



# **Border Wars: Narratives and Images of the US-Mexican Border on TV**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the visual and narrative representation of the US-Mexico border in the National Geographic television show "Border Wars." The show is significant because it brings the hidden and often opaque borderlands into the homes of millions of Americans, and viewers around the world, every week. It transforms the unknown space of the border into a series of images and stories that create a coherent narrative for the viewer. The representation of the border emphasizes threat and danger through the constant repetition of particular phrases (terrorism, war, cartel foot soldiers) and images (guns, high-speed chases, Black Hawk helicopters, Predator drones). Despite the militaristic lead-ins to each episode, the dramatic music, and the heightened drama of the storytelling, in the end most of the episodes present a more prosaic border landscape of poor migrant workers looking for a better life. This disjuncture between the official narrative of the border and the images of what happens in the show provide a crucial insight into the role popular geopolitical narratives play in creating a version of reality and convincing the public that the ‘problem’ of the border needs a securitized and militarized response.



## I. The Cable Television Wars

In 2013, the United States cable television landscape is a place of war. Animal Planet has “Whale Wars,” which documents environmentalists’ efforts to disrupt Japanese whaling operations. There is a “Star Wars” remake on Spike TV. Spike TV also has another show called “The Deadliest Warrior” in which different teams of soldiers face off in competitions. Over on the Travel Channel, “Food Wars” serves up battles between different restaurants to make the best version of a particular dish. Episode titles include Philly Cheese Steak War and Chicago Pizza War. The Discovery Channel has “Weed Wars,” which documents the lives of people who run medical marijuana dispensaries. HG TV, the home and garden network, has “Design Wars,” in which designers “battle it out” to design rooms in a house. A & E, formerly the Arts & Entertainment Channel, has four war shows. “Parking Wars” follows parking enforcement officers who give tickets to illegally parked cars. “Storage Wars” glorifies people who buy the contents of abandoned storage units at auctions. “Storage Wars Texas” just does it bigger, because everything is bigger in Texas. “Shipping Wars” follows independent truckers who ship odd-sized items. The Food Network probably wins the war of having the most unlikely war show with “Cupcake Wars.” The show’s website includes a graphic of a large pink cupcake with a tank gun protruding out of it. With all of these other vacuous uses of the term “war,” you cannot blame the National Geographic Channel for calling a show about US Border Patrol agents using helicopters, unmanned drones, and machine guns on the US-Mexican border “Border Wars.” Nevertheless, in a nod to the particularly American banalization of war, when the show is broadcast on most National Geographic stations around the world, “war” is dropped from the title and it becomes simply “The Border.”<sup>2</sup>

“Border Wars” was an immediate success and its first episode on 10 January 2010 was the highest rated premier ever for the National Geographic Channel. The show is in its fifth season and is still in production. “Border Wars” utilizes what appears to be a documentary style and follows the experiences of Border Patrol agents and Customs officers over several shifts on the job. The narratives and images in the show are often the first time many viewers see the Border Patrol and what occurs in the borderlands. “Border Wars” takes the unknown space of the border and transforms it into a series of images and stories that create a coherent narrative for the viewer. The show is a powerful propaganda tool that portrays the Border Patrol as brave, patriotic, and compassionate as they simultaneously fight the war on drugs, battle terrorism, and save the lives of immigrants stranded in the desert. The show does not, however, put these fragments in the context of why people cross the border, why they choose such a difficult route through the desert, or where the confiscated drugs are going.

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<sup>2</sup> One exception is in Australia where it is called “Mexican Border Wars.”

Representations and narratives play a critical role in shaping perceptions of chaotic and distant events. We cannot be everywhere at once and we cannot know what is occurring over a vast area. Anderson (1991) argues newspapers standardized accounts across a wide readership, which allowed people to share in the knowledge of events in places far distant from their daily life. Before newspapers, limited first-hand experience and unreliable word-of-mouth produced fragmented and varied accounts of events. Erving Goffman (1979, 27) contends that visual mediums can be even more effective than text in shaping our understanding of events because images “transform otherwise opaque goings-on into easily readable form.” This transformation of the opaque into perceivable knowledge is very powerful and consequently as Castells (2010, xxxii) writes “power struggles have always been decided by the battle over people’s minds, this is to say, by the management of processes of information and communication that shape the human mind.”

Critical geopolitics analyzes the social construction of the political world by investigating the narratives and actors that create representations of geopolitical space (Dodds, 2001; Ó Tuathail, 1996). Rather than accepting a fixed reality in the world, the focus is instead on how perceptions of reality are created for particular purposes. These invented worlds can entail both representations of territories and representations of people, which constitute the effort to categorize and define the subjectivity of an individual or a group. Once established and inscribed into the consciousness of a population, these geopolitical discourses act as disciplinary regimes of truth by shaping how events are understood and interpreted by the population (Foucault, 1971; 2002). Consequently, defining the boundaries of the categories we use to understand the world defines what is and is not (Jones, 2009).

This paper analyzes the representation of the US-Mexican border in National Geographic’s “Border Wars.” After situating the recent increases in manpower and budget of the Border Patrol within the history of the US-Mexico border, this paper examines the first season of *Border Wars* through the lens of critical geopolitics and identifies five reoccurring themes that shape the image of the border and the Border Patrol for the viewer (Fairclough, 1995; Müller, 2010).<sup>3</sup> These themes are the presumption of guilt, the potential for violence, the language of war, the lack of governance in Mexico, and the simultaneous dehumanization of the immigrants and valorization of the Border Patrol agents. What emerges in *Border Wars* is a sharp disconnection between, on the one hand, the framing of each segment, the language of the narrator, and the perspectives of the Border Patrol agents, and on the other hand the footage of what actually happens at the border in each episode. Despite the militaristic lead-ins, the dramatic music, and the tension of the

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<sup>3</sup> This paper is a critical geopolitical analysis of the representations of the US-Mexico border in the show *border wars*. The first season of the show was analyzed by transcribing each episode and applying the lens of critical discourse analysis to the narrative representations of the show (Fairclough, 1995; Müller, 2010). CDA attempts to identify the ways that power operates through the narrative construction of reality.

storytelling that emphasizes violence, terrorism, and war, most of the episodes present a more prosaic border landscape peopled by poor migrant workers looking for a better life. The question remains, however, whether the viewer remembers the dramatic and frightening set-ups or the banal denouement when another group of immigrants is rounded up, hand-cuffed, and put in the back of a Border Patrol truck.

## II. “What it is Really Like”

Over the past thirty years, the US-Mexico border entered the US political debate as a symbol and touchstone for understanding a range of changes occurring in society (Andreas, 2009; Heyman, 1998; Nevins, 2010). The border was described as a bridge for trade in the form of Maquiladoras and later NAFTA and as a dangerous space that needed to be secured to protect American jobs from immigrants and American children from the scourge of drugs. The attention to the border occurred during a period when there were profound changes in how the border is monitored and patrolled, which resulted in substantial increases in funding for the Border Patrol (Ackleson, 2005; Coleman, 2003, 2005; Dunn, 2009; Heyman and Ackleson, 2009; Jones, 2012; Lytle Hernandez, 2010). From 1980 to 1995, the Border Patrol budget increased sevenfold (Haddal, 2010). From 2000 until 2010 its budget tripled again increasing from \$1.06 billion to \$3.58 billion (Haddal, 2010).

A large portion of the budget increases went to hiring additional agents and fencing the border. In 1992, at the US-Mexico border there were 3,555 agents and by 2010 there were over 20,100 (Haddal, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, in 2006, the US Congress passed the Secure Fence Act that authorized fencing on 1100 km of the border of the 3,169 km border, and 1,070 km were completed by 2010 (Haddal et al., 2010). These mutually constitutive processes produce shifting images and narratives of what is happening at the border and create a new landscape as the border becomes securitized and militarized.

National Geographic’s “Border Wars” is significant because it brings the hidden and often opaque borderlands and the activities of the Border Patrol into the homes of millions of Americans, and viewers around the world, every week. The show is shot in a documentary style, but it often depicts the most spectacular aspects of the work of Border Patrol agents and Customs officers. “Border Wars” uses images of Predator drones, Black Hawk helicopters, hidden seismic sensors, and night vision equipment to build excitement and tension in the show. The publicity material for the show and its producer, Nicholas Stein, emphasize that the show strives to show the real experiences of the border.

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<sup>4</sup> There are an additional 1000 agents US-Canada border, however over 98% of apprehensions occur at Mexico border.

In a 2010 television interview, Stein explains:

We were there to pull back the curtain and let people see exactly what it's like day to day, car by car, mission by mission, shift by shift, what it's really like to try to secure the U.S.-Mexico border. And in many ways Nogales became a microcosm, if you will, of some the issues and problems that are up and down all the way from San Diego all the way to Brownsville, Texas. So it's a real look at the work and the dedication of the men and women there. We didn't talk policy, we didn't talk about, you know, what people should do in terms of policy and legislation and laws. We were there with the law enforcers and we saw how difficult their job really is (Cavanaugh and Heilbrunn, 2010).



**Figure 1: Promotional image from Border Wars (Source: National Geographic Website)**

The show is described as a documentary about the border; however, Stein explicitly states that he sees his job as telling the story from the perspective of the Border Patrol agents. He continues:

There was an original show that National Geographic did called “Border Wars” that was a one-hour show that was done by their Explorer Unit and it was sort of a – more of an overview of all the things that go on there.<sup>5</sup> But, really, this [Stein’s version] is a look from the point of view of the federal law enforcement folks. There is [sic], I think, many opportunities for many filmmakers of every stripe and

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<sup>5</sup> This previous documentary style show is referred to as episode 1 of season 1 of the show. The differences in style and content are clearly evident, as Stein suggests. This National Geographic Explorer documentary shows life on both sides of the border and it even follows an immigrant from Mexico all the way to his home in Kentucky. However, as is described later in this paper, it also uses similar production effects to create tension and drama in the storytelling.

news organizations to do a more comprehensive look at all of the issues there. There's so many points of view. But we decided that a lot of people really didn't understand what these men and women are being asked to do on our behalf and with our tax dollars. And we thought that it was important to get on the ground and really see that happening. The truth is there's no border like the U.S.-Mexican border in the world because there's no border that has perhaps the world's richest country hard up against one of the poorest and one that's now going through the spasms of this narco war (Cavanaugh and Heilbrunn, 2010).

The positive depiction of the Border Patrol is not surprising because the producers, and National Geographic, rely on the permission of the Department of Homeland Security and on the cooperation of the agents in order to film it. Stein explains the agreement with Customs and Border Protection,

I think the CBP, Customs and Border Protection, *really trusts us to tell their story* in a serious way and to tell it in an accurate way. So after the negotiations were successful, we headed to Nogales, Arizona, and we got to know the officers and agents quite well (Cavanaugh and Heilbrunn, 2010, emphasis added).

Without that access, and the stock footage of the military hardware, the show would be impossible to make.

### III. Fighting the Border Wars

Each episode of *Border Wars* begins with a fast-paced title sequence with images of guns, helicopters, Predator drones, and agents racing through the desert accompanied by dramatic music and a voice-over about terrorism, drug cartels, security threats, and war. The first segment of each episode sets up several different scenarios involving Border Patrol agents on the ground, Rapid Response Team agents in a Black Hawk helicopter, and Customs officers checking cars and pedestrians at crossing points. The initial segment builds tension by emphasizing the potential threat through phrases that are repeated in virtually every episode about "trails known to be used by narco-traffickers," the fact that "smugglers are almost always armed," "will do anything to protect their cargo," and "ambushes are not uncommon." The remainder of the episode then follows the scenarios to their conclusion.

The title sequence and voiceover for the second episode of the first season is typical [description of the on-screen images in brackets]:

[Dramatic music] These officers and agents of the Department of Homeland Security work around the clock protecting America's borders [images of agents, ATVs, Black Hawk helicopters, and Predator drones]. They are at ground zero of the war against narco-traffickers, illegal immigration, and terrorism [dark, grainy film of a line of agents shooting automatic weapons after one yells "fire"]. In the

next twelve hours, officers and agents in Nogales, Arizona will risk it all to pursue and arrest hundreds of illegal immigrants [image of an agent diving and tackling a man sitting on a hillside, the agent says:] “I was able to dive and get a hold of him just in time”. Confront cartel foot soldiers in the dead of night [nighttime images of an agent with a gun pointed in front of him yelling “Border Patrol! Parate (stop)! Parate!”] and stop would be imposters from entering the country [image of a woman and an ID card]. These are the border wars. [Final image of several agents hiking past on a trail and one says:] “Welcome to Nogales.”

The sequence is exciting and frightening. The images do make it seem like a war is happening: there are agents in military fatigues, automatic weapons, military helicopters, Predator drones, and video of what appears to be a firing squad. It also creates the perception of imminent threat at the border where agents “risk it all.” The border is described as “ground zero of a war” against “narco-traffickers” and “terrorism” which includes “cartel foot soldiers” and “imposters” trying to slip into the country. An agent says he tackled a man “just in time,” which implies that something terrible could have happened.

If you watch the sequence a few times, however, questions start to arise. All the accoutrements of war are there, but only one side. The guns, helicopters, agents, and Predator drones are all from the US Border Patrol. “Terrorists,” “narco-traffickers,” and “cartel foot soldiers” are mentioned but none are shown. The Mexican military is not shown. The two threats that are shown are the imposter with the fake ID and the man tackled on the ridge “just in time.” The imposter, as the episode later describes, is a middle-aged Mexican woman with three kids. She lived in the United States for twelve years before returning to Mexico to visit with her dying father. Now she is trying to return to her job in California. The man tackled on the hill was a late-middle aged undocumented worker. He was travelling with a large group of immigrants that were located by a helicopter. They ran in different directions and most of his group was caught by agents on the ground. This particular man was later seen by the helicopter pilot who aimed a spotlight on him so the agents on the ground could find him. The man did not run or resist. Instead, he sat still on the hillside in the spotlight for at least ten seconds (the amount shown in the footage) before the agent at him from above and the two men rolled fifty meters down the steep incline. The older, slightly overweight man was later shown complaining to the agents about pain in his chest and legs after the fall. This pattern of exaggerating threats along the border is evident in every episode of the show.

In addition to the dramatic title sequences, there are several themes that reoccur in each episode that create tension but also establish a framework for viewers to understand what happens at the border. These themes are the presumption of guilt, the potential for violence, the lack of governance in Mexico, the language of war, and the dehumanization of immigrants and valorization of the Border Patrol agents.

These representations support a particular narrative about the border that emphasizes threat and danger while providing little context to what is actually occurring in each episode. Indeed, just as the threats in the title sequences did not live up to the hype, the on-screen images throughout the show often belie the overwrought storytelling of *Border Wars*.

### *The presumption of guilt*

The first reoccurring theme in the show is the tendency of the producers, and the agents themselves, to presume that most of the people they encounter are, at the minimum, in United States illegally and possibly are hardened criminals with violent intentions. This presumption is evident in how the narrator describes the people who are interdicted. Typically, the first time the people are mentioned they are referred to as “suspected” smugglers or illegal immigrants. However, later in the episode the terminology of suspicion is dropped or the narrator uses general terms like “smugglers are known to.” Although the statements are about smugglers generally, the implication is that the people being shown on screen are examples of it.

A segment in the third episode of season one illustrates the tendency of agents to presume the people they detain are in the country illegally and more than likely criminals. The segment begins by showing Agent Pittman driving along the border fence in Nogales:

Narrator: Pittman has patrolled this area for nearly fifteen years and watched the violence intensify.

Agent Pittman: I think it’s more and more criminals coming across. It’s every kind of criminal you can imagine we catch and arrest them.

Narrator: Agent assaults are on the rise, including near the border fence.

Agent Pittman: In my opinion it seems to be organized, trained people. They have set up ambushes for us. They would shoot at our guys.

Narrator: The biggest risk here are [sic] the rocks, bricks, and even kitchen sinks thrown over the fence. Cartels hire local teens to target the agents.

Agent Pittman: I still get nervous parking next to the fence.

A call comes over the radio that sends him to a remote area fifteen kilometers from the city, which Pittman says “is [a] busy area for smuggling out here. In an emergency situation, everyone goes until we get enough people there. We have our agents being shot at a lot. We have cartels in Mexico telling their people to defend their loads at all costs.”

The segment occurs during the daytime and Agent Pittman decides to pursue the suspects on foot, who are said to be walking along a dirt road that



follows a gas pipeline. Pittman spots two men walking along the road in front of him and at the same time two agents on ATVs speed in and arrest them. The two 50 to 60-year-old men of apparently Mexican ancestry are wearing nice, clean clothing and carry themselves in a dignified manner. Despite their appearance, Agent Pittman carefully searches and interrogates them. First, he inquires if they have weapons or drugs. They respond “no.” Then he asks if they are terrorists. Again, “no.” Agent Pittman explains his concerns:

They look like unarmed immigrants but the rule is never assume. It’s dangerous – anything that can be made into a weapon like toothbrushes, combs, and pens, we’ll take. Lighters, perfumes, that’s flammable. We don’t know who we are dealing with. They may be just looking for an opportunity to do something to harm you. We don’t know their history, their criminal records until they get processed. You’d be surprised; we can’t relax on these individuals because a lot of them do have criminal records.

Agent Pittman’s approach to the two men is sanctioned by US law, which states that the Border Patrol can stop anyone near the border with “articulable facts” that led to their suspicion.

Section 287 (a) (3) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U. S. C. § 1357, authorizes Border Patrol agents, without a warrant, “Within a reasonable distance from any external boundary of the United States, to board and search for aliens any vessel within the territorial waters of the United States and any railway car, aircraft, conveyance, or vehicle.” The Border Patrol has the authority to enter private property (but not buildings) within twenty-five miles (forty km) of the border. The reasonable external boundary distance for warrantless search and seizure was set as within 100 miles (161-km) of a land border or the coastline. In 2011, the US House of Representatives considered a bill that would further provide the Border Patrol with a waiver of 36 federal laws in the 100-mile zone near the borderlines (but not the coasts) in order to patrol for illegal entrants.

In the 1975 *Brignoni-Ponce* decision, the US Supreme Court reaffirmed the right of the Border Patrol to stop cars and pedestrians without warrants in the 100-mile zone under certain conditions “only if they are aware of specific articulable facts, together with rational inferences therefrom, reasonably warranting suspicion that the vehicles contain aliens who may be illegally in the country.” The ruling goes on to list factors that could be considered “articulable facts”:

Officers may consider the characteristics of the area in which they encounter a vehicle. Its proximity to the border, the usual patterns of traffic on the particular road, and previous experience with alien traffic are all relevant ... They also may consider information about recent illegal border crossings in the area. The driver's behavior may be relevant, such as erratic driving or obvious attempts to evade officers can support a reasonable suspicion ... The vehicle may appear to be

heavily loaded, it may have an extraordinary number of passengers, or the officers may observe persons trying to hide. ... Aspects of the vehicle itself may justify suspicion. For instance, officers say that certain station wagons, with large compartments for fold-down seats or spare tires, are frequently used for transporting concealed aliens ... The Government also points out that trained officers can recognize the characteristic appearance of persons who live in Mexico, relying on such factors as the mode of dress and haircut. ... In all situations the officer is entitled to assess the facts in light of his experience in detecting illegal entry and smuggling.

Although the ruling limits the ability of Border Patrol agents to stop anyone, the factors listed are broad enough that virtually any stop could be justified (Heyman, 2009). As the Supreme Court case indicates these articulable facts can be simply being near the border or wearing Mexican-style clothing or having a Mexican-style haircut.

Every episode of *Border Wars* demonstrates the result of these laws and court judgments as the Border Patrol agents operate with the normal American legal standard of presumption of innocence reversed. Instead, as Agent Pittman puts it, “the rule is” to treat everyone they encounter as a potential threat until they can prove otherwise.

### ***The potential for violence***

The Border Patrol reports that several hundred agents are attacked in the borderlands every year.<sup>6</sup> It is a dangerous job, particularly given the money involved in drug smuggling and human trafficking. In the show, the suspects are always set up to be potentially violent. With dramatic music in the background, the narrator states in ominous tones that the suspects are on a route that is known for smuggling, smugglers are almost always armed, attacks against agents are on the rise, and they will do anything to protect their cargo.

A segment that follows the Black Hawk based Rapid Response Team in the fourth episode of season one demonstrates how the producers intentionally create fear through unequivocal statements about the dangerous threat posed by smugglers. The narrator begins (emphasis added):

Oscar Peru and his team touch down in some of Arizona’s *most inhospitable terrain*. Their goal: help ground agents capture what could be a group of dangerous smugglers without being attacked. Hundreds of agents are assaulted on the job each year. ... *Only the most experienced smugglers dare to navigate these dense woods*, relying on the harsh terrain to diminish their chances of apprehension.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2009 the Border Patrol reported 1073 attacks on agents.

The voice-over states that not only are they certain to encounter smugglers, but moreover it is only the most experienced smugglers due to their location.

After following tracks through the grove of trees, the agents finally apprehend the group at the end of the episode. Once the group is spotted, the show always cuts to a commercial break, heightening the drama. On many occasions, the final sound before the commercial resembles an echoing gunshot, which implies the agents were under fire or had to use force themselves. After the commercial break, however, it is revealed to simply be a group of immigrants. The narrator: "Not drug smugglers but half a dozen exhausted immigrants." The images show several men, two women and two small children both less than 10-years-old. The problem with the documentary style of the show is evident in this encounter. The producers know the result of the search in the forest will be a family with small children, but they still state in a breathless voice that it is "most inhospitable terrain" and only "experienced smugglers" would dare to enter the woods.

The stories about ambushes and armed drug smugglers protecting their loads at all costs are equally misleading. In every episode of the first season when the agents encounter drug smugglers the men toss the loads and run as soon as the agents approach. Rather than hardened criminals, or "cartel foot soldiers," as they are referred to in the show, they are poor, desperate people who run away as soon as there is a chance of being arrested. Nevertheless, even as the agents collect the packages of Marijuana, the voice-over continues to build tension stating "The smugglers could be waiting for the right moment to attack. Some will go to any lengths to protect their loads" (Episode 1.2). It is always "some" or "most" but apparently never the ones in the show.

Finally, in addition to stating that every trail depicted in the show is a "known smuggling route," the show indicates that virtually every situation increases the risk for the agents. In episode three of season one we learn that being near the border is more dangerous: "After dark the rules change, drug traffickers can ambush agents without warning and many will be armed. The closer you get to the border, the more brazen they get." However, episode four of season one tells the viewer that the farther into the United States a group gets the more dangerous they are: "The closer a group gets to safety, the more they are willing to risk and the more dangerous it is for agents on their tail." The reality is that every episode in every location is represented as being extremely dangerous and risky whether in the end the agents locate drug mules, undocumented workers, families with kids, or even a cow that set off the seismic sensors.

### ***The lack of governance in Mexico***

Just as the show dehumanizes immigrants by depicting them as shadowy law breakers who are a potentially violent threat to agents, it also represents Mexico as an ungoverned place where the state lacks the ability to control its population or enforce its laws. The first episode of the season includes a segment in which the camera crew travels to the Mexican side of the border in order to document how

immigrants reach the borderline.<sup>7</sup> The segment begins with dark images shot from a car covertly driving at night around the town of Altar in the Mexican state of Sonora. The voiceover says in ominous tones:

This is a world few outsiders see run by a shadowy network that offers a range of services. Phony US papers and IDs, van rides to the border, guides, [and] pickups on the US side. If there is a police presence in Altar, our film crew never detected it. We did notice we were followed and observed at every turn, though it wasn't clear by whom. It's no secret what this town's main business is [camera zooms in on a shop selling backpacks]. We found shops selling backpacks, shoes, water bottles and caffeine pills on nearly every corner.

This first scene presents Altar as a seedy, dangerous place where the Mexican government is absent and order is enforced by the cartels that control the streets. The actual footage does not quite live up to the narrative that accompanies it. Indeed, the evidence of lawlessness is a shop selling backpacks, shoes, and water bottles. These first furtive images of Altar make it appear that the crew is secretly filming because it is too dangerous to do so in the open. However, the next few minutes of the episode include interviews with people in public during the daytime ranging from a vender selling backpacks to an immigrant planning to cross into the United States.

After these public interviews, the tone then shifts again. Sinister music begins in the background and the daytime moving images are replaced by a series of snapshots that resemble those taken surreptitiously by a police team on a stakeout. They are in black and white and each new image is accompanied by the clicking sound of a camera. These production effects imply something extremely illegal was filmed and could only be seen through these secretive means. The voiceover explains: "They are bundled into groups and packed thirty at a time into shuttle vans that will take them to the border. The vans line up in broad daylight. Everyone in town knows where they are headed." The people in the vans may indeed cross the border, but driving someone to the border within the territory of Mexico is no more illegal than taking one of the four daily Greyhound buses from Tucson to Nogales in Arizona. Essentially the film crew found a town that caters to immigrant workers by providing supplies and a ride to the border, but the show presents it as if it is shocking and illegal. It is unclear, however, what the producers would expect the Mexican government to do in this situation.

The fifth episode of the first season is entitled "City Under Siege" and focuses on the differences between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. The episode begins "Nogales, Arizona. A border town under siege" [image of a vehicle with a machine gun mounted on the back]. A siege is the military blockade of a

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<sup>7</sup> As Nicholas Stein states in the above interview, this first episode was made by the National Geographic Explorer unit, not Stein and his production team.

city with the intent of conquering it. It is simply not an accurate description of Nogales because the immigrants and smugglers moving through the area have no intention of conquering the city or even staying there. Instead they want to move past it as quickly as possible. However, “siege” creates a useful narrative that represents the US side as the victims of the border. The narrator continues:

The twin cities share the same name, but little else. South of the fence the scene is one of stark poverty and severe overcrowding. With a population that is as many as ten times as large, many are desperate to come north to the other side. The fence doesn't stop the people who try crossing over every day. It merely slows them down.

The episode describes the two sides of the border as “different worlds” three times, which positions the US as part of the modern, civilized and orderly world and Mexico as not. In this version of the border, it is the critical line to prevent those uncivilized and potentially violent practices from entering the United States. The siege metaphor contributes to the desired image of barbarians at the gate attempting to overrun civilization.

In the show, spillover violence from Mexico is an article of faith as each episode emphasizes the disorder in Mexico and how it threatens the stability of the United States. A supervisor at the port of entry explains that he views the violence in Mexico as a threat on the US side: “Although much of the drug violence occurs in Mexico, it spills across the border into the US. There is a lot of danger over here. At my house, I have a double deadbolt and I have six dogs.” The officer states matter-of-factly that there is spillover violence at the border and viewers almost certainly accept the veracity of the claim given his official position.

The problem is that there is no evidence of spillover violence. In 2013, the US Congressional Research Service reported that:

U.S. federal officials have denied that the increase in drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico has resulted in a spillover into the United States, but they acknowledge that the prospect is a serious concern. ... CRS is unable to develop fact-based conclusions about trends in drug trafficking-related violence spilling over from Mexico into the United States (Finklea, 2013, 1).

The cities of Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas provide the strongest evidence against the claim of spillover violence. Juárez, Mexico has been devastated by the drug violence. In 2008 there were 1,600 murders, in 2009, 2,600 murders, and in 2010, over 3,000 murders, which makes Juárez one of the most dangerous cities in the world. El Paso is directly beside Juárez on the other side of the border and the Rio Grande. Despite its proximity to the violence, El Paso only had five murders in 2010, its lowest total in forty-seven years. In terms of overall crime rate, El Paso was the safest city with a population over 500,000 people in the United States in 2010 (El Paso, 2011).

Despite the US government data on the lack of spillover violence and the visual evidence on the show that most people who cross the border are unarmed immigrants looking for work, *Border Wars* creates the perception that Mexico is an ungoverned territory with an uncivilized population that does not respect the rule of law. These ungoverned and uncivilized people represent a potentially violent threat to both border towns like Nogales and to the civilized way of life in the United States as a whole, which must be sealed off with a wall and patrolled with whatever means are necessary, including the latest military technologies developed on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

### *Militaristic language*

On paper, the role of the Border Patrol changed dramatically after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. While previously immigration and smuggling were the main focus, after 9/11 terrorism prevention was elevated to the first priority of the agency (US Customs and Border Protection, 2005). As security practices were reorganized, the Border Patrol was moved to the Department of Homeland Security and the Border Patrol's guidelines were rewritten to emphasize its role in preventing terrorism. The Border Patrol National Strategy (2005), while conceding that the vast majority of people are "economic migrants," argues that an "ever present threat exists from the potential for terrorists to employ the same smuggling and transportation networks, infrastructure, drop houses, and other support and then use these masses of illegal aliens as 'cover' for a successful cross-border penetration." In 2004, Customs and Border Patrol Commissioner Robert Bonner said after 9/11, "US Customs and Border Protection became the nation's first line of defense against terrorist threats" (US Customs and Border Protection, 2004).

The show emphasizes the role the agents and officers play in preventing terrorism. When agents find a tunnel under the border fence in the fifth episode of season one, an agent remarks: "It could be for anything from drugs to terrorists and weapons of mass destruction. We don't leave tunnels be." A customs officer describes his duties at the border by saying "other than fighting terrorists," we look for smuggled drugs and fake identifications. Episode four introduces a Customs officer who searches vehicles crossing the border as a member of the "Anti-Terrorism Contraband Enforcement Team."

The terminology of war also pervades the show. Beyond the war metaphor in the title and the siege metaphor for border towns, the show consistently uses militaristic language to describe the activities of the Border Patrol agents and the Customs officers. Customs and Border Protection is part of the Department of Homeland Security and is a law enforcement agency, not part of the military. The agents and officers are the equivalent of police officers not soldiers. Their role is not to defend the United States from attack but rather to patrol the border for violations of immigration and customs laws. Despite the official focus on terrorism as priority number one for Customs and Border Protection, in practice, most agents and officers spend their time as they had before chasing immigrants in the desert

and searching for drugs at the ports. Or sitting bored in their trucks (Marosi, 2011). Nevertheless, in *Border Wars* the narrator and the agents and officers consistently describe their activities using the language of war.<sup>8</sup>

The first segments of most of the episodes in the first season include aerial footage of the deserts along the border, which the narrator describes as a “battlefield.” The fourth episode of season one shows Border Patrol agents beginning their shift, the narrator states “Its 8:00 am and a new shift begins at Border Patrol headquarters in Nogales. Agents gear up to face illegal immigrants, drug traffickers and terrorists [images of agents distributing machine guns]. Their battleground is 1100 square miles of unforgiving desert.”

While the Border Patrol agents are out in the field pursuing people and tracking them through the desert, the Customs officers at the port of entry are described in similar terms. In episode five of the first season:

Narrator: At the port of entry, a new group of officers steps up to their mission. Take on the hundreds of drivers who cross the border every day ... Supervisor Mark Shanley also prepares his troops for battle.

Office Shanley: Yesterday was a kick-ass day. A lot of good seizures, a lot of good imposters. Number one, always remember officer safety is paramount. Be aware of your surroundings. The violence in Mexico is still there, it is still a threat. All right? Let’s be safe out there.

The language simply does not match the duties of these officers. For the most part, they check the passports and ID cards of legitimate border crossers who are going shopping or to work on the other side of the border. It is a routine, mundane job that does not resemble a war or a battle in any way.

The language and many of the images of *Border Wars* create the perception that the Border Patrol agents and the Customs officers are part of the military and are fighting a war. Despite the fact that the duties of the agents and officers are still law enforcement, the practice of border security has been militarized over the past twenty years. This includes the deployment of the military along the border in form of National Guard troops and the acquisition of military technologies developed for wars abroad in Iraq and Afghanistan. These technologies include guns, surveillance technologies from night vision to high tech sensors, Blackhawk helicopters, and unmanned Predator drones. As the wars abroad wind down, it appears that military technology industry is focused on converting these products to border security uses (Gregory, 2011).

Indeed, *Border Wars* producer Nicholas Stein was one of two keynote speakers at a major security industry convention in 2011. The report about the

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Foxnews channel and website puts the heading “America’s Third War” on any stories that refer to the Mexican drug cartels or the border.

speech in the organization's magazine noted the priceless publicity the show provides for the industry:

He and his crew captured border patrol agents, ICE investigators and Coast Guard officers employing a wide range of security equipment – including helicopters, patrol aircraft, night vision equipment, mobile surveillance vehicles, Predator drones, X-ray machines, all-terrain vehicles, body scanning equipment, portable fingerprinting devices and much more – as they portrayed the real-life challenges confronting U.S. Government personnel along the nation's southern and northern borders. ... The ratings for *Borders Wars* has [sic] been extraordinarily high, Stein theorized, "because of the enormous hunger our viewers have for a real sense of what is going on down there." "Securing the U.S. border is a monumental and Herculean task," said Stein. His series *Border Wars* is striving to present that never-ending, heroic struggle "at the granular level," he explained (Goodwin, 2011).

The repetition of the militaristic language and the references to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction legitimate the expensive and aggressive practices at the border.

### ***The dehumanization of the immigrants and the valorization of Border Patrol agents***

The fifth theme that reoccurs in the show is the simultaneous dehumanization of immigrants and valorization of the Border Patrol agents as humanitarian aid providers. These two representations map the good and evil binary that pervades the discourse of the war on terror onto the categories of the Border Patrol agents and the foreign immigrant other. *Border Wars* humanizes the agents through the depiction of casual interactions during the show. The immigrants crossing the border are more elusive and often appear as blurry, pixilated faces, which is ostensibly done to protect their privacy. The resulting visual image, however, goes beyond simply protecting privacy because it simultaneously implies guilt and dehumanizes the immigrant as a faceless other. Eyes and facial expressions are extremely important for eliciting sympathy and for judging intentions. When those are missing, it is much easier to assume all of the people detained are more than likely in the country illegally and possibly a violent threat.

The Border Patrol agents also use dehumanizing language to describe immigrants. For example, segments shot from the Black Hawk helicopter often show immigrants in short, shaky clips as they are running in the desert. Rather than referring to them as people, immigrants, or suspects, the Border Patrol uses the term "bodies." In one episode you hear the pilot say "Ok, we got visual on the bodies." In another, "Everybody is running. We have your bodies." Although there are many deaths in the desert and many bodies recovered, here they are referring to living people, but in a clearly dehumanizing way.



Border Wars emphasizes the environmental dangers of the Sonora Desert along the border in Arizona, which does result in many dead bodies. The Border Patrol finds about 400 per year despite decline in total apprehensions. While in 2000 there were 1.6 dead bodies recovered per 10,000 apprehensions, in 2009 the rate climbed to 7.6 dead bodies per 10,000 apprehensions (Haddal, 2010).<sup>9</sup> The increase is partially due to a decline in total apprehensions, but the main reasons are the new border fence, the substantial increase in the number of agents patrolling the border, and the changes in enforcement techniques. Easier routes between populated areas are now closed off, forcing immigrants to use longer and more dangerous routes through the desert.

The show, however, ignores the role of the Border Patrol and the border fence in funneling people to these dangerous areas and instead holds up the agents as valiant rescuers that save lives. The first episode of season one describes the section the Sonora Desert near Nogales as a parched, rugged, and dangerous place. The voice-over states: “Some call it the devil’s highway because it is littered with the bones of those who thought they saw an easy way into the US and ran afoul of the elements. If it weren’t for the search and rescue units like [Agent] McClafferty’s, the death toll would be even higher.” Every episode of the first season includes footage of the agents providing water and medical care to tired and thirsty immigrants.

The result is that Border Patrol agents, despite having all of the weapons and military gear, are humanized and made out to be caring individuals who are doing their job by helping people. Not only are they bravely facing terrorists and drug smugglers, they are also saving lives of poor unfortunate people that the show emphasizes were abandoned by their wily and unreliable guides. The immigrants, conversely, are either shown in shaky dark images running or handcuffed with their faces blurred. As with many geopolitical narratives, the absences and erasures in Border Wars are as significant as what is actually portrayed on the show.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Although at first the war metaphor seems apt for Border Wars when compared to other shows like Storage Wars, Parking Wars, or Cupcake Wars, the militaristic language is far more problematic precisely because the border does seem to resemble a war. The viewer knows that wars involving cupcakes are hyperbole and is in on the joke. When the viewer sees the machine guns, Black Hawk helicopters, and Predator drones patrolling the US-Mexican border it is not a joke at all and the perception that it is a war is strengthened. The confident and authoritative voice-over, the constant repetition of images of war making devices,

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<sup>9</sup> These numbers refer to bodies found by the Border Patrol. Undoubtedly there are many more deaths that go unreported. The ACLU estimated that there 5000 deaths between 1994 and 2009 due to the funnel effect that directs immigrants to more dangerous locations (Jimenez, 2009).

and the use of fear-inducing hypothetical statements leave the viewer with the strong impression that these extremely aggressive tactics are indeed necessary.

Borders provide a unique challenge for the practice of sovereignty in a territory because just beyond the borderline lies another sovereign state with its own laws and enforcement regimes. Consequently, borders are critical places to impose authority because they represent the first opportunity to identify, classify, and organize the people and things entering the states territory. All contemporary sovereign states have special laws that recognize the importance and challenges of this role and give border agents expanded authority to monitor the area and stop people who could potentially be a threat to the state. The US-Mexico borderlands is a place with a long history of the expansion and (re)-territorialization of US sovereignty through war, the coerced sale of land, the settlement of Anglo populations, the re-signification of the landscape, and now through aggressive and exceptional border enforcement practices. The sovereignty of the state over these lands is not a finalized thing, but rather is reproduced through the daily practices of the Border Patrol and the representation of that space through media. Resistance to the suspension of rights and the militarization of the borderlands is defused through the banalization of war on TV, through reminders that there are wars all around us, and through representations of the border – and the state on the other side – as dangerous, chaotic, and a threat to a civilized way of life. *Border Wars* legitimates the border as a site for the performance of sovereignty and the militarized Border Patrol as a legitimate element of the practice of sovereignty in the state's territory.<sup>10</sup> It also obscures the fact that the border is only one facet of complicated immigration and drug transportation networks. These networks stretch from South America, through Mexico and the border, and end up in the interior of the US. On the show, however, the border is emphasized and the huge market in the US for drugs and the factors that shape immigration decisions are hidden (Heyman, 2008).

The images and narratives in *Border Wars* attempt to bring clarity to a range of events, objects, and groups that are located in the borderlands (Castells, 2010). The border's complex history of land dispossession, inequality, labor recruiting, and corruption is boiled down to simple language and images. It is a "game of cat and mouse" where law breakers are brought to justice and even have their lives saved by the valiant US Border Patrol. For viewers, the images of *Border Wars* define Mexico as an uncivilized and violent place, as the show reiterates, "a different world." They define the borderlands as a dangerous place where every trail is a smuggling route, every encounter is potentially dangerous, and everyone in that space is a suspect until they can prove they are not. They create the image of the Border Patrol agent as a patriotic, brave, and compassionate human being who does everything possible to protect "us" from "them." They create the still-blurry image of the immigrant as poor, helpless, gullible, and unsophisticated. They create

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Joshua Kurz for suggesting these implications.

the image of the smuggler as a “cartel foot soldier” who is armed and willing to do anything to protect their load. The show fills in the details that confirm a series of assumptions about who is doing what along the border. The producers use various cuts, sound and visual effects, and tension building devices to deliver a clear, coherent, thrilling, and, in the end, heartwarming story of the border and the Border Patrol every week.

Nevertheless, the US-Mexico border is not a drama produced in a television studio but rather is a real space inhabited by real people. It is here, at this disjuncture, that the story of Border Wars is written. Despite the best effort of the producers, and officials at the Border Patrol itself, to create a clean picture of right and wrong and good and evil at the border, an alternative formulation persistently creeps into this reality show. Although the promotional material, the lead-ins to each episode, and the set-ups for each segment create a sense of foreboding, danger, and imminent threat, the conclusions to each segment never live up to this potential and often paint a completely different picture of who is crossing the border and why. Here we see regular people, families, and long-time residents of the US who simply want to make a better life. We see people who are willing to cross through harsh deserts to go to work because other easier routes were closed by the Border Patrol. We see a woman who went back to Mexico to be with her dying father. We see a family trying to find a better home for their children. We see people who pose no threat at all to the agents, but rather are deeply afraid of the helicopters and guns of the Border Patrol. The desert is not a battleground, the border is not ground zero of a war, there is not a siege of Nogales, and there are not cartel foot soldiers. So far, there have not been any terrorists. What the show depicts is a law enforcement agency with overwhelming and disproportionate military force deployed against a “problem” that could almost certainly be solved in cheaper, more humane ways. In Border Wars, there are two competing stories of the border; which image remains in the viewer’s mind is an open question.

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