification of what is at stake. The stake, in this case, is referred to as the referent object. According to

Wæver (1995, p. 52), the referent object is generally identified with the state's integrity, sovereignty, or the security of its citizens. The process of defining the referent object is fundamental for the mobilisation of resources. In fact, a clear delineation of the object drawn by securitising actors unblocks the material means needed to defend that particular entity against alleged existential coercions (Wæver, 1995, pp. 52-53). This clear definition is fundamental for condoning the usage of exceptional actions as it determines what must be defended by all means.

Reversibility and desecuritisation embody the last indicator of the securitisation theory. According to the Copenhagen school, securitisation is subject to constant change. Once the audience ascertains that a security threat is not being existential anymore, they can reverse the securitisation measures taken so far and re-transform the issue into a normal political debate (Wæver, 1995, p. 55). This retraction allows for putting a check on the elite who framed the issue. This reversibility highlights how temporary emergency responses can be put apart after having experienced a momentaneous build-up. Hence, Wæver (1995, pp. 54-55) suggested that the act of securitisation comes with intrinsic risks that are inherent to the securitisation process. Said differently, securitisation measures can surge and fade easily making it difficult to predict the future actions a government can take in the area of security.

Overall, the principles that make up the securitisation theory forwarded by the Copenhagen school are valuable analytical tools. This is specifically the case with the research topic of this paper. Understanding how the War on Drugs might have been transformed into a security issue used to create space for exceptional measures can be facilitated by applying the analytical tools put at disposition by this theory. As a matter of fact, the principles listed in this section help evaluate the transformation of conventional criminal practices – such as drug smuggling and consumption – and health problems to unusual actions taken by the states to face these issues. Significant policy shifts were created by elites who engaged in speeches that gave birth to unheard of policies resulting in the adoption of virtual enforcement mechanisms to fight drug trafficking along the southern US border. The following section expounds the operationalisation and methodology that this paper adopts to conduct its analysis.

4. OPERATIONALISATION AND METHODOLOGY

Toshkov (2016, p. 100) described operationalisation as being the translation of abstract concepts into concrete notions that can be observed, classified, and empirically measured. The principles composing securitisation theory can be used with the same purpose. This paper operationalised four of the five key concepts to understand the role that the War on Drugs had in contributing to the US' transition to virtual borders. The four indicators composing the theory that are used in this paper to analyse the study's case study are: (1) securitisation as a speech act, (2) elite framing of threats, (3) audience acceptance requirement, and (4) referent object identification. The last principle pointed out in securitisation theory – reversibility and de-securitisation – is of no use to this research. That is, this last principle is useful to study the deconstruction of a security measure – a

part which this study does not intend to cover. Nevertheless, this does not compromise the soundness of this work as the patterns leading to the securitisation remain unchanged.

The four indicators are able to give a deeper understanding of the virtual dimension the southern border of the US took during Nixon's term. Consequently, a critical qualitative reflection on the research topic is pushed forward to understand the present-day US importance of enhancing digitalisation along its territorial border separating it from Mexico. The five indicators, therefore, are of fundamental importance to identify why the drug crisis managed to epitomise a key factor in virtual border enforcement mechanisms.

The methodology of this paper has to be clarified too. This research consists of a single case study. More precisely, it analyses the southern border of the United States during the Presidency of Nixon. Single case studies allow to give precise information on a specific case to create knowledge that then can be applied to similar cases too. That is, with this research, the model of investigation can then be used in similar cases to identify analogous patterns of evolution in virtual border control. The decision to opt for this case study is based on the fact that the US is amongst the very first countries that decided to opt for the partial digitalisation of its border. Therefore, the justification of the case selection resides within the interest to add new information to the academic research gap that is present on this topic.

A number of primary and secondary sources are used throughout the analysis of the subject-matter. The goal of a large range of information stemming from diverse sources helps consolidate and guarantee the quality of the findings of this research. As in primary sources, political statements, news articles, and public speeches are considered. In these sources, important features regarding the securitisation theory can be recognised. Whereas the secondary sources used in this study stem from academic studies that have been conducted on the topic of border security, virtual security, and the War on Drugs. This is a useful practice that enables to place the study's findings in a broader academic debate.

Discourse analysis represents the backbone of this study. The information retrieved from two speeches Nixon did with regards to the War on Drugs are scrutinised. Based on a qualitative method, the interpretation of given sources helps to identify the indicators presented in the theoretical framework. Political speeches forwarded by the US president are, thus, key to complete this study. Moreover, by applying this research method, it is possible to test the theory employed in this study. In fact, by applying the indicators proposed by the securitisation theory to speeches, it is possible to understand if there truly are patterns in political discourses that can lead to the securitisation of constructed risks.

The timeframe of this research is based on the Nixon Administration's term. More specifically, the time considered ranges from 1969 until 1974. This reduced time frame helps give space to a number of key actions undertaken by the US President at the time with regards to virtual control mechanisms along the US-Mexico border.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. NIXON'S CREATION OF A SECURITY ISSUE

The surveillance of the border separating Mexico from the US from 1969 to 1974 predominantly shifted its focus to illegal drug trafficking. The Sinaloa region in Mexico's north-west stripped away the cultivation of opium from Chinese immigrants in the 1910s. Ever since, the Sinaloa Cartel became rich by exporting this substance mainly to the US. With the hippie generation and the trafficking of Marijuana, however, illegal importation of substances to the US became problematic for society (Grillo, 2013, p. 255). The drug problem became the pivotal topic around which President Nixon based most of its political activity. Beyond this, Timmons (2017, p. 15) called attention to the fact that Richard Nixon became the first president who made a promise to close the US-Mexican border to illegal drugs. As a matter of fact, while the war in Vietnam went on, "the Nixon Administration is quietly Americanizing the war's technology, and the war on the home front escalates" (Barkan 1972, p. 1).

In order to delve into the role Nixon played in starting this trend, the first part of the analysis is dedicated to the discourse analysis of two speeches held by the President in question. The communications in the query are *Remarks About an Intensified Program for Drug Abuse Prevention and Control* and *Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control*. Both speeches were held on June 17, 1971. Both speeches took place on the same day and followed each other. In fact, the former epitomises the press conference held to explain what he mentioned during his address to the Congress.

Both speeches are key to understanding in what way an elite framing of a threat was proposed to the political and public audience. It is by taking a closer look at them that it is possible to understand how Nixon managed to unblock extraordinary resources to counter the new and constructed existential threat of drugs in the US. Both speeches are presented together in a document facilitated by the US Department of Defense (2017). After identifying the most relevant points in both of them, the paper proceeds to clarify the relevance that these unique measures have had on the virtualisation process of the southern US border from 1969 to 1974.

5.1.1. The creation of a National War of Drugs

When considering Nixon's speeches from the securitisation theory's point of view, it is necessary to look for a performative act. This act needs to bring to the audience's attention the existence of a security-related issue that is jeopardising their well-being. President Nixon did so by boldly declaring a full-out War on Drugs. At the press conference held, once having addressed the Congress with a special message, he opened his communication by stating that "America's Public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 1). A bombastic opening as such proved to be captivating for public spectators. It helped create a sensation of fear among the US population who was 15 years in the catastrophic Vietnam War. It is of no surprise

that any reference to national security threats, wars, and enemies in those years easily spiked feelings of paranoia and the desire to act.

In order to propose the new threat, Nixon had to point out what the threat actually consisted in. He did so by stating that:

> There are several broad categories of drugs: those of the cannabis family – such as marihuana and hashish; those which are used as sedatives, such as the barbiturates and certain tranquilizers; those which elevate mood and suppress appetite, such as the amphetamines; and drugs such as LSD and mescaline, which are commonly called hallucinogens. Finally, there are the narcotic analgesics, including opium and its derivatives – morphine and codeine. Heroin is made from morphine." (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 10).

This is what the securitisation theory identifies with the referent object identification. By pointing out and insisting on who or what represents a threat, the audience can identify the problem and spur actions against it.

Furthermore, representing himself as a cautious President helped the performative act to become more convincing. Hence why he stated that "I very much hesitate always to bring some new responsibility into the white House, […] but I consider this a problem so urgent […] that it had to be brought" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 2). In doing so, Nixon attempted to portray himself as the protector and guarantor of the US whose actions were guided by the needs of US citizens and not by personal interests.

A number of exceptional measures were created so as to face this national security threat. Nixon affirmed that "it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 1) evoking the necessity of a common effort to halt a peril that managed to enter US soil. These words clarified the extent to which the US was committed to actively fight off drug-related security threats. The enforcement of war-like measures, such as deploying and creating military and federal departments to control and fight drug routes heading to the US, epitomised the basis of this new plan of action.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight the acceptance of the audience of Nixon's speech act. It is, as a matter of fact, possible to say that the audience did accept his discourse adopted with the War of Drugs. Signalling this acceptance are a number of actions proposed by the Administration and then executed with overall support by the majority of the country. The most emblematic operation that started the War on Drugs was Operation Intercept launched throughout September and October 1969. This operation resulted in an almost complete closure of the border between Mexico and the US.

Operation Intercept presented a debacle due to the impossibility to control the entire border by means of physical disposition. Although two thousand Customs agents were deployed, no effective results were managed to be reached (see Reid, 2022). Nonetheless, public and political support yielded for further actions that opened the door for new types

of procedures. This was the case for the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act (CDAPC Act) of 1970 adopted to strengthen US control, amongst other things, along the southern border.

Operation Intercept and the CDAPC Act represent the milestones upon which his 1971 speeches were based on. In fact, these actions sparked a number of further government procedures to intensify the War on Drugs. An indicator of how President Nixon wanted to increase these procedures meant to halt this security threat is visible in the following passage: "We must now candidly recognize that the deliberate procedures embodied in present efforts to control drug abuse are not sufficient in themselves. The problem has assumed the dimensions of a national emergency" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 3). It was in this way that he succeeded in gaining bipartisan support for tackling this new and apparently devastating security threat.

To be more precise, the most important legislative actions taken since the two speeches analysed in this section were: the founding by Executive Order of the Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention in 1971, broadening the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act of 1966 in 1971, organising the International Security Assistance Act of 1971 along with the International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Act of 1971, crafting the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement in 1972, and establishing the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973.

It is important to underline that these sorts of actions were only possible to attain with an extended political support. This was a trait which the President was aware of since he repeatedly focused on the bipartisan support of his actions throughout his press conference. It consists of an important aspect when considering securitisation theory since it underscores the power that the general acceptance gives to the elite framing the security threat. A power that allows the elite to take extraordinary actions in little time – something that clashes with the lengthy bureaucratic procedures that in these situations are overruled.

Beyond political support, Nixon managed to gain the societal acceptance of the threat he managed to frame. He did so by stressing how any member of the US society was being affected by the drug-threat. By stating that "In 1960, less than 200 narcotic deaths were recorded in New York City. In 1970, the figure had risen to over 1,000" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 2) Nixon accomplished to establish a vertical relationship between the author of the speech act and his audience. The point which the US President made here is that the average population of the US was falling to drugs. This is a compelling point that people were able to identify with since it was taking place close to them. The effort to convince his audience exemplifies another fundamental aspect mentioned in the securitisation theory. That is, it unveils how elite members try to create an issue and achieve its acknowledgment among a wide public.

A similar situation is depicted in the same speech where Nixon tried to call for a communal response by making leverage on individual sentiments. The sentence in question is: "In order to defeat this enemy, which is causing such great concern, and correctly so, to so many American families, money will be provided" (US Department of

Defense, 2017, p. 1). What the US President tried to do here was to make sure to gain the definite favour of his audience. It is by statements like this that legitimation is achieved and thus must be considered as an inherent part of the securitisation framing of threat process.

The process of legitimation was necessary to take actions on the borders of the US and even beyond. As he put it: "No serious attack on our national drug problem can ignore the international implications of such an effort, nor can the domestic effort succeed without attacking the problem on an international plane" and then "I am initiating a worldwide escalation in our existing programs for the control of narcotics traffic" (US Department of Defense, 2017, p. 11). These actions were mainly directed towards those who introduced drugs onto US soil. As the President put it: "to halt the drug traffic by striking at the illegal producers of drugs […] and trafficking in these drugs beyond our borders" (p. 4). In other words, Nixon framed foreign drug traffickers as a threat enlarging the scope of who was the root of the cause that produced the threat jeopardising US' security. These were key aspects that would thereon shape the country's foreign relations especially with states below its southern border.

The speeches used for this discourse analysis proved to be useful to identify patterns proposed by the securitisation theory. By addressing the Congress and the US population with subsequent speeches, President Nixon managed to reinvigorate the transformation of the drug issue into a persisting security issue. The indicators of the securitisation theory thus helped tracing the evolution from a relatively conventional criminal and public health problem to one that vindicated substantial policy shifts. With the goal of enlarging the securitisation process taken on by the US to introduce virtual enforcement mechanisms to its southern territorial border from 1969 to 1974, the next section examines a number of secondary sources that have been written on this topic.

5.1.2. The Virtualization of the Border during Nixon's term

The first concrete measure to fight off drug smuggling from Mexico to the US was taken by President Richard Nixon in 1969 with Operation Intercept. According to Grillo (2013), this operation consisted in searching "every vehicle or pedestrian coming across the southern border while the army set up mobile radar units between posts" (p. 256). This plan resulted in a fiasco since it soon became evident that conducting such a thorough terrestrial control was utopic. On-ground personnel alone were simply not capable of sealing off the entire border with Mexico. As Ghaffaray (2019) noticed, the border separating the US from Mexico was too broad and its orography too unwarranted to be enclosed in its entirety. For this reason, the $30 million USD Operation Intercept only lasted 17 days.

Regardless, Mendoza (2023) highlighted that Nixon aimed at fortifying the border by means of a virtual fence, not a material one, to achieve better results in diminishing drug flows. That is, after noticing that physical border closure alone was quixotic, Nixon invested in the control structure of the already existing border to improve the securitisation of it technologically speaking. Adding to this, Koslowski (2019) explained

that at that time the US government deployed motion, infrared, seismic and magnetic sensors that were able to detect motion as well as heat from a 50 to 250-foot range. The justification Nixon used to legitimise the investment in digital mechanisms went along the motto of protecting the border shared with Mexico was the War on Drugs.

The need of Nixon coincided with interests of military high-tech firms of the US. The looming end of the Vietnam War forced these firms to diversify and start investing in US's domestic Army support systems. In order to do so, they had to convince the US Government to keep on investing in different types of military spending, namely a defence that had to be carried out domestically instead of solely internationally. Hence, commencing from the late 1960s, a number of research and development firms contracted by the US to support the military intervention in Vietnam managed signing federal contracts.

Sylvania Electronics, for instance, succeeded in doing so. More precisely, it sold in 1970 to the US government its ground sensors used to remotely detect on-ground movements. This was a ground-breaking event since it symbolised the first application of virtual technologies used to monitor the US southern border. Grandin (2019) specified that these sensors were industrialised as part of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's plan to construct a material and virtual fence unravelling north from south Vietnam and were used to detect troop and truck movements on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The main function of these sensors was to perceive seismic activities caused by people or trucks passing close by the sensors and move the ground (Rosenau, 2001, pp. 11-12). This technology was handy to detect movements across and in proximity to the US border as well; reason for which it was implemented during Nixon's term.

A further technological feature first used during the Vietnam War and then for the US-Mexico border were drones. These drones, Novak (2015) suggested, were known as RPVs (Remote Piloting Vehicles) – whereas today they are known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) – and were used to scan the area from above. While describing the Mexican border of 1972, Novak explained that:

The US Air Force's *QU-22b* remote controlled pilotless aircraft – made surplus in Vietnam by the introduction of more sophisticated drones – have been returned to the US where they [flew] over the border to monitor the sensors and relay data to central control points (Novak, 2015)

With the arrival of drones, a surveillance center receiving the information collected by the unmanned aerial vehicle was put together. Barkan (1972, p. 1) rationalised that these UAVs were flying over remote stretches of the border to relay signals from hundreds of ground sensors that then were sent to the so-called Infiltration Surveillance Center where huge computers diagnose the data.

5.2 RESULTS AND APPLIED EFFECTS OF NIXON'S SECURITISATION

The Vietnam War represents a milestone for the virtual securitisation of the US-Mexico border under the Presidency of Nixon. In fact, there was a clear shift from applying war technologies onto the US home-borders translating into a virtualisation of the boundary. These novelties were handy for the Nixon Administration to fuel the desire of engaging in the War on Drugs. Accordingly, all of this was accompanied by an increasingly determined political participation of sealing the border – a term normally used in military missions though linked for the first time to the US border at that time (Lee, 2005), amongst the central goals was to hold drug traffickers entering through US's southern border.

Even though the surveillance systems introduced by Nixon's Administration were not always functioning – as Barkan (1972, p. 2) relentlessly remarked, it "is not able to distinguish friend from foe" – it is undeniably an important step in US border control. This innovation proved to be a cornerstone for almost each President that followed with regards to the management of the southern US border. Understanding that such an important new trend was built upon a performative act – as described by the securitisation theory – is explicative of how important the creation of security threats amongst an audience's perception is in terms of instigating security measures.

As it had been discussed decades after the War on Drugs, there was not really such a thing as a drug threat – or at least not to the extent President Nixon first remarked. John Ehrlichman, the then Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs under President Nixon, admitted that the Administration was lying with regards to the drug threat to make political and military moves possible (see Lopez, 2016). If anything, there was a real drug issue amongst US armies abroad and far away from US territory (see Vulliamy, 2011).

There are related consequences of adopting a security-driven approach to the US-Mexico border as initiated under Nixon. It is necessary to consider literature on the use of allegories as means of polarisation. These, in fact, elucidate the relation that exists between securitisation, speech acts, and the creation of societal struggles within the broader process of justifying border surveillance and emergency powers. This is the case of Kruglanski (2007) who concentrated on the idea of metaphors to illustrate in what way language is able to frame threats determining the process of policy response. Nixon's speech act focusing on "enemy number one" aligns with Kruglanski's war metaphor. To be more precise, Nixon's war metaphors mirror those in terrorism discourse as proposed by Kruglanski (2007). This signals that the securitisation of the US border has been used even in more recent times. In both cases, a totalistic response was made possible thanks to the legitimisation of emergency measures such as border surveillance.

The disadvantages of using such an approach in the securitisation process of the US can be found in the polarising and radicalising effects they have in the long run. For example, Moyano *et al.* (2016) criticised the Bush-era securitisation process (the War on Terror) caused by the 9/11 terror act. In their opinion, the US society would have benefited more from a less polarising narrative avoiding societal disjunctions affecting

the present-day societal division. The same can be said about Nixon's approach with regards to the War on Drugs. In fact, following this idea, framing the issue as a war instead of a human challenge eclipsed the associated public health and community development issues afflicting the US. It would have been advisable, therefore, to adapt the conception of his speech acts. It would have been more profitable in the long run to opt for a more holistic response. These should have been based on a multidisciplinary approach so as to avoid backlashes created by securitisation processes that consider only one issue.

6. DISCUSSION

This paper engaged in finding an answer to the following research questions: How did the War on Drugs under the Nixon Administration contribute to the transition from a physical border control along the southern border to virtual enforcement mechanisms? So as to find an answer to this query, this research made use of the main principles composing the securitisation theory. These principles were used as indicators to conduct a discourse analysis of two speeches held by Nixon officially declaring his War on Drugs. What resulted from this analysis is that President Nixon actively engaged in the framing of a security threat proposed to his public and political audience as being detrimental to the national security of the entire country. Thanks to the audience's acceptance of the given narrative, extraordinary measures to halt drug influx entering the States were adopted. Amongst these measures it was possible to identify the introduction of virtual enforcement mechanisms.

Previous research has pointed out the importance that the virtual border has had in defining the southern US border. Heyman (2008) highlighted how walls and fences are reinforced by the virtual aspect defining the coercive side of US immigration policy. An idea that was forwarded by Amoore *et al.* (2008, pp. 99-100) listing the array of technologies used to help the US Border Patrol to sort out by means of algorithms what can be considered a threat and what not. Their study thus focused on the change of the human role in border management along with the US capacity of controlling beyond the physical border thanks to the virtual aspect of its boundary. Another sort of research conducted on the virtualisation of the US border was linked to military development. As Adams (2001) suggested, military advances in the use of technology to conduct warfare was used to reinvigorate the smart border separating the US from Mexico to guarantee an optimal supervision.

Considering this existing research, a gap in the literature became manifest. That is, although border securitisation, virtualisation, and militarisation along the US southern border has been studied, the outset of this transformation was not considered adequately. What this paper attempted to do was precisely filling in this gap. After conducting this research, it became evident that Nixon's presidency proved to be ground-breaking for the US' history of border management. In fact, it was the first time that the States implemented technological features – such as on-ground sensors and the first versions of UAVs – to monitor the US-Mexico border. By filling this gap present in the academic debate on the origins of the States' smart border, it is possible to further impulse the research on and comparison of borders from a perspective of security studies. Moreover, by testing the securitisation theory to successfully accomplish a discourse analysis undertaken by political elites to frame security needs, the findings of this research can be applied to other cases too. For instance, it would be possible to apply this research to similar cases such as the Spanish border shared with Morocco. Securitisation theory used as in the present study could shed light onto how and when virtual border mechanisms were introduced to the Spanish border regime.

It is, however, necessary to mention the limitations of this paper too. Even though the choice of undertaking a single-case study was necessary to offer a precise account of Nixon's role in fostering the virtualisation of the US-Mexican border, a comparative study could have offered an overarching understanding of borders in general. Similarly, making use of a mix-method for conducting this study could enhance the validity of the findings too. Integrating a quantitative perspective to the qualitative approach favoured in this research could give important insights in terms of locating what parts of the borders were fortified the most with regards to the virtualisation process.

The limitations of this paper represent, nevertheless, an opportunity to stimulate further research on this topic. Comparing the findings of this study with other cases that have seen important developments of border virtualisation as part of a more general fortification process. The Spanish Autonomous Cities Ceuta and Melilla, for instance, could benefit from this sort of analysis. Understanding their border fortification process starting from its accession to the Schengen Area would give significant insights into how border management has changed due to virtual border practices. Establishing whether the outset of this digitalisation was complemented by the example furnished by the US earlier on could help conceive the borders of Ceuta and Melilla in a more complete fashion. In addition, pairing the securitisation theory to these specific cases could unveil the dual importance of national narrative justifying this change in the border regime along with the narrative implemented by the European Union. In doing so, it would be possible to analyse the idea of Fortress Europe from a virtual securitisation point of view.

Overall, Nixon's attempts to counter drugs being smuggled through the southern US border laid the foundation for decades of the US-Mexico border policy. The importance of this change in the border regime is visible in the present *modus operandi* of the Border Patrol. Maintaining the control of the southern border would virtually be impossible without the US military technologies used in Vietnam and introduced to the national border under Nixon. In tracing the origins of virtual border enforcement to Nixon's War on Drugs, this study reveals how the politics of security can quietly transform the very architecture of a nation's boundaries.

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