

Deconstructing the Camarena Affair and the Militarized United States-Mexico Border

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Recently, the state of the United States-Mexico border has assumed primary importance in American domestic politics. And with that, the border has been conflated with notions of security. This paper will investigate the root causes of the border's securitization by grounding the case study of the Camarena Affair within The Copenhagen School's burgeoning constructivist literature on securitization. The paper will conclude by discussing the legislative fallout from the Camarena Affair's legacy, and arguing that the successful linkage between border and security occurred long before the events of September 11th, 2001.

The border shared by Mexico and the United States did not always function the way it does today. In this paper, I will trace the securitization of the border through the case of the Camarena Affair and frame the narrative by discussing how the United States government policed the War on Drugs prior to the kidnapping of undercover DEA agent, Kiki Camarena. While the War on Drugs was initially marked by cooperation with the Mexican government and domestic policing of heroin and crack cocaine users within the United States, the United States government's attention drastically shifted to the border, and the Mexican government's policing of drug cartels on the whole, two weeks after Camarena's kidnapping.

By closing down the border in a symbolic search for the DEA agent, United States elites explicitly decided to turn an undercover operation into a public relations campaign. The two week time lag between Camarena's kidnap and the subsequent shutdown of the border reveals the degree to which elites evaluated the likelihood that the American public would accept a depiction of Mexico, its government, citizens, and products, as dangerous.

Evidence that the affair was made public on a large scale will be shown by a shutdown of the border, marked by lines as long as seven hours. What follows is a succession of speech acts levied against the Mexican government a few months later. And to prove that the ideas

of the securitized border in the wake of the Camarena Affair live on to this day, the case will conclude with a discussion of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, a mere symbolic measure, which conditionally ties United States' foreign aid to drug source countries' cooperation with the United States' narcotics laws.

The Copenhagen School's literature on securitization studies expects that any issue can be securitized in a time of 'emergency.' Applying the school's theoretical ideas to a concrete case, this paper will explore to what degree the

United States elites explicitly decided to turn an undercover operation into a public relations campaign.

Camarena Affair reoriented notions of friends and enemies in the War on Drugs. Further, if the affair can be traced to an enhanced distinction of 'friend' and 'enemy' between the United States community and drug exporting governments, what proof exists that this relationship was ever securitized?

First, I will apply a theoretical review of recent security studies. The review will explain why traditional security studies' focus on objective conditions for securitized issues fail to account for the intersubjective experience, inherent in all democracies, by which issues operating outside of conventional military sectors can be rendered post-political. The paper will

frame the Camarena Affair within the recent, “radically constructivist” school of International Relations.¹

Secondly, I will outline my methodology for placing this case within the theoretical realm of constructivist security studies. Thirdly, using a process-trace approach, I will argue that the capture, torture, and subsequent murder of DEA agent Kiki Camarena securitized the issue of source governments’ lack of cooperation with the United States’ stated social preferences, a drug-free America, and fostered the necessary political conditions for the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986. Tracing these conditions is of particular importance, as this legislation marks the starkest example of the



The United States border fence near El Paso, Texas

United States’ enforcement of drug laws beyond its borders.

Theoretical Review

Understanding security in a post-Cold War world marks a significant departure from the age in which scholars infatuated over the imminent threat of nuclear war. During that time, security was narrowly understood as “the study of the threat, use, and control of military force,” according to Stephen Walt.² Juxtaposed against traditional scholars such as Walt who view military engagement and state-centrism as the primary framework through which security studies must be understood, Wæver, Buzan, et.al. have developed a comprehensive alternative to the study of security, more

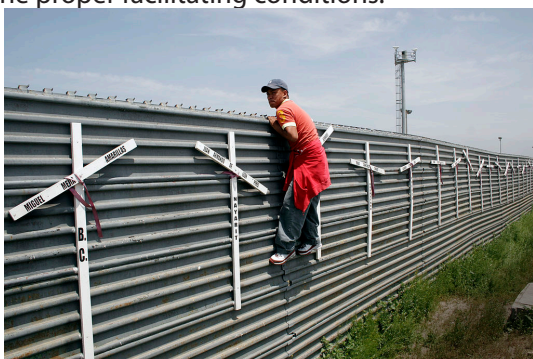
commonly known as the Copenhagen School.

The Copenhagen School’s approach stresses a wider framework for security, marked by “exploring threats to referent objects,” which are abstract categories or concepts (most often the state) that need protection during a time of existential crisis. The theory argues that during such a time, a securitizing actor within a given community will endorse extreme measures, thereby suspending the natural rule-bound order to justify the protection of the referent object.³ To the extent that security is socially constructed, “fears, anxieties, and insecurities in the population” serve as informants to these radical solutions, which aim to prevent an affront to that which the community declares sacred.⁴ Traditionalists, on the other hand, view security as an objective condition, ignoring the intersubjective process by which mobilization for security occurs. What is lost in this form of traditional analysis is the rhetorical structure, known as a “speech act,” whereby securitizing actors place issues onto the security agenda.

In democracies, elected representatives cannot simply govern with a mandate to do what they believe is right behind closed doors. Instead, they must communicate to their polity why they believe in the decisions they make. Similarly, yet distinct from normal political engagement, securitizing actors, many of whom occupy elected office, must communicate to their constituencies why they should be granted the authority to “operate in a different mode than he or she would have otherwise” in a normal situation.⁵ Security implies consent among the referent object’s subject population for a securitizing actor to use any and all means necessary, including military action, extreme regulation or sudden legislation, to protect any given sector in a time of crisis.

Securitizing actors will not objectively assess threats to referent objects. Threat assessment is not only inherently subjective, as individual actors bring with them a set of personally tailored political priorities, insofar as an objective and absolutist approach to risk management is inefficient. According to

securitization scholar Peter Nyers, representative bodies do not function to completely eliminate risk; rather they govern as managers of risk. Risk management implies proper prioritization of risk. Thus, government actors reduce coordination costs of risk prioritization by “encouraging, inculcating, and suggesting” to free thinking subjects “certain ways of conduct that increase [their] health, wealth, and happiness.”⁶ To do this, actors use speech acts to “construct a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat.”⁷ But speech acts themselves ought not be equated with securitization. Instead, one should view them as mere tools of securitization. For an issue’s securitization will only occur given the proper facilitating conditions.



An aspiring migrant from Mexico crosses into the US at the Tijuana-San Diego border. The crosses on the fence represent the deaths of failed attempts.

The Copenhagen School defines facilitating conditions as “conditions under which the speech act works.”⁸ The speech act itself is but one of many facilitating conditions. Generally speaking, one can break down a speech act into its constitutive parts, which include an “existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out.”⁹ These underlying components of a speech act communicate vital information to the consenting group at which the speech act is aimed. Therefore, the likelihood that a speech act is successful directly correlates to the actor making the claim and the identified threat within the claim. Furthermore, for a group to trust the actor making the claim, he or she “must be in a position of authority.”¹⁰

Secondly, the threat itself matters. An

audience is more likely to “conjure a security threat if certain objects can be referred to that are generally held to be threatening.”¹¹ Some examples of threats include terrorists, drugs, weapons and viral diseases. With the securitizing actor identifying a referent object that needs protection, calling for a suspension of the rule-bound order and combining a consenting subject population, the next question becomes: from whom or what does the community need protection?

Michael Williams extols the comparison between aspects of the Copenhagen School and Carl Schmitt’s classical realist theory of securitization. Such a comparison is important because it grounds an emerging, non-traditional theory within the scope of a traditionally recognized approach to understanding security. Of particular significance within this comparison is Schmitt’s treatment of the enemy from which securitizing actors draw their claims. According to Schmitt, a political enemy:

“Need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in extreme cases conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party.”¹²

Therefore, pitting a community’s survival against an enemy of the community aids securitizing actors by appealing to a communal sense of identity.

When such an identity, a sense of unity, is threatened by an abstract “other,” the society in question “fears that it will no longer be able to live *as itself*.”¹³ In this regard, creating a distinction between friends and enemies is an explicit tool of the securitizing actor, not an objective condition. As the prominent critic

of the Copenhagen School, Bill McSweeney argues, friend/enemy distinctions distort the “multiplicity of social identities, along with the process of negotiation and accommodation through which they operate.”¹⁴ This is precisely why not all claims to securitization succeed; why securitization involves the consent of dissimilar identities, which comprise a community, to agree on a united course of action. Thus, the “friend” element of the equation is as socially constructed as the “other.”

The framework of friend/enemy distinctions, a time of existential crisis, a suspension of the rule bound order, discursive speech acts, and facilitating conditions for an issue’s securitization will provide a lens, through which notions of defense and drugs transform a border from a place of trade and commerce to a space of danger; something that must be defended.¹⁵ The theoretical ideas of the Copenhagen School and Schmitt will be applied to the case of DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena’s kidnap, torture and subsequent murder in Mexico. And the legacy of this case will show how the Camarena Affair reoriented the threat of drugs from American cities to the Mexican government itself.

The War on Drugs

At a press conference on June 17, 1971, President Nixon declared, “America’s public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive...a worldwide offensive.” Of particular significance about this press conference were Nixon’s calls for suspending debate on \$350 million in Congressional appropriation, including an increase in “some new responsibility into the White House,” because he “considered the problem so urgent...that it had to be brought to the White House.” Moreover, because of the existential threat that drugs posed to “American families,” Nixon argued that if the \$350 million “is not enough...I have made it clear to the [Congressional leaders] more will be provided.” And with those words, the securitization of

drugs ushered in the Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention (SAODAP) and an extension of the United States government’s sphere of influence as a transnational police force.¹⁶ Functioning as a “relatively weak police force,” the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) was reorganized under the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973, marking a significant departure from a mere subsidiary component of the Department of Justice (DOJ).¹⁷ As a federal agency, the DEA became committed to enforcing:

“The controlled substances laws and regulations of the United States and bring to the criminal and civil justice system of the United States, or any other competent jurisdiction, those organizations and principal members of organizations, involved in the growing, manufacture, or distribution of controlled substances appearing in or destined for illicit traffic in the United States.”¹⁸

The DEA’s broad mission granted itself the ability to conduct investigations foreign and domestic,



*U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers
wielding the Heckler & Koch UMP*

provided foreign governments cooperated. According to Maria Celia Toro, director of the Center for International Studies at El Colegio de Mexico, members of the DEA in Mexico initially sought to establish and train a “Mexican antinarcotics police unit trained in its own spirit and tactics” in the early 1970s.¹⁹ Mexico quickly became a priority for the newly established DEA, as a projected 87 percent of the heroin and 95 percent of the marijuana flooding the United States market originated in Mexico.²⁰

But if Mexican officials were not the enemies in the 1970s, then who was?

A combination of heroin, crack, and marijuana users within the United States served as the earliest public faces of the drug wars, with each drug occupying a respective prominence in United States history. In the late 1960s, heroin usage spiked to record levels due to heavy usage among GIs returning from the Vietnam War.²¹ By the 1980s, cocaine flooded the United States market, which caused dealers to convert the powdery substance into “crack,” a smokeable version of cocaine that could appeal to consumers on a wide market.²²

Local law enforcement continued arresting local traffickers and users, whose usage, often associated with record levels of crime in inner-city neighborhoods, served as the public face of the War on Drugs for many years.²³ Concomitantly during this period, DEA agents continued their interdiction model of restricting supplies from drug sourcing and transit countries by working with and helping train anti-narcotics officers from said countries. Operation Condor, a 1975 joint marijuana and opium crop eradication effort between the respective United States and Mexican governments, has been the most ambitious effort of its kind to this day.²⁴

The “Bust of the Century”

Though DEA agents had worked closely with Mexican police throughout the 1970s, by the time cartel efforts shifted their transporting networks primarily to Mexico in the 1980s, the DEA decided the cooperative police model in Mexico was “hopeless,” and instead favored to work “without notifying Mexican authorities, be they police or others.”²⁵ As Toro argues, the switch in policy centered on a deep-seated, *private* concern that “Mexican police were incorrigibly corrupt.”²⁶ By the 1980s, Mexican cartels boasted multi-national distribution networks by forging transnational alliances with better-established cartels throughout Latin America. The Guadalajara Cartel, founded by former Mexican policeman Miguel Angel

Felix Gallardo, established its dominance over Mexican trafficking *plazas* by creating a syndicate between Pablo Escobar and the Medellin Cartel. The resulting network brought cocaine production to Mexico.²⁷

As part of the Guadalajara Cartel’s proliferation, it attracted Rafael Caro Quintero, known by many as “*El Chapo*” (Shorty), to its ranks. And by December of the same year, DEA special agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena was undercover and on his case. *Time* magazine reported Camarena’s bust of Quintero’s marijuana farm in the Mexican state of Chihuahua as “the bust of the century,” yielding 9,000 tons of marijuana valued at over \$4 billion.²⁸ Needless to say, the record-breaking bust caused Quintero to seek swift revenge on those who plotted against him and the Guadalajara Cartel.

Camarena’s Kidnap

Nearly 2 months after the bust, Camarena was kidnapped in a “police-type arrest,” on February 7th. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration Reauthorization for Fiscal Year 1986, Special Agent Camarena was picked up by people with whom he had worked in the past, and placed in an unmarked car. The kidnapping occurred in broad daylight.²⁹ Camarena missed a scheduled lunch with his wife, who then notified the DEA office in Guadalajara on February 8th. After the DEA made initial contact about Camarena’s location with the Mexican Federal Judicial Police (MFJPD), “there was a 2-day delay” from the time Camarena disappeared to the time when the MFJPD “showed up in any number to initiate an investigation.” At this point, United States elites began to suspect that if not entirely in on Camarena’s kidnap, the MFJPD were certainly not cooperating with the United States government’s investigation. To highlight the state of tension between the two sides, when the MFJPD assigned Comandante Pavon to the case, he failed to act on credible information provided by the DEA on Camarena’s kidnappers’ whereabouts. On the morning of February 9th:

“DEA personnel in Guadalajara located an aircraft at Guadalajara Airport which was an aircraft that was guarded very securely. We asked the officers from the MFJPD to search that particular aircraft, because we had reason to believe a major trafficker who we believed may have had information on the abduction of Special Agent Camarena owned it. The commadante, Commadante Pavon, and a number of his personnel approached the airplane, talked to an occupant of the airplane, and then told DEA personnel that the airplane was cleared to leave... much to the dismay of our DEA personnel.”³⁰

Enmity between the two agencies increased by Tuesday, February 12th, when the MFJPD carried out a search of a Mexico City apartment after “a several-day delay.” DEA officials in Mexico City had previously provided the MFJPD with credible intelligence that the owner of the apartment in question, Juan Matta Ballesteros, was tied to Camarena’s disappearance.³¹ For many United States elites close to the situation, this was the final straw.

Border Shutdown

The first visible example of the United States government’s efforts to securitize the United States-Mexico border in relation to Camarena’s kidnapping took place on February 20th, 1985, 13 days after Camarena disappeared. By that time, Camarena’s whereabouts were still unknown to United States officials. Accordingly, Frances M. Mullen Jr., head of the DEA, ordered United States Customs Service Commissioner, William von Raab, to highlight their discontent with the MFJPD’s handling of Camarena’s disappearance. The pair manifested their discontent by ordering “an excruciating campaign of car-trunk by car-trunk inspection” for every car crossing the border. Thus, both Mullen Jr. and von Raab satisfied the conditions of securitizing actors who endorsed extreme measures in a time of crisis to protect a referent object, which, in this case, was the border and all of its inhabitants within the United States.

Named Operation Camarena, the campaign’s publicly stated goal was to find the missing agent. Yet elites knew of no evidence

suggesting Camarena’s kidnappers intended to transport him across the border. Still, the inspections took place at every official border crossing along the United States-Mexico border. According to a *Time* magazine article published days after the six-day operation ended, crossing the San Ysidro border between Tijuana and San Diego, a border that typically took twenty minutes to cross, spawned lines over seven hours long. The number of United States citizens who typically crossed the border severely plummeted, thereby weakening a substantial source of income from tourism, on which the Mexican government relied.

By enacting Operation Camarena, United States elites invoked a suspension of the rule-bound order of the border, which was formerly a demarcated place of trade and commerce. Furthermore, Spokesman for the State Department, Bernard Kalb, explicitly equated Camarena’s kidnap to an existential crisis by invoking the safety of American citizens when he stated, “Certainly, the safety of Americans in Mexico is a matter of current concern. We are monitoring the situation.” Welcome to life at the border in the post-Camarena era.³²

In reality, the border closing was a symbolic measure constructed by the Reagan administration. Its primary purpose was to apply pressure on Mexico to cooperate with the United States’ search for Camarena.³³ Evidence of this can be found in the time lag between Operation Camarena’s culmination (February 26th) and the actual positive identification of Special Agent Camarena’s decomposed body (March 7th).³⁴ United States officials never had any reason to believe that drug traffickers planned to covertly export Camarena’s body out of Mexico and back into the United States. And even if United States officials had any reason to believe that drug traffickers planned to covertly export Camarena’s body out of Mexico and back into the United States, those same officials realized the futility of finding a needle in a haystack.

The United States government had successfully linked the securitization of the

border with Camarena's disappearance and imposed tangible costs on businesses along the border. They knew Mexico's already flailing economy could not suffer such a hit if business continued to falter indefinitely. And they also knew that the newest threat in fighting the War on Drugs would stem from an already expanding Mexican cartel



The start of the border fence between the United States and Mexico near Sunland Park, New Mexico, U.S.A. and Rancho Anapra, Chihuahua, Mexico.

network, the size of whose political influence was unmatched. Given these conditions, and provided with Camarena's kidnap and murder as a symbol of what was to come, the United States government calculatedly securitized the border, thereby expanding the threat of drugs from its own streets to across the border. Thus, the Camarena Affair was instrumental in conflating Mexican corruption with the already established War on Drugs. Mexico, and by extension, Mexicans become security concerns.

Reaffirming the already securitized concept of the border as the source of the drug threat, the speech acts made by United States elites reified the distinction between friend and enemy governments, placed drug trafficking and the web of related activities beyond the pale of normal politics and into an 'existential' category, and allowed for any and all means necessary to combat the threat of drugs and the associated cartel violence, including a complete border shutdown. Less than 3 months after Camarena's kidnap, Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary

of State for Inter-American Affairs, spoke to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and said, "if Mexico doesn't get a hold of the problems [then in] a number of years it can get to be too late."³⁵ There was nothing "normal" about the border anymore. Camarena's kidnap enabled United States policymakers to successfully, and publicly, place significant blame on Mexico for its lack of compliance with the United States government's domestic drug policy.³⁶

In an interview with the New York Times in May of 1986, Commissioner von Raab proclaimed that "The drug situation is a horror story, increasing logarithmically, and Mexico is doing nothing about it." He went on to charge that Mexican government officials were "inept and corrupt...[and that] the concern is now shared by the entire executive branch of Government."³⁷ By October of the same year, von Raab publicly decried, "My position hasn't changed," and added that "[Mexican government officials were] inept and corrupt, up and down the ladder - my policy is to assume everyone is corrupt unless I learn otherwise."³⁸ Despite the facts that behind Mexico's rampant corruption lied an increasing amount of Americans who demanded, consumed and funded the illicit strategies employed by the cartels to ensure that their products came to market, President Reagan and the 99th Congress chose to stage a legislative attack aimed at the in-compliant source government.

Legislative Fallout

Harnessing the memory of the Camarena Affair into concrete, legislative terms, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 became law on October 27th, 1986. Among other statutes, Title II: International Narcotics Control serves as the manifestation of the speech acts leveled against Mexico immediately following Camarena's kidnap. Title II effectively created a conditional aid-leveraging program for both illicit drug producing and transporting countries. Further, it established the drug certification system, which requires the Executive Branch to annually report to Congress the extent to which drug

sourcing and transiting governments comply with United States narcotics policies.³⁹ By restricting aid to source governments, the United States government successfully shifted the focus of the drug threat toward foreign governments, Mexico chief among them, who can barely compete with the forces of supply and demand fueling the cartels.

The drug certification process has not only failed to achieve its policy goals of promoting greater cooperation between the United States and drug transiting and sourcing nations, but it has also created its own distinct set of political confrontations. Former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms' (R-NC) move in 1989 to block Mexico's certification on the grounds of its widespread corruption elicited a response from Mexico City, calling the senator an, "unblushing liar."⁴⁰

Distinctly, there was widespread criticism from the media and members of congress when President Clinton certified Mexico in 1997, even though Mexico's drug czar was found to be corrupt just a short time before the President rendered his decision to certify the country. When asked by members of the media why they chose to continue the process, the Clinton Administration responded with a sentiment stating, "It's not for [the administration] to decide or to weigh in on whether it's a good law or not."⁴¹ Thus, the ideas of the Camarena Affair, a securitized border, and its associated sub-optimal policies live on to this day.

Conclusion

How did we come to understand the border as a militarized concept, a place that symbolizes the inherent good of the United States and its ability to keep out the foreign, and thus dangerous "other?" Certainly many factors, including the events on September 11th, 2001, contributed to the increasingly securitized state of the border as we know it. Yet, as this paper argues, the first major modern act of securitization came shortly after Mexican drug cartels kidnapped, tortured and murdered

one undercover DEA agent, Enrique Camarena. But what makes this case so exceptional is not the mere events of February 7th, 1985. What makes the Camarena Affair noteworthy is what Camarena has come to symbolize still to this day.

Surely Camarena is not the only undercover agent to have ever been captured and killed beyond the territory of the United States. But he may very well be one of the only undercover agents to have ever single-handedly shut down the largest border crossing in the world, for an entire week, under the guise of finding information on his or his body's whereabouts.

The only possible explanation for these actions points to the policy priority of the War on Drugs, specifically the United States' inability to curb drug demand within its own borders. Because it could not conceivably declare war on its own society, policymakers used the language and actions of securitization by closing the border, thereby demarking everyone and everything foreign trying to enter as an "enemy," and associating them with the previously securitized threat of drugs.

Few people, if any, view the modern United States-Mexico border as merely a place of trade and commerce. As the border initially became securitized over the issue of drugs, soon thereafter nearly everything associated with Mexico was associated with the "other," from its government to its citizens. Therefore, one can better understand the confluence of drug and immigration policy today by looking back to the United States' initial distinction of friend and enemy, memorialized within the Camarena Affair itself.

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