

Foreign or Domestic? The Desecuritization of Indian Affairs and Normativity in Securitization Theory

Abstract

Is securitization normatively undesirable? Many scholars who have studied this process by which issues come to be treated as pertaining to “security” have argued that it is indeed preferable to keep as many issues as possible from being securitized. Rather, most issues ought to remain politicized such that they are seen as the legitimate subject of public debate. By contrast, I argue that we ought not to ascribe any inherent moral valence to securitization or the reverse process of desecuritization. Instead, each attempt to (de)securitize an issue ought to be debated on its own terms. To support my argument for the moral ambiguity of (de)securitization, I examine the U.S. Senate’s debate over whether to transfer the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the Department of War to a new Department of the Interior in 1849. I argue that this an inflection point in a longer desecuritizing process by which the United States—acting on a presumed hierarchy—coercively assimilated Native nations into its domestic political order. I conclude that scholars should not discard (de)securitization as an analytical tool but can instead use work on (de)securitization to inform public debate on the likely consequences of any particular (de)securitizing move, thereby serving a chastening role in public discourse.

I. Introduction

Is securitization normatively undesirable? Is it inherently good or bad for a policy issue to be deemed a matter of “security” and therefore deserving of special treatment? For International Relations (IR) scholars, securitization theory (ST), both in its original theoretical formulation and in many subsequent applications, has generally provided a consistent answer to this question: ST cautions against securitization because this process removes policy from the arena of public contestation, an arena that should be quite capacious in liberal democracies.¹ Securitization is “a failure to deal with issues of normal politics”.² For most proponents of ST, it is thus preferable to prevent issues from being securitized or to “desecuritize” any securitized issues to put them once more in the domain of “politicized” issues. In this article, I add to the work of scholars who are skeptical of this bifurcation between inappropriate securitization and appropriate desecuritization in arguing that we ought not to ascribe any inherent moral valence to (de)securitization.³ That is, while (de)securitization is a helpful analytic construct that offers a tool with which to debate the merits of any given case of (de)securitization, we ought not to begin with normative assumptions about the virtue thereof.

Why should we doubt the typical normative generalizations that have been built into ST? I argue that both securitization and desecuritization can constitute or make possible forms of domination—“institutionalized power relations”—that have been central to the typical

¹ This body of work often refers to “securitization theory,” and I generally follow that convention here, but as Balzacq and Guzzini note, this may overstate the homogeneity of work on securitization that can take at least four different forms of “theorizing”. Thierry Balzacq and Stefano Guzzini, ‘Introduction: “What Kind of Theory—If Any—Is Securitization?”,’ *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 97–102.

² Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 29.

³ Rita Floyd, ‘Towards a Consequentialist Evaluation of Security: Bringing Together the Copenhagen and the Welsh Schools of Security Studies,’ *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 327–50; Paul Roe, ‘Is Securitization a “Negative” Concept? Revisiting the Normative Debate over Normal Versus Extraordinary Politics,’ *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012): 249–66.

skepticism of securitization.⁴ I illustrate the moral ambiguities of (de)securitization with a study of U.S. policy on “Indian Affairs” and, in particular, debate over whether to move the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior. ST, especially in its original formulation, assumes a preexisting polity in which contestation over what constitutes an existential threat to the polity takes place. This process becomes more complicated when the boundaries of this polity are more fluid—in particular, when one considers global historical processes of state (trans)formation, territorial expansion, and assimilation of other peoples.⁵ This process, however, may include both securitization—in the form of classifying another group as a threat to the polity—and desecuritization insofar as governments will generally need to convince their existing subjects that a conquered or otherwise subordinated people can be brought into the political system without still constituting a threat or otherwise undermining the polity.

I posit that the transfer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the Department of the Interior was a desecuritizing move in the U.S. government’s process of bringing Native nations into its domestic sphere. If, as I argue, both securitization and desecuritization can entail practices of domination, this is especially clear in the settler colonial context:

A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of *domination*; that is, it is a relationship where power...has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to

⁴ Álvaro Morcillo Laiz and Klaus Schlichte, ‘Rationality and International Domination: Revisiting Max Weber,’ *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 2 (2016): 168–84, 171.

⁵ Following Charles Tilly, other scholars typically describe “state formation” as the outcome of interest when considering the emergence and spread of the state, but Tilly later regretted using this term and wrote that he should have instead referred to “state transformation” given that both individual states and the state as a political formation never stop evolving. Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992 [1990]); Charles Tilly, “States, State Transformation, and War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 176–93. See also: Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Julia Costa Lopez, ‘Political Authority in International Relations: Revisiting the Medieval Debate,’ *International Organization* 74, no. 2 (2020): 222–52.

facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.⁶

Rather than attributing any inherent moral valence to (de)securitization, scholars should thus continue to use securitization as an analytic construct and as a means of chastening political efforts to (de)securitize any given issue.⁷

In the next section, I will discuss how (de)securitization has been conceptualized, how scholars have addressed the question of (de)securitization's desirability, and how other scholars have offered critiques of ST on which I build. I will then provide a study of the U.S. decision to move the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior. I will then discuss the legacies of this decision, and I conclude with implications for future research.

II. Securitization and Desecuritization

ST takes as its focus the process by which issues are “securitized” by actors (usually policy-makers or activists) who seek to designate issues as posing an existential threat to some referent object and therefore as necessitating special treatment (a treatment that may be granted if the speech acts suffice to win over the relevant audience). This literature calls attention to the fact that the perception of and reaction to threats is intersubjective and political. “Security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act”.⁸ But the same is true of the reverse dynamic of desecuritization—the process by which some “security”

⁶ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Emphasis in original.

⁷ As I discuss below, my argument for ST as a chastening tool is drawn primarily from Daniel J. Levine, *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization,’ in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie Lipshutz (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 46–87, 53.

issue may come to be seen as no longer necessitating exceptional treatment. A desecuritized issue thus enters the realm of the political once more—it is subject to legitimate political debate in a way that securitized issues are not, and this explains the normative preference for desecuritization in ST. In a liberal democracy, few (if any) things should ever be put beyond the realm of public contestation if citizens are to be able to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

As desecuritization has received less attention than securitization, it has been used in “unsystematic or even contradictory” ways.⁹ It has been used to describe, among other things, instances in which one security issue is superseded by another or in which a securitized issue returns to the realm of “normal” politics. It is this latter meaning that I adopt as I believe this best captures the core of desecuritization as originally conceptualized—“a moving of issues off the ‘security’ agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse and ‘normal’ political dispute and accommodation”.¹⁰

This concept of (de)securitization is often associated with the “Copenhagen School”, a key text of which offers a usefully representative description of securitization and the spectrum on which securitized issues reside:

“Security” is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization. In theory, any public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from nonpoliticized (meaning the state does not deal with it and is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and decision) through politicized (meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource

⁹ Lene Hansen, ‘Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply It,’ *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 525–46, 527.

¹⁰ Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 511–31, 523. Hansen attributes this view of desecuritization to Åtland. Kristian Åtland, ‘Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic,’ *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 3 (2008): 289–311

allocations or, more rarely, some other form of communal governance) to securitized (meaning the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure).¹¹

As this suggests, those associated with the Copenhagen School generally treat (de)securitization as involving public speech acts and audiences who must be convinced to accept these (de)securitizing moves. A variety of facilitating conditions such as the speaker's social capital, moreover, might make the acceptance of any given (de)securitizing move more likely.¹²

The Copenhagen School's understanding of ST is "radically constructivist" in that they see no issue as naturally or objectively a security issue—all security issues must be constructed as such.¹³ This is indeed consonant with constructivist work in IR that emphasizes "intersubjective expectations and normatively stabilized meanings" and the mutually constitutive character of agents and structures.¹⁴ This co-constitution means that foreign policy itself ought not to be seen as a static domain describing a certain set of issues but as "a political practice that makes 'foreign' certain events and actors".¹⁵ While there are different varieties of constructivism in IR, including its manifestation in the "practice turn," relationalism, and other such "turns"

¹¹ Jef Huysmans, 'Revisiting Copenhagen: Or, On the Creative Development of a Security Studies Agenda in Europe,' *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 4 (1998): 479–505, 479-480; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, 23.

¹² Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁴ Friedrich Kratochwil and John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State,' *International Organization* 40, no. 4 (1986): 753–75, 775. Furthermore, the Copenhagen School's emphasis on public speech and attempts at persuasion is part of a broader strand of constructivism in IR that uses speech acts to delineate how agents might reshape the social structures in which they are embedded. Harry D. Gould, 'What Is at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?,' in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. Vendulka Kubáľková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 79–98, 81. Some strands of thought otherwise quite similar to this sort of constructivism, however, seek to do away with any clear distinction between "agents" and "structures". On pragmatism in IR, for example, see: Sebastian Schmidt, *Armed Guests: Territorial Sovereignty and Foreign Military Basing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1992]), 61.

generally framed against “the mainstream,” I maintain what Hacking describes as a minimally constructivist position here—“the existence or character of X ,” in this case what is deemed a security or non-security issue, “is not determined by the nature of things”.¹⁶ U.S. policy on Indian Affairs, as I will detail below, is illustrative of this.

Those writing about securitization, however, have often gone beyond descriptive or analytic claims about the potential for any issue to go from a politicized to securitized state or vice versa. That is, much of the work on securitization has demonstrated a normative preference for keeping issues from becoming securitized or, failing that, for desecuritizing issues when possible.¹⁷ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde first define desecuritization as a process by which an issue is moved “out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere”.¹⁸ The word “normal” here could refer to the most frequent state of affairs—a baseline of sorts—but it is more commonly given a normatively positive connotation in the literature. Indeed, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde explicitly argue that desecuritization is “better” than securitization and the “optimal long-range option” as it is preferable to keep political issues in “the ordinary public sphere”.¹⁹ “We are on the record here and elsewhere,” they say, “arguing in

¹⁶ Swati Srivastava, ‘Varieties of Social Construction,’ *International Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2020): 325–46; David M. McCourt, ‘Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2016): 475–85; David M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022); Stephane J. Baele and Gregorio Bettiza, ‘Turning Everywhere in IR: On the Sociological Underpinnings of the Field’s Proliferating Turns,’ *International Theory* 13, no. 2 (2021): 314–40; Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6-7. Despite McCourt’s argument that relationalism constitutes a new manifestation of constructivism, there is some debate on this in that not all relationalists endorse the constructivist label. See, e.g., Stacie Goddard, ‘Hiding in Plain Sight? The Not-So-Secret Constructivism of Relationalism,’ *International Studies Quarterly Online*, June 18, 2017, 4–6.

¹⁷ Lin Alexandra Mortensgaard, ‘Contesting Frames and (De)Securitizing Schemas: Bridging the Copenhagen School’s Framework and Framing Theory,’ *International Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (2020): 140–66, 144.

¹⁸ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4, 29.

favor of desecuritization as the long-range political goal”.²⁰ Subsequent work on (de)securitization in a wide array of issue areas—public health, climate change, and gender-based violence—has generally taking a similarly skeptical view of securitization.²¹

While quite influential, especially in Europe, ST has received much critique over the years.²² The Copenhagen School’s focus on speech acts and the posited process by which (de)securitization succeeds primarily by following procedural rules correctly, for example, has been critiqued as insufficiently capturing the “strategic (pragmatic) practice” of public political debate and the various institutional settings and media that lend themselves to different kinds of (de)securitizing moves or exclusions from the (de)securitizing process.²³ A related critique is that the Copenhagen School provides an overly narrow view of how actors (and which actors) might try to securitize an issue.²⁴ Moreover, there is a temporal issue in the Copenhagen School’s focus

²⁰ Ibid., 210.

²¹ Stefan Elbe, ‘Should HIV/AIDS Be Securitized? The Ethical Dilemmas of Linking HIV/AIDS and Security,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006): 119–44; Jarrod Hayes and Janelle Knox-Hayes, ‘Security in Climate Change Discourse: Analyzing the Divergence between US and EU Approaches to Policy,’ *Global Environmental Politics* 14, no. 2 (2014): 82–101; Sara Meger, ‘The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016): 149–59.

²² Indeed, beyond the Copenhagen School, the less frequently invoked Paris School and Welsh School offer somewhat different perspectives on securitization. The Paris School takes a similar view of the basic idea of securitization, but it shifts the focus from speech acts and policy-makers to the non-verbal everyday practices of “professionals in charge of the management of risk and fear,” including local and national police organizations. Didier Bigo, 2002. ‘Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,’ *Alternatives* 27 (1 (Special Issue)): 63–92, 63. The Welsh School, on the other hand, takes its cues from critical theory in aiming to craft a more emancipatory politics of security and in maintaining that efforts at securitization are fundamentally misguided: “true security can only be achieved by people and groups if they do not deprive others of it”. Ken Booth, ‘Security and Emancipation,’ *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 4 (1991): 313–26, 319. Quoted in Floyd, ‘Towards a Consequentialist Evaluation of Security,’ 332.

²³ Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171–201, 172; Lene Hansen, ‘The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School,’ *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 285–306; Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies’; Mark B. Salter, ‘When Securitization Fails: The Hard Case of Counter-Terrorism Programs,’ in *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, ed. Thierry Balzacq (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010): 116–31.

²⁴ This is also related to a concern that the Copenhagen School risks “reifying both dominant voices and traditional security discourses”. Matt McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security,’

on moments of (de)securitization; contestation over whether an issue is properly considered a “security” issue does not necessarily stop when an issue has been (de)securitized. For example, an already securitized issue—as Iran’s nuclear program has long been treated in Israeli politics—may be brought back into political discourse for the purpose of making the case that the issue now presents an even greater threat demanding further exceptional action.²⁵ More generally, we might see (de)securitization less as sequential and more as processual. That is, following relational or processual sociology, we might see securitization not as something that is achieved at the moment a relevant audience accepts a securitizing claim but rather as a relatively stable state of affairs that must be continually maintained through political action.²⁶

I build on these critiques of ST while nonetheless maintaining securitization’s utility as an analytic tool. First, I focus less on speech acts *per se* and more on the bureaucratic political machinations by which an issue can be (de)securitized. Second, the Congressional debate I examine here was public, but it was not obviously directed at an audience beyond those policy-makers involved. While this debate and its result may have been informed by perceptions of

European Journal of International Relations 14, no. 4 (2008): 563–587, 565, 571–575. For a similar critique related to ST’s treatment of religion, see: Mona Kanwal Sheikh, ‘The Religious Challenge to Securitisation Theory,’ *Millennium* 43, no. 1 (2014): 252–72, 257. Buzan and Lawson’s narrative of Europe’s hybridized development would seem to cut against a notion of securitization theory as inherently Eurocentric, but some works on ST do evince a particular sense of political normalcy—that is, one that ‘derives largely from the context of (Western) liberal democratic states’. Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Roe, ‘Is Securitization a “Negative” Concept?’ 251. See also: Claudia Aradau, ‘Security and the Democratic Scene: Desecuritization and Emancipation,’ *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7, no. 4 (2004): 388–413, 392.

²⁵ Amir Lupovici, ‘Securitization Climax: Putting the Iranian Nuclear Project at the Top of the Israeli Public Agenda (2009–2012),’ *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (2016): 413–32, 413.

²⁶ See, e.g., Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291–332; Andrew Abbott, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). This approach would be consonant with Guzzini’s reframing of securitization as a “causal mechanism” in which we might see a “speech act” as “a process, not a kind of single bombshell event”. Stefano Guzzini, ‘Securitization as a Causal Mechanism,’ *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 329–41, 335.

what the public would countenance, I do not believe we can make nomothetic generalizations about which audience needs to accept a (de)securitizing move for the move to succeed. Third, while I do focus on a specific “moment,” I situate this moment in a longer-running process of desecuritization (following relational and processual sociology as described above).²⁷ I thus use my case study to relate policy-makers’ “security articulations...to their broader discursive contexts”.²⁸

The main argument I am making here is similar to Floyd’s contention that the moral valence of any given (de)securitization process is “issue-dependent,” because “every incidence of securitization is unique”.²⁹ ST’s positive view of desecuritization, she argues, “does not stem from actual empirical observation of how politics operates but rather from Ole Wæver’s view of how politics, including security policy, *should* be done” (Floyd 2011, 428).³⁰ I agree on this

²⁷ While I argue that this long desecuritizing process was relatively successful, I concur with Ruzicka’s (2019) argument that more examination of failed attempts at (de)securitization is necessary if we want to ascertain why (de)securitizing moves vary in their degree of success. Jan Ruzicka, “Failed Securitization: Why It Matters,” *Polity* 51, no. 2 (2019): 365–77. Given the apparent ubiquity of efforts at (de)securitization, however, I doubt that scholars could ever assemble something approximating a truly complete universe of cases from which nomothetic generalization would be possible (to say nothing of the contingency introduced by reflective subjects). I thus depart from efforts to place securitization theory on a more “positivist” foundation. See, e.g., Thomas Jamieson, ‘Securitization Theory: Toward a Replicable Framework for Analysis,’ in *Constructivism Reconsidered: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Mariano E. Bertucci, Jarrod Hayes, and Patrick James (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018): 155-179, 155.

²⁸ Holger Stritzel, ‘Toward a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2007): 357–83, 360.

²⁹ Floyd, ‘Towards a Consequentialist Evaluation of Security,’ 337.

³⁰ Rita Floyd, ‘Can Securitization Theory Be Used in Normative Analysis? Towards a Just Securitization Theory,’ *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4/5 (2011): 427-439, 428. In some of Floyd’s more recent work, however, her starting point is a view of securitization as likely to be normatively undesirable in many (or perhaps even all) cases. As she notes in a recent symposium on her 2019 book, *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization*, the framework she outlines for assessing the justice of any given (de)securitizing process “is about curtailing the occurrence and destructiveness of securitization”. Rita Floyd et al., ‘The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitisation Symposium,’ *European Journal of International Security* 7, no. 2 (2022): 248–82, 249. “Given that the bar for the moral permissibility of securitization is set high...it is possible that a real-world example of such a securitization does not exist.” Rita Floyd, *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 70.

point and seek to illustrate why observers should indeed debate the merits of (de)securitization on a case-by-case basis.³¹ Where I depart from Floyd is in eschewing an effort to craft definitive standards by which we may judge acts of (de)securitization, an effort in which she draws on consequentialism and just war theory, traditions of thought that have their own limitations (Floyd 2019; Morkevičius 2015).³²

While much work on (de)securitization has sought to systematize the study of this process to enable a better understanding of when (de)securitizing processes are more or less likely to succeed, I argue that work on (de)securitization should receive more scholarly attention as a chastening tool. That is, scholarly and related public-facing work on (de)securitization can helpfully inform debates over the merit of any (de)securitizing process by chastening all sides in such debates. Amid public contestation that seeks to erect one policy response as *the* right choice, scholars can serve to caution against the most optimistic projections or universalizing pretensions of advocates by laying out “the limitations inherent in *all* conceptual thought” insofar as any given policy proposal emerges from “historically contingent convergences of interest, identity, and understanding”.³³ In other words, rather than offering a “just securitization theory,” I am suggesting that ST can be used not to establish the justice of any particular

³¹ Here my argument is also similar to Roe’s argument that engagement with the normative content of (de)securitizing moves “should...strive not to escape from security (securitization) but rather to ‘break back in’ precisely to reclaim it as a site for such contestations over the possibilities for inclusion/exclusion”. Roe, ‘Is Securitization a “Negative” Concept?’ 261.

³² Floyd, *The Morality of Security*; Valerie Morkevičius, “Power and Order: The Shared Logics of Realism and Just War Theory,” *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2015): 11–22. Floyd notes that *The Morality of Security* was motivated in part by the observation that “we—as a discipline—do not have a systematic normative theory that enables us to distinguish between securitisations that are morally justifiable, and those that are not,” and she offers Just Securitization Theory (JST) to serve that purpose. Floyd et al., ‘The Morality of Security,’ 249. I am less confident that we will be able to come to consensus on a single “systematic normative theory” with which to scrutinize any given instance of (de)securitization. Rather, in arguing that the key move that ST makes possible is the chastening of (de)securitizing processes, I would expect different individuals to bring different normative theories—some perhaps less systematic or explicit than Floyd’s—to bear on specific processes of (de)securitization.

³³ Levine, *Recovering International Relations*, 33. Emphasis in original.

(de)securitizing process but to bring a critical lens to bear on all of them, something that is especially important given “the danger of perverse and unintended consequences” resulting from any such processes.³⁴

Securitizing and desecuritizing moves should be subject to the same critical scrutiny, I argue, because both can constitute or make possible practices of domination.³⁵ I am referring to domination in a Weberian sense—domination as “institutionalized power relations,” relations that increase “the probability of a command being obeyed without employing coercion”.³⁶ Laiz and Schlichte invoke Weber’s contention that “in daily life domination means primarily: administration,” thereby highlighting the political nature of “techniques of administration” that present themselves as apolitical.³⁷ Domination by this definition has no inherent moral valence. Rather, its desirability will vary across particular cases even as this will always be debatable.³⁸ For Copenhagen School theorists, however, securitization involves a normatively undesirable sort of domination in which some issues are removed from the public sphere and designated as

³⁴ Eric Van Rythoven, ‘The Securitization Dilemma,’ *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (2020): 478–93, 479. If Aradau argues for “a politics of emancipation which would unmake securitization and its non-democratic, exceptional and exclusionary logic,” I am arguing not for an emancipatory politics but for a refusal to attach any inherent moral valence to (de)securitization, a refusal that might allow us to ask whether any given (de)securitizing move is likely to be emancipatory or otherwise desirable. Aradau, ‘Security and the Democratic Scene,’ 405.

³⁵ To the extent that proponents of ST characterize securitization as normatively troubling, they tend to focus on troubling aspects of either the “process” of securitizing an issue (generally the procedural illiberalism thereof) or the “outcome” (generally the repression of certain groups or behaviors), but those who emphasize the ways securitization warps liberal democratic processes often evince a concern about the outcomes that warped processes will produce. While the process-outcome distinction may thus be more ideal typical as opposed to an actually existing bifurcation, practices of domination better fit this second category. Roe, ‘Is Securitization a “Negative” Concept?’

³⁶ Laiz and Schlichte, ‘Rationality and International Domination,’ 171; Álvaro Morcillo Laiz and Klaus Schlichte, ‘Another Weber: State, Associations and Domination in International Relations,’ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2016): 1,448-1,466, 1,452.

³⁷ Laiz and Schlichte, ‘Rationality and International Domination,’ 169.

³⁸ Floyd, for example, references the COVID-19 pandemic as an instance in which this sort of administrative domination—in the form of mask mandates, vaccine mandates, and the like—may have been justified within her own framework of Just Securitization Theory, but she also notes the myriad concerns critics of such policies raised. Floyd et al., ‘The Morality of Security,’ 280.

issues on which a very small group of people (or even a single person) can make decisions on behalf of the polity. I would agree that “security practices buttress” (or can buttress) “institutional arrangements and legitimize forms of domination and exclusion,” but I maintain that desecuritization (or, for that matter, any political project) can do the same thing.³⁹ I argue that a study of the way “Indian Affairs” shifted from being treated as a foreign policy issue to a domestic issue in the United States can help demonstrate the moral ambiguity of (de)securitization and the role of bureaucratic actions in (de)securitizing any given issue. The key events in this domain of federal policy were sufficiently recent and public that we have good records that can speak to this transformation of Indian Affairs, and the varying ways and extent to which U.S. policy-makers aimed for the elimination and/or assimilation of Native peoples over time make this a key case on which future research might seek to build.⁴⁰

III. Desecuritizing Indian Affairs

For early U.S. political elites, Indian Affairs was considered to be a foreign policy issue of paramount importance. Yet, by the mid-nineteenth century, the Bureau of Indian Affairs would be moved to the Department of the Interior, and these relationships would increasingly be treated as part of American domestic politics. This shift, I argue, can best be described as part of a process of desecuritization that the U.S. government undertook as part of its broader efforts to

³⁹ Claudia Aradau, *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 72.

⁴⁰ Many studies of (de)securitization similarly focus on a single case study, and the case selection usually follows from at least one of three logics—the “typical case,” “critical case,” or “revelatory case”. I would place my case study in the third (“revelatory”) category. The trajectory of Indian Affairs in the United States from “foreign” to “domestic” offers a new way of looking at (de)securitization that calls into question existing perspectives in the literature. Thierry Balzacq, ‘Enquiries into Methods: A New Framework for Securitization Analysis,’ in *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, ed. Thierry Balzacq (London, UK: Routledge, 2011): 31-53, 34.

dispossess Native nations and to delegitimize Native claims to sovereignty. I stipulate that this was only a part of the process of desecuritization because I would argue that this was neither the first nor the last desecuritizing move in that process, and this relationship is still contested.

In this section, I will use primary and secondary sources to delineate the process by which political elites came to construct Indian Affairs as a domestic issue. I will pay particular attention to the 1849 debate over whether to shift the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior. First, however, I will address the question of whether policy-makers ever truly considered Indian Affairs to be a foreign policy or security issue.

Even if there were violent disputes between the United States and Native nations, one might still question whether this is properly considered an issue of U.S. foreign policy—or whether anyone at the time thought of it as foreign policy. Indeed, to the extent that political scientists have studied U.S. relations with Native nations, relatively little of it has approached the topic from the standpoint of International Relations.⁴¹ From the early colonial period until well into the nineteenth century, however, private citizens and the American government alike often treated Native nations as distinct (if not always wholly sovereign) peoples (Saler 2015).⁴² The federal government formed treaties with Native nations until 1871 and made frequent use of

⁴¹ For some important exceptions that relate Indigenous experiences to contemporary international politics and related theoretical debates, see: Neta C. Crawford, ‘A Security Regime among Democracies: Cooperation among Iroquois Nations,’ *International Organization* 48, no. 3 (1994): 345–85; J. Marshall Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Kimberly R. Marion Suiseeya, ‘Navigating the Nagoya Protocol: Indigenous Demands for Justice,’ *Global Environmental Politics* 14, no. 3 (2014): 102–24; Taesuh Cha, ‘The Formation of American Exceptional Identities: A Three-Tier Model of the “Standard of Civilization” in US Foreign Policy,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 4 (December 2015): 743–67; Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016).

⁴² Bethel Saler, *The Settlers’ Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America’s Old Northwest* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

military force in interactions with them (sometimes following settler-instigated conflict) both before and after its own independence.⁴³ The debate over the Indian Removal Act of 1830 in the Senate was framed in part by the question of whether Native Americans were sovereign entities or not, and the Supreme Court was often unhelpfully ambiguous on the question. Finally, until 1924, Native individuals as a class were not eligible for U.S. citizenship, and the federal government still characterizes relations with federally recognized tribes as government-to-government relationships.⁴⁴ Such relations, I argue, do indeed appear to have been considered “foreign” relations by many political elites for a sizable portion of U.S. history, especially in the first several decades thereof.

To further underscore this last point, militarized disputes between the U.S. and Native nations constituted a significant, costly experience for early U.S. policy-makers. These so-called “Indian Wars” in which an independent United States engaged varied in the extent of federal involvement, casualties, and expenditures. Still, “wars against Native Americans were the most common kind of conflict involving the United States. These were costly affairs...and were a primary American security concern.”⁴⁵ Roughly 50 conflicts between 1783 and 1890 were considered serious enough for the U.S. government to call them “wars,” and these conflicts—along with civil administration of Indian Affairs and veterans’ benefits—were costly. As

⁴³ Andrew A. Szarejko, ‘Do Accidental Wars Happen? Evidence from America’s Indian Wars,’ *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 1–7; Alexander D. Barder, *Global Race War: International Politics and Racial Hierarchy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 71-94.

⁴⁴ Vine Deloria, Jr. and David E. Wilkins, *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ Eric Grynviski, *America’s Middlemen: Power at the Edge of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 48.

reported in the 1890 U.S. Census, military spending between March 1789 and June 1890 totaled \$4,725,521,495; the Census Bureau attributed about 17% (or \$807,073,658) to the Indian Wars.⁴⁶

It is in this context—a general understanding of Native nations as being a threat to U.S. security alongside some uncertainty as to how exactly to characterize the relationship—that Congress delegated relations with Native nations to the Department of War in 1789. This perception of threat, however, was not new. From the earliest days of colonization, but especially after Powhatan resistance to settler expansion in Virginia in the 1620s and after King Philip’s War (1675-1678), many colonists felt that Native nations presented a rather acute threat to their continued flourishing in the “New World,” something they saw as rightfully theirs by virtue of discovery and their ability to make “better” use of the land.⁴⁷ The treatment of Indian Affairs as a security issue to be dealt with as part of foreign policy thus had ample precedent and resonance with the general public, and the delegation of Indian Affairs to the Department of War would be formalized with the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and its placement in the same department in 1824. If Congress had wanted to create something like a “home” or “interior” department in 1789, it certainly had other institutions of the time that it could have used as a model.⁴⁸ Ultimately, however, the BIA would not be transferred to a newly created Department of the Interior until 1849.

⁴⁶ United States Census Bureau, ‘Indian Wars, Their Cost, and Civil Expenditures,’ in *Eleventh Census, Vol. 10* (1890), 644, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1894/dec/volume-10.html>. See also: Szarejko, ‘Do Accidental Wars Happen?’.

⁴⁷ Christine M. DeLucia, *Memory Lands: King Philip’s War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 36-37; Lindsay G. Robertson, *Conquest by Law: How the Discovery of America Dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of Their Lands* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4-8.

⁴⁸ Henry Barrett Learned, “The Establishment of the Secretaryship of the Interior,” *The American Historical Review* 16, no. 4 (1911): 751–73.

The rest of this section will proceed in three segments. First, I will discuss the history of Indian Affairs in the United States before the BIA was formally established. Second, I will discuss the history of the BIA as an agency of the War Department. Third and most substantially, I will discuss the decision to move the BIA to the Department of the Interior. Throughout, I will focus on the ways that policy-makers sought to keep Native nations “foreign” or to make them “domestic”.⁴⁹

In managing relations with Native nations, an independent United States built on pre-existing political practices. The Articles of Confederation did not establish a formal agency for this task, but it did maintain the pre-independence structure that centralized Indian Affairs in the Department of War. There were, however, important regional divisions in the practice of Indian Affairs—the three pre-independence regions (“Northern,” “Southern,” and “Middle”) shrunk to two (“Northern” and “Southern”) by 1786—and even after the ratification of the Constitution placed the Department of War in the executive branch, Congress retained significant influence in the making of American Indian policy, including (in the case of the Senate) the power to approve treaties with tribes. From the beginning, the responsibilities of Indian agents (as officials in this field were often called) were framed in terms similar to any normal diplomat. They were to try to maintain amicable relations with tribal governments, ensure at least tribal neutrality in the Revolutionary War, and, after the war, ease the way for U.S. settlement and expansion through

⁴⁹ This narrative draws generally on the following sources: Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Treaties: The History of a Political Anomaly* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Stephen J. Rockwell, *Indian Affairs and the Administrative State in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Donald L. Fixico, *Bureau of Indian Affairs* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2012); Eric M. White, ‘Interior vs. War: The Development of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Transfer Debates, 1849-1880’ (Harrisonburg, VA, James Madison University, 2012), <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019/366/>; United States Department of the Interior, “History of The Department of the Interior,” n.d., <https://www.doi.gov/whoweare/history#main-content>. I also make note of these or other relevant sources where the history is less well-known.

the negotiation of treaties and land purchases. Indeed, George Washington structured much of early U.S. policy on Indian Affairs around an understanding of these relations as a security issue while also trying to avoid costly conflicts. In a 1783 letter he wrote to Congressman James Duane, Washington summarized his position as follows: “In a word there is nothing to be obtained by an Indian War but the Soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expence, and without that bloodshed, and those distresses which helpless Women and Children are made partakers of in all kinds of disputes with them.”⁵⁰ Duane, a New York delegate to the Confederation Congress and the Chair of the Indian Affairs Committee, presented the Congress with a report based largely on Washington’s lengthy letter, and this report would be the Congress’s primary statement of its position on Indian Affairs for decades.

In these early days, there was little official pressure on Indian agents to push for the assimilation of Native nations; that is, there was not yet consensus on whether Native peoples would or should be absorbed into the Union as citizens. Throughout this period of 1783 to 1824, however, there were at least two important continuities in U.S. policy on Indian Affairs, both of which constituted practices of domination. First, the acquisition of Native land was the central goal of settlers and political elites alike, but the political process was often *ad hoc* as policy-makers necessarily adapted to the desires and capacities of heterogeneous Native nations.⁵¹ In the South, for example, illegal state claims of Native territory would complicate federal plans for negotiation, and tribes of the Northwest Territory varied in the concessions they were willing to make to a U.S. government that claimed to have conquered their land through the Revolutionary

⁵⁰ George Washington, ‘Letter to James Duane,’ September 7, 1783, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11798>.

⁵¹ As Wolfe puts it, “[T]he primary motive [of settler colonialism] is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory.” Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,’ *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, 388.

War. Second, federal policy in this period aimed at the “civilization” of Indigenous peoples even as long-term assimilation remained an open question.⁵² Policy-makers at this time tended to support purportedly civilizing measures being included in legislation and treaties—the supply of farming equipment, for example, or a ban on the sale of alcohol to Native peoples—but this was widely seen as the appropriate thing to do even if Native nations would remain somehow distinct polities. Alternatively, if this civilizing program failed, many self-servingly assumed that Native nations would simply fade away (Dippie 1982).⁵³ These continuities both presumed and enacted “institutionalized power relations,” however, and they established a long-term pattern of U.S. efforts to reformulate relations with Native nations such that they would not constitute a threat to the United States.⁵⁴

After decades of relatively unsuccessful attempts to regulate the interactions of U.S. persons with Native nations, Congress authorized the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of War in 1824. John C. Calhoun, then the Secretary of War, was the impetus for this change, but Congress’s refusal to give Calhoun the authority to add employees to the new BIA meant that the reorganization ultimately amounted to little *de facto* change. Rather, the key development was Calhoun’s designation of Thomas L. McKenney as Superintendent of Political Affairs. It was not until 1832 that Congress would establish within the BIA the position of Commissioner of Indian Affairs, but in McKenney’s six-year tenure as *de facto* head of the BIA, he would play a key role in generating support for President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal

⁵² This civilizing process was bound up with a homogenizing logic of progress: “From the late 18th century onwards, progress, in singular, meant progress of mankind, of civilisation, or simply of history – thus synchronising and indeed integrating different types of progress into a singular historical movement.” Helge Jordheim and Einar Wigen, ‘Conceptual Synchronisation: From Progress to Crisis,’ *Millennium* 46, no. 3 (2018): 421–39, 429.

⁵³ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1982).

⁵⁴ Laiz and Schlichte, ‘Rationality and International Domination,’ 171.

Act, which Congress ultimately passed in 1830.⁵⁵ McKenney and Jackson alike made their argument on humanitarian grounds—Native nations would not survive sustained contact with settlers who were already spreading far beyond the original thirteen colonies—and McKenney ensured that the BIA civilizing programs continued alongside these efforts. But there remained an ambiguity in U.S. relations with Native nations even amid this effort to “remove” them. In relaying the Indian Removal Act to Native nations, BIA officials—sometimes relaying the words of Jackson himself—typically gave these nations an ultimatum. They could either leave their homelands, resettle on some designated territory west of the Mississippi, and remain a tribal government, or they could instead remain in their homelands while forfeiting any claim to sovereignty and being incorporated into the American domestic sphere. To the extent that one can refer to such demands as offering a “choice,” this left Native peoples with the choice of remaining foreign or becoming domestic. Either way, however, U.S. relations with Native nations would be structured around the presumption that the latter were subordinate polities.

From War to Interior

A key inflection point in the history of Indian Affairs—in the process of turning it from a security issue alongside other such aspects of the country’s foreign policy into a desecuritized issue of domestic policy—was the transfer of the BIA from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior in 1849. There were abortive talks of establishing some such department in the decades prior to 1849, but this expansion of the federal government had previously struggled to attain sufficient political support. This support, however, would ultimately arise after the significant territorial expansion of the 1840s and the Mexican-American War.⁵⁶ The proposal to create a new Department of the Interior came from the administration of

⁵⁵ Rockwell, *Indian Affairs and the Administrative State in the Nineteenth Century*, 160-162.

⁵⁶ Fixico, *Bureau of Indian Affairs*, 23-26; White, ‘Interior vs. War,’ 24-25.

President James K. Polk, representatives of which argued that this would allow for more coherent federal management of an increasingly large swath of public lands. The proposal—for what Congressmen often called a “Home Department”—met with little resistance in the House of Representatives, and it passed there on February 16, 1849.⁵⁷ More substantial debate, however, would occur in the Senate. This was, in effect, a debate over whether to make a foreign policy issue a domestic issue instead.

Initial discussion of this proposal in the Senate first centered on questions about the proper scope and arrangement of government. The first substantive comment on the matter, in which Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi noted that most of the functions in the new Home Department would be transferred from the Department of the Treasury, justified his support for the bill with reference to checks and balances: “The officer who is charged with finding the ways and means to carry on the Government properly, never should have been charged with the disbursement of those ways and means.”⁵⁸ By contrast, Senator William Allen of Ohio shortly thereafter expressed his opposition to the bill on the grounds that it would inappropriately rush an expansion of government: “I am utterly opposed to taking upon ourselves the responsibility of this augmentation of patronage and consequent expense to the people.”⁵⁹

This early debate about the size and scope of government—no doubt informed by Democratic majorities in both chambers that were reluctant to create more positions for the incoming Whig administration of Zachary Taylor—quickly turned to the proper place of Indian

⁵⁷ Francis P. Blair and John C. Rives, eds., ‘The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,’ in *The Congressional Globe* (Washington, DC: Blair and Rives, 1849), 544, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c057923859&view=1up&seq=590&size=150>.

⁵⁸ Blair and Rives, ‘The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,’ 670.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Both Davis and Allen were Democrats.

Affairs.⁶⁰ Senators understood the implication entailed in creating the Department of the Interior and placing the Bureau of Indian Affairs in it; much of the Senate's debate on this proposal turned on whether "Indian Affairs" was properly considered part of foreign or domestic policy. The first to raise this issue, Senator Allen, registered his opposition: "What the bill proposes to do for the Secretary of War, in relieving him from the Indian Affairs, is not only unnecessary, as I believe, but I fear is as likely to be pernicious."⁶¹ Likewise, Senator James Murray Mason, a Democrat of Virginia, argued that there was little reason to bother moving the "Indian Bureau":

These Indian Tribes are decreasing in number every day; and they are driven further to the west, till I apprehend they will be driven to the very verge of the Pacific. How do our relations with them stand in comparison with those great departments of the Government which were carved out of the original power of managing our foreign relations? They are purely subordinate.⁶²

While these initial explanations for senatorial opposition indicate an awareness of one of the questions at hand—whether Indian Affairs should be considered an issue of foreign or domestic policy—the senators were not explicit in justifying their votes along those lines. Rather, that would have to wait until after a failed call to table the motion when John C. Calhoun, another Democrat and by that point serving in his second stint as a senator from South Carolina, expressed his opposition precisely because he considered Indian Affairs to be a security issue. It was, he argued, a matter self-evidently for the War Department:

Who does not see that the Indian affairs are immediately connected with the War Department? Who does not see that the preservation of peace and harmony on our frontier, both between ourselves and the Indians, and between the Indian tribes themselves, depends upon the action of the War Department. In my judgment, the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 674. Senator Henry S. Foote of Mississippi, a Democrat, made explicit the conspicuous timing, but he and some other Democrats nonetheless supported its passage: "I shall not decline voting for it because a Whig Administration is about to come into power. The general and permanent welfare of the Republic will always be with me a leading a paramount consideration; and even were I to view this measure only with reference to party considerations...I can perceive no impropriety in adopting it at once."

⁶¹ Blair and Rives, 'The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,' 671.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 671.

Indian affairs are so intimately connected with the War Department that they cannot be separated without producing mischievous consequences.⁶³

After a brief break in the debate to consider other pending matters, Democratic Senator Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia echoed Calhoun's sentiments. For Hunter, Indian Affairs "very properly belongs [to the War Department], inasmuch as they involve matters of war and peace with the Indian tribes," and as Allen had noted earlier in the debate (before it explicitly turned to Indian Affairs), "The Government has got along in peace and war with our present departments. They have got along most triumphantly".⁶⁴ Why change something that was working well enough?

In arguing for BIA's placement in Interior, on the other hand, Senator Henry S. Foote of Mississippi made the opposite argument.

The honorable Senator from South Carolina has discovered great incongruity in this bill: he contends that there is neither similarity nor affinity between our Indian policy—our policy in connection with the public lands, and the Patent Office arrangements. Why, sir, is not the honorable Senator in error? Do not all these several matters relate to the *domestic* policy of the Republic, as distinguished from its *exterior* concerns? What two things can be mentioned more closely connected than our Indian policy and the policy of the public lands?"⁶⁵

Nor was Foote, another Democrat, the only one to make this argument. After several failed attempts to amend the bill, for example, Whig Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts asked, "Do not the duties of the Indian bureau as much affect our internal affairs now as they will when this bill is passed?"⁶⁶ Davis, speaking immediately after Webster, pressed opponents on this same point:

⁶³ Ibid., 43. Note that page 43 here represents a section break of sorts that appears between pages 673 and 674. My narrative still relays this in chronological order—Calhoun's argument appears shortly after Mason's.

⁶⁴ Blair and Rives, 'The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,' 674, 670.

⁶⁵ Blair and Rives, 'The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,' 674. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 677.

Under what other head than domestic relations will he [Mason] place the district courts, the transmission of the mails, the collection of revenue, the intercourse with Indian tribes, the disposal of the public lands, the protection of frontier inhabitants, and the many other duties of the General Government to the people of the United States?⁶⁷

Indeed, Davis continued to elaborate on his argument that U.S. relations with Native nations had once been a matter of foreign policy but were no longer appropriately labeled as such because:

When our intercourse with the Indian tribes was held under the protection of troops, and wars and rumors of wars came annually with the coming of grass, it was proper to place Indian relations under the War Department. Happily for them, honorably for us, the case has greatly changed, and is, I hope, before a distant day, to assume a character consonant with the relations of guardian and ward, which have been claimed by us as those existing between our Government and the Indian tribes. After having been partially civilized and prepared for agricultural life, tribes have been removed to the western frontier. It is now equally a duty to them and ourselves that we should, as far as we can, prevent them from lapsing again into barbarism. . . . War being the exception, peace the ordinary condition, the policy should be for the latter, not the former condition.⁶⁸

While several other senators spoke after Davis, much of the remainder of the debate focused on procedural issues. Proposed amendments to the bill that would have produced significant delays in the final bill's passage ultimately failed, and the legislation passed in a 31-25 vote.⁶⁹

One of Polk's last acts in office was to sign the bill into law, and while the BIA itself would remain much the same albeit with an expanded staff, this was a significant moment in the gradual movement toward treating Indian Affairs as a domestic issue.⁷⁰ To describe this as an act of desecuritization does not wholly comport with the Copenhagen School's portrayal of such processes; this was primarily a debate among elites, and it was not so much success in public

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 678.

⁶⁹ Blair and Rives, 'The Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress,' 680.

⁷⁰ Paul Stuart, 'Administrative Reform in Indian Affairs,' *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1985): 133-146.

persuasion that enabled this legalistic act as it was simply the possession of sufficient will among those with the legal authority to effectuate such a change.

In moving the BIA from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior, U.S. policy-makers firmly established their expectations as to the future character of U.S. relations with Native nations. Even as the Constitution would *de jure* require the federal government to respect previously established treaties and its government-to-government relationship with tribes, moving the BIA into Interior would legally entrench the practice of relating with Native nations as a domestic issue similar in kind to the responsibilities of Interior's other founding offices—the General Land Office, the Patent Office, and the military pension offices. Whether or not individual Congressmen earnestly sought to change or maintain the status of Indian Affairs as it was then practiced—that is, whether this bureaucratic maneuver was ultimately about partisan politics, sectional differences, or sincere disagreements on the nature of Indian Affairs—this vote ultimately had the practical effect of serving as an inflection point in a long-running process of desecuritization.

In its relations with Native nations, however, the United States did not immediately cease using military force. For decades after 1849, there were still militarized disputes between the United States and Native nations as it continued to consolidate its hold on what is now the contiguous United States. Nonetheless, a critical mass of policy-makers had apparently come to see Native nations as no longer representing an existential threat to the United States and its realization of expansion across the continent. Many by that point assumed that “the time when Indians posed a threat to the viability of the republic had passed”.⁷¹ There was still occasional debate in Congress—some of it stoked by military officers eager to bring the BIA back into their

⁷¹ Rockwell, *Indian Affairs and the Administrative State in the Nineteenth Century*, 247.

remit—as to whether Indian Affairs should be returned to the Department of War.⁷² Nonetheless, the BIA would stay in Interior, and the United States would spend much of the following century further desecuritizing this issue area to bring these once-foreign Native nations more fully into the domestic order.⁷³

After the creation of the Department of the Interior, the continued push to “civilize” Native nations—that is, to make possible their assimilation into the American domestic order—would come to focus in part on education. The often forcible enrollment of Native American children in federal boarding schools, which began early in the nineteenth century but broadened significantly after 1849, offers perhaps the clearest example of the practices of domination on which an increasingly “domestic” relationship was predicated.⁷⁴ Tens of thousands of Native American students were enrolled in BIA-affiliated boarding schools in which the curriculum

⁷² Jeffrey Ostler, ‘Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance,’ *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (1996): 217–248; Bryan Newland, ‘Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigate Report’ (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior, May 2022), 28, https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf.

⁷³ Indeed, even some states started to treat relations with Native nations as a law enforcement issue rather than as a national security issue to be handled with state militias or federal assistance. See, e.g., Graybill on the creation of the Texas Rangers. Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mountains, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 12-16.

⁷⁴ A recent Department of the Interior report found that the federal government began funding its first “Indian boarding school” in 1819, but the vast majority of these institutions were created in the latter half of the nineteenth century (and into the twentieth century). The report defines a “Federal Indian boarding school” as an institution that “(1) provided on-site housing or overnight lodging; (2) was described in records as providing formal academic or vocational training and instruction; (3) was described in records as receiving Federal Government funds or other support; and (4) was operational before 1969.” In “approximately 50 percent” of these institutions, which includes 408 institutions across what is now the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, the federal government partnered with religious (typically Christian missionary) organizations that provided at least part of the funding, infrastructure, or personnel. Newland, ‘Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigate Report,’ 6-7. Although the report does not provide summary statistics as to how frequently these boarding schools were opened across time, Appendix B lists the start date of student enrollment in these institutions, and a review of those figures indicates that the majority of institutions opened after 1849 and that these openings clustered to an extent around major shifts in Indian Affairs policy (with many opening in the 1850s and in subsequent periods of legislative change such those associated with the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934).

typically focused on instilling American cultural norms while providing only a rudimentary education.⁷⁵ Ultimately, “These institutions would do nothing to alter the Indians’ marginal economic existence or to equip tribesmen with skills that might enable them to challenge the political power of their non-Indian neighbors.”⁷⁶

President Ulysses S. Grant’s “Peace Policy,” a related initiative undertaken after the BIA became part of the Department of the Interior, relied largely on Christian missionaries to try to make Native peoples more “civilized” to prepare them for assimilation into the American body politic.⁷⁷ Grant justified this policy, moreover, with reference to the purported inability of Native nations to remain free-standing, sovereign nations. As he noted in discussing Indian Affairs in his first annual message to Congress, “I have attempted a new policy toward these wards of the nation (they can not be regarded in any other light than as wards), with fair results so far as tried, and which I hope will be attended ultimately with great success.”⁷⁸

Later policies oriented toward the assimilation of Native nations would likewise be justified with reference to the domestic nature of the relationship but would target communal land ownership. President Grover Cleveland described in his first inaugural address the sentiment that, “The Indians within our boundaries shall be fairly and honestly treated as wards of the Government and their education and civilization promoted with a view to their ultimate

⁷⁵ “The Federal Indian boarding school system deployed systematic militarized and identity-alteration methodologies to attempt to assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children through education, including but not limited to the following: (1) renaming Indian children from Indian to English names; (2) cutting hair of Indian children; (3) discouraging or preventing the use of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian languages, religions, and cultural practices; and (4) organizing Indian and Native Hawaiian children into units to perform military drills.” Newland, ‘Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigate Report,’ 7.

⁷⁶ Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 209.

⁷⁷ Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery: Frontier Governance and the Making of the Modern State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 119.

⁷⁸ Ulysses Grant, ‘First Annual Message,’ *First Annual Message* (blog), December 6, 1869, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-6-1869-first-annual-message>.

citizenship.”⁷⁹ Cleveland would later sign the Dawes Act, which sought to break apart reservations and trust lands and which was justified as an effort to make individual tribe members more individualistic capitalists befitting their status as part of an American domestic sphere.⁸⁰ In short, the BIA’s placement in the Department of the Interior helped to entrench “Indian Affairs” in the domestic sphere and facilitated the continuous reinscription of this hierarchical relationship.

In 1924, perhaps the apotheosis of this desecuritizing process came when the Indian Citizenship Act granted U.S. citizenship to “all non citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States”. Peoples with whom relations had once been conducted through the Department of War could now more readily enlist to serve that department (and the later Department of Defense). Notably, the Indian Citizenship Act had supporters and detractors among tribes. While the U.S. government did not conduct serious consultation with tribes on this or earlier reforms, there was much intra-tribal debate: “Was citizenship a force of political empowerment or a tool of disempowerment?”⁸¹ That there was disagreement within tribes underscores the moral ambiguity of (de)securitization. The United States had enacted practices of domination in its relations with Native nations in its early, more securitized relations, and these practices changed in form—but less so in content—as these relations were slowly desecuritized. Even as the administration in Indian Affairs shifted from a reliance on instruments

⁷⁹ Grover Cleveland, ‘First Inaugural Address,’ March 4, 1885, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/clevel.asp.

⁸⁰ As Cleveland’s Commissioner of Indian Affairs, J.D.C. Atkins, described it, the goal of the policy was to turn “idleness, improvidence, ignorance and superstition...into industry, thrift, intelligence and Christianity”. Andrew Glass, ‘Cleveland Signs Dawes Severalty Act, February 8, 1887,’ *Politico*, February 8, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/02/cleveland-signs-dawes-severalty-act-feb-8-1887-049008>.

⁸¹ Philip J. Deloria, ‘American Master Narratives and the Problem of Indian Citizenship in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,’ *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 1 (2015): 3–12, 5.

of foreign policy—war and diplomacy—to instruments of domestic policy such as law enforcement and assimilationist schooling, the underlying aim to institutionalize power relations remained much the same.

IV. Discussion

I have argued that the debate over whether to move the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior constituted a desecuritizing move in a broader process of desecuritization. “Politics,” however, “is about providing stability to social relations,” and if we take the relational character of securitization seriously, we might see this desecuritization as an ongoing process.⁸² If “sovereignty may exist within sovereignty,” albeit “in terrific tension,” the federal government must continually seek to reproduce the status of Indian Affairs as a domestic issue.⁸³ Indeed, from the state’s perspective, this is all the more necessary in the face of Native activism and legal decisions that question or undermine the legitimacy of the subordination of tribes to the federal government. It should thus not be surprising that some challenge laws that treat members of federally recognized tribes as members of distinct political communities with related rights (as opposed to members of a racial or ethnic group).⁸⁴ Similarly, the U.S. Supreme Court was subject to political attacks after the 2020 *McGirt v. Oklahoma* decision that upheld Creek Nation claims to a large portion of Oklahoma that Congress had previously reserved to them.⁸⁵ Likewise, the 2021 nomination and the narrow,

⁸² Hansen, ‘Reconstructing Desecuritisation,’ 528; Jackson and Nexon, ‘Relations before States’.

⁸³ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

⁸⁴ Tracy Rector, ‘Why Conservatives Are Attacking a Law Meant to Protect Native American Families,’ *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/11/21/why-conservatives-are-attacking-law-meant-protect-native-american-families/>.

⁸⁵ Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, for example, responded to the decision on Twitter by claiming that, “Neil Gorsuch & the four liberal Justices just gave away half of Oklahoma, literally. Manhattan is next.” Jack

contested confirmation of Representative Deb Haaland to be Secretary of the Interior underscores the backlash that Native activists and their allies may face in seeking to change the status quo.⁸⁶

As any given process of (de)securitization will entail active work to maintain the issue's (de)securitized status, I am hesitant to say that any such process is ever truly successful.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the efforts at desecuritization that I discuss have produced relatively durable stabilities in U.S. relations with Native nations. In defining success, securitization has received more attention than desecuritization. Citing Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, for example, Taureck notes that, "a successful securitization consists of three steps. These are: (1) identification of existential threats; (2) emergency action; and (3) effects on inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules".⁸⁸ Floyd offers a similarly tripartite standard:

I suggest that securitization is 'successful' only when (1) the identification of a threat that justifies a response (securitizing move) is followed by (2) a change of behaviour (action) by a relevant agent (that is, the securitizing actor or someone instructed by the same), and also (3) the action taken is justified by the securitizing actor with reference to the threat they identified and declared in the securitizing move.⁸⁹

By those standards, policy-makers certainly seem to have been successful in keeping Indian Affairs mostly desecuritized for a long period of time, and the 1849 decision does look to have been an important inflection point in that process. While the

Healy, 'For Oklahoma Tribe, Vindication at Long Last,' *The New York Times*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/us/muscogee-creek-nation-oklahoma.html>.

⁸⁶ Aliyah Chavez, 'Madam Secretary,' *Indian Country Today*, March 15, 2021, <https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/madam-secretary-deb-haaland>.

⁸⁷ To draw an analogy to work in Comparative Politics, I would be similarly reticent to describe any given democracy as "consolidated". Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm,' *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5-21.

⁸⁸ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, 6; Rita Taureck, 'Securitization Theory and Securitization Studies,' *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9, no. 1 (2006): 53-61, 55.

⁸⁹ Rita Floyd, 'Extraordinary or Ordinary Emergency Measures: What, and Who, Defines the 'Success' of Securitization?,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2016): 677-94, 679.

shapers of the Constitution and Supreme Court justices had already provided the legal framework necessary to think of Indian Affairs as “domestic” policy, the ensconcement of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior brought the federal bureaucracy in line with this framework and sent a very public message about how the government would relate to Native nations going forward. The extent to which this domestic relationship is now normal is only made more visible by occasional ruptures in this otherwise relatively stable state—for example, by the seizure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building by American Indian Movement activists in 1972 or the more recent Keystone XL Pipeline and Standing Rock protests.⁹⁰ This does not foreclose fuller realizations of Indigenous sovereignties, but it does present activists with difficult choices.⁹¹

V. Conclusion

I began this paper by asking whether securitization is as normatively undesirable as many who have written on the topic would have it. On the contrary, I have argued that we ought not to attach any inherent moral valence to (de)securitization. Rather than bringing normative denunciation to all securitizing processes, we should bring skepticism to any (de)securitizing process. I have focused primarily on desecuritization, which I have argued will often be involved in the process of incorporating a “foreign” population into one’s “domestic” order. As is clear from the long, coercive process by which the U.S. government turned Native nations into its “wards,” both securitization and desecuritization can involve practices of domination, and if the

⁹⁰ David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2019).

⁹¹ Matthew Wildcat and Justin de Leon, ‘Creative Sovereignty: The In-Between Space: Indigenous Sovereignties in Creative and Comparative Perspective,’ *Borderlands* 19, no. 2 (2020): 1–28.

(in)justice of such practices is of central concern in the study of (de)securitization, scholars ought to bring their typical skepticism of securitization to desecuritization as well. That is, the study of (de)securitizing processes provides a framework for the chastening of all such processes. Moreover, these processes may entail slow, steady shifts in policy largely removed from public debate, and they may involve seemingly banal forms of bureaucratic politics to which ST has not always been attentive. That agents of the United States perpetrated acts of genocide against Native individuals both before and well after the 1849 debate on the Department of the Interior should give us pause when considering securitization theory's typical preference for desecuritization.

This does not mean that we need to rid the field of (de)securitization studies. Rather, we ought to retain the concept of (de)securitization as a useful analytic construct—as “a theoretical tool of analysis”—that draws our attention to a ubiquitous phenomenon.⁹² This phenomenon, however, can have varying effects that we need not imbue with any inherent moral valence *ex ante*. So long as political communities exist, we can expect there to be debate over what constitutes a threat to their security, and academics can draw on securitization theory to chasten public discourse that is not sensitive to the “equally political” nature of both securitizing and desecuritizing moves.⁹³ We need not “impose moral certitude where there often is none,” but we

⁹² Taureck, ‘Securitization Theory and Securitization Studies,’ 55.

⁹³ Hansen, ‘Reconstructing Desecuritisation,’ 531. Van Rythoven for example, explores contemporary politics in Canada in which racialized justifications for securitizing Indigenous protest movements have become less publicly tenable. Nonetheless, he argues, state coercion remains central to that settler colonial relationship even as politicians “distance” themselves from overtly racialized constructions thereof: “strategies of distancing create opportunities for actors to feign the appearance of racial sensitivity while at the same time enabling, or at least tolerating, racialized constructions of threats through less visible avenues.” Eric Van Rythoven, ‘A Feeling of Unease: Distance, Emotion, and Securitizing Indigenous Protest in Canada,’ *International Political Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2021): 251–71, 266. In writing about the politics of Indigenous “recognition” in Canada, Coulthard is similarly interested in the ways this allows politicians to make coercion less visible. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.

can use the theoretical tools available to us to inform public debate when states seek to use the rhetoric of “security” to enact genocidal or otherwise troubling policies.⁹⁴

Finally, there is more work to be done on the relationship between (de)securitization and settler colonialism. While I have used settler colonial processes in the United States to argue that desecuritization can involve practices of domination in the same way that securitization can, this is certainly not the only context in which a government has used coercion to make a once-foreign population part of its domestic sphere. Indeed, others have made similar arguments to the effect that European colonization in the Americas and elsewhere relied on a process of this sort to incorporate the Indigenous “Other” into the domestic sphere.⁹⁵ “Perhaps better than any other measure, the perfection of an advanced colonial system of domination is signaled by its capacity to (re)make its Others in ways consistent with its own logics rather than theirs.”⁹⁶ Such processes have occurred in many other times and places, including the Russian expansion into Central Asia—a long series of events shaped by “prejudices, paranoia and anxieties about prestige” among Tsarist Russia’s elites.⁹⁷ Imperial and modern Chinese governments have treated “the Uyghurs and other local Turkic people as fundamentally different from and inferior to the dominant Han population and, thus, incapable of either becoming equals to the Han or of even knowing how best to care for themselves”.⁹⁸ On the other hand, Indigenous peoples have made

⁹⁴ Van Rythoven, ‘The Securitization Dilemma,’ 488; Adrian Gallagher, ‘To Name and Shame or Not, and If So, How? A Pragmatic Analysis of Naming and Shaming the Chinese Government over Mass Atrocity Crimes against the Uyghurs and Other Muslim Minorities in Xinjiang,’ *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 1-16.

⁹⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999 [1982]); Mark Pearcey, *The Exclusions of Civilization: Indigenous Peoples in the Story of International Society* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁹⁶ Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places*, 80.

⁹⁷ Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study of Imperial Expansion, 1814-1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 50.

⁹⁸ Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 24.

(de)securitizing moves of their own, which suggests a decolonizing possibility in these processes as well.⁹⁹ A comparative consideration of (de)securitization in settler colonial projects and Indigenous resistance movements could help us to better understand how related practices of domination differ and whether (de)securitizing moves can alternatively be used to liberatory effect.

⁹⁹ Wilfrid Greaves, 'Arctic (In)Security and Indigenous Peoples: Comparing Inuit in Canada and Sámi in Norway,' *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 6 (2016): 461–80.