Swashbuckling Criminals and Border Bandits: Fighting Vice in North America’s Borderlands, 1945-1960

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Drug smuggling and vice along the US-Mexico and US-Canada borders were topics of much public debate during the period following World War II. This article examines the ways in which media debates, pop culture images, and federal enforcement policies towards transnational drug smuggling overlapped in the North American borderlands. In both Canada and the United States, public discourse and federal policy blamed drug trafficking on racial outsiders and Communists, framing border cities as the first line of contact between heroic enforcement officers and dangerous transnational criminals. Blaming the “drug problem” on dangerous others, though, sometimes hampered cross-border alliances between local officials, making it difficult to enforce anti-drug policies across national lines. Ultimately, by analysing the US-Mexico and US-Canadian borders in relation to one another, we gain new insight into the ideologies that united North American drug policies in the postwar years, as well as the ways in which modern perceptions of “bordertowns” were created by Cold War anxieties about transnational crime and vice.

La contrebande de stupéfiants et la criminalité le long des frontières entre le Mexique, les États-Unis et le Canada ont fait couler beaucoup d’encre après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le présent article examine les recoupements au niveau des débats dans les médias, des images populaires et des politiques fédérales visant à contrer le trafic de drogues transnational dans les zones frontalières nord-américaines. Au Canada comme aux États-Unis, l’opinion publique tout autant que les politiques fédérales ont blâmé les étrangers et les communistes pour le trafic de stupéfiants et transformé les villes frontalières en foyers de rencontre entre héroïques agents d’exécution de la loi et redoutables criminels transnationaux. Or, le fait de rejeter le « problème de la drogue » sur l’étranger dangereux a parfois nui aux alliances transfrontalières entre fonctionnaires

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ON JANUARY 5, 1952 a front-page Washington Post article reported on a nationwide crackdown on narcotics trafficking in the United States designed to put at least 500 peddlers behind bars in what was termed “the greatest criminal roundup in the Nation’s history.” “The raids stretched from Canada to Mexico,” the paper reported, and included border cities like Buffalo, New York—a “key gateway” to the drug market in Canada—as well “as a scattering of cities in Texas and New Mexico near the southern border.” In this massive federal raid, American authorities attempted to “break the backbone” of the illegal drug trade that, by the early postwar period, stretched across North American borders and beyond. While the scope of this investigation was exceptional, its goals and the publicity it received were not. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, national publications in the United States and Canada regularly printed stories about international drug smuggling rings that used the shared border as a way to sneak illegal drugs into the country. The porousness of the national line, and the gall of the criminal underworld that congregated around it, led Americans and Canadians to worry that these “swashbuckling criminals” were increasingly making life difficult for federal authorities and dangerous for law-abiding citizens.1

As the Washington Post article suggests, during the late 1940s and 1950s, the issues of illegal drug smuggling and crime along the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders were hotly debated in the public arena. By examining media and pop culture narratives on the issue of drug trafficking, as well as federal investigations into the “drug problem” in the United States and Canada, this article explores the cultural meanings of anti-drug discourses in the postwar environment. In publications ranging from nationally circulated papers like the New York Times and the Globe and Mail to local papers like the Windsor Daily Star and the Arizona Republic, Canadians and Americans regularly read about drug traffickers and crime syndicates bringing large quantities of narcotics into North America. Blaming the smuggling problem on the rise of organized crime and Communist conspiracies from abroad, these stories presented an image of racial and ethnic others subverting national laws and sneaking across North American borders. Within this formulation, bordertowns along the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders emerged as the front lines in the fight between heroic federal officials and nefarious villains. Contemporary media and pop culture images portrayed bordertowns as vice towns, where the forces of good and evil collided and where otherwise good citizens came into daily contact with dangerous outsiders.

If the domestic drug problem was a result of global criminals and porous borders, Americans and Canadians began to wonder what their governments were doing to protect citizens. In 1955, the American and Canadian federal governments took up this question when both formed special senate committees to investigate the drug problem. These highly publicized investigations served to reinforce popular perceptions that the drug problem was largely caused by dangerous outsiders. Through their testimonies before committees, officials like the heads of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and immigration and customs departments reaffirmed the image of the heroic federal official fighting racial and ethnic others at each nation’s boundaries. By focusing on a shared prohibitionist ideology, federal officials also worked hard to demonstrate that they were in fact in control of the drug problem and were effectively working together with neighbouring nations to enforce stringent drug policies. At a time when the Canadian and American governments were attempting to project a unified front in the fight against Communism and other subversive forces, fighting vice networks was about more than simply eliminating a particular illegal activity. It was also a way for the federal governments to enact what Kenneth Meier terms “morality politics,” in which federal officials asserted themselves as the proper authorities to define productive citizenship and protect their nations’ boundaries against dangerous interlopers.

Yet a closer look at the complex representations of bordertowns and border enforcement in the senate committee debates also highlights the contradictions inherent in attempting to control spaces that operate simultaneously as barriers and as connecting points. While the simplistic dualism of “heroes” and “villains” sometimes enabled federal enforcement officials in the United States, Canada, and Mexico to work together to fight an identifiable “other” (such as a member of the Mafia importing heroin across national lines), it also often led local enforcement officers to blame the trafficking problem on the lax policies of their neighbours. American customs and border agents publicly accused the Mexican government of failing to stop the flow of drugs out of Mexico, while Canadian law enforcement officers likewise complained about the influx of drugs from their American neighbours to the south. Despite lofty attempts to present a unified prohibitionist front in the fight against cross-border smuggling and crime at the federal level, then, the realities of life in border cities often blurred the line between “good guys” and “bad guys” that was so central to postwar anti-vice rhetoric. Ultimately, the exclusive definitions of citizenship that allowed the public and government officials to blame vice and illicit cross-border activities on dangerous “others”

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also at times undermined the effectiveness of nation-building projects, diplomacy, and border enforcement in the postwar years.

**Public Concerns: Setting the Context for the 1955 Senate Committees**
While anti-drug discourses were not unique to the postwar period and indeed have a long genealogy in North American history, the postwar environment shaped public perceptions of illegal drugs and drug users in key ways. Growing fears over two international conspiracies—the Mafia and Communism—helped to transform national anti-drug narratives into global struggles against much larger sinister forces. This transformation was bolstered by high-ranking federal officials who stressed the need to remain vigilant against the infiltration of these menacing forces into North American society. Organizations like the FBN and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), under the direction of Harry Anslinger and Herbert Hoover respectively, misleadingly depicted both the Mafia and Communism as coherent and centralized international conspiracies, arguing that they were the two most dangerous threats facing North American society. Their claims were reinforced by several government investigations into the growing power of organized crime and its negative effects on North American life. The most publicized hearing was the Special Senate Committee to Investigate Organized Crime, or the Kefauver Committee as its came to be known. These televised hearings, which took place over the course of 1950, were watched by millions of Americans and became a useful tool in mobilizing the public against organized crime. The hearings portrayed figures like New York’s Charles “Lucky” Luciano and Detroit’s Joseph Zerilli, in contrast to the street thugs of the Prohibition Era, as sophisticated individuals whose tactics had evolved to allow them to blend in with corporate leaders and use legitimate businesses and unions as fronts for their illegal activities.

Newspapers, magazines, films, and television shows, drawing on “evidence” provided by law enforcement officials and politicians, created sensational stories about the connection between the illegal drug trade and transnational syndicates. Anslinger and other FBN agents collaborated with journalists who printed stories based solely on the information they received from the enforcement officers. They regularly leaked stories about their agents standing bravely against the Mafia and the People’s Republic of China, suggesting that the objective of both was to speed up the moral degeneration of the American people through the spread of drug

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6 Between 1945 and 1980, there were at least five presidential and congressional commissions formed in the United States and at least six provincial or federal commissions in Canada that studied the problem of organized crime. See Stephen Schneider, *Iced: The Story of Organized Crime in Canada* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley and Sons, 200), p. 227.
Similarly, national publications in Canada printed stories of large-scale syndicates trafficking dope across the national border and subsequently harming thousands of Canadian citizens. “The individual racketeer has gone,” one 1954 Maclean’s Magazine article reported, “and the traffic is controlled today by ‘syndicates’ headed by [men who are] clever, suave, outwardly well-mannered, but inwardly as vicious and dangerous as the old-time gangster.”

Widely circulated media representations of the Italian mobster shaped public perceptions of the clever and cunning, yet extremely dangerous drug trafficker. One article, written by investigative reporter Drew Pearson in 1950 and reprinted in newspapers across the country, explained to the American public, “A total of 50 men control most of the big rackets in the United States. All are members of the mysterious Mafia, and all but one are either Italian-born or of Italo-American descent... Like a plate of spaghetti the connections of the Mafia members are tangled and twined together.” Similarly, a Chicago Defender article provided a brief history of the organization, describing its transition over time from a group of Sicilians forming an underground economy in the eighteenth century to a sophisticated organization that used violence and intimidation to infiltrate legitimate businesses and unions across North America. According to the article, ethnicity and blood lines were key, with pedigree “being handed down from father to son in the strict baronial manner.” “Essentially,” the Mafia was “just one big law-breaking family.” Contemporary reports likewise noted that this violent, patriarchal “family” controlled the narcotics traffic in North America by using lower-level peddlers to do the actual work of moving the illegal products. The higher-ups rarely got their hands dirty, instead relying on a series of mid-level dealers who pushed drugs in designated urban neighbourhoods, especially among racially segregated African American and Latino communities. As a result, federal officials had to use increasingly sophisticated tactics to pin narcotics, racketeering, or prostitution charges on them.

The danger of the white ethnic mobster could only be matched by that presented by Chinese Communists, who—according to the media—trafficked dope into North American cities as part of an agenda designed to undermine the moral and physical health of citizens. The association between racial “others” and illicit drug use was not new to the postwar period; indeed, anti-drug movements had a long tradition of blaming the rise in drug addiction on particular racial or ethnic groups, often in the service of larger political agendas. This long history...

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9 Woodiwiss, Organized Crime, pp. 244-245.
12 “Says Mafia is Just One Big Family,” The Chicago Defender, July 19, 1958, p. 11.
of associating men of Chinese descent with opium use and other forms of vice in fact lent credence to the argument that Chinatowns were hotbeds of both drug use and Communist subversion in the postwar years. One Spokane Daily Chronicle article, for example, told the story of Pon Wai, a “smiling 64-year-old operator of the Fragrant Flower Garden shop in San Francisco’s Chinatown,” who “was peddling the white death called heroin.” The article explained that “day after day” the FBN had watched the florist, whom they suspected of drug trafficking, in an effort to ascertain how he was moving his illegal products. When a search of one of Pon Wai’s messengers revealed that he was smuggling “pure heroin” in green capsules attached to the stems of roses, the FBN agents finally had the evidence needed to arrest the florist and eight of his messengers on smuggling charges. Similarly, a Saskatoon Star-Phoenix report described a bust of a smuggling ring in Vancouver’s Chinatown that uncovered a sophisticated network of individuals illegally bringing jade, diamonds, and opium into Canada from China. “In Market Alley, a dingy section of Vancouver’s Chinatown, with its rabbit-warren dwellings,” the article explained, “law enforcement agencies swooped down to uncover the existence of the ring after months of intensive investigations. The officers had to battle their way down the alley, finally overpowering four Chinese armed with meat cleavers who guarded a house doorway, leading to the Vancouver headquarters of the ring.” In these media narratives, federal agents emerged victorious over smugglers who used sophisticated and violent tactics to evade arrest.

As the power of these global drug networks increased, postwar media narratives began to report on cities along the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders, framing them as the first sites of contact between transnational smugglers and vulnerable citizens. In the United States, national discussions about bordertowns tended to centre on Mexico, due in part to the growing amount of heroin and marijuana being imported from that country. Yet images of Mexican bordertowns were also rooted in a longer history in which Americans perceived the border as a racialized space that enabled criminality and violence. As Thomas Bender argues, the notion of bandidos and fugitives crossing the national line has been central to American perceptions of Mexico since at least the mid-nineteenth century. In the postwar years, public panics over illegal immigration likewise continued to fuel American perceptions that the US-Mexico border enabled lawlessness. Large-scale immigration enforcement efforts, most significantly “Operation Wetback” in 1954, were highly publicized and had the effect of bolstering perceptions that


countless illegal immigrants were pouring across the border on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{20} Newspapers often explicitly linked the “illegal Mexican aliens” with vice problems in American cities. As one report explained, “Because these people live outside the law ... they have become victims of lawless elements in Southern California where dope and prostitution rings are causing serious local problems.”\textsuperscript{21}

American newspapers regularly described Mexican bordertowns as lawless places whose location next to large American markets enabled extensive vice industries to flourish. One \textit{Milwaukee Sentinel} article described Baja California as “the gate to hell.” The article explained that the city’s “gaudy night clubs and half hidden dives attract Americans in droves. Tourist dollars spent on lurid pastimes—and on bullfights and horse and dog racing—provide the border population with just about its only income.” In a city with only 100,000 residents, the article maintained, there were as many as 8,000 prostitutes. “Their customers were Americans—’who come here every time they need drugs, easy women, or to satisfy whatever insane desire they may have.’”\textsuperscript{22} The ease with which Americans could travel back and forth between American cities and Mexican bordertowns was central to this problem. As a \textit{Los Angeles Times} article explained, many Americans were “only a hop, skip, and a fix away from pushers in [towns like] Tijuana.”\textsuperscript{23}

The notion of the wide-open bordertown likewise shaped public perceptions of cities along the northern border. A description of Windsor, Ontario, painted the city as a gateway to hell, where even “the devil himself lack[ed] the persistency, defiance, and outright gall of bordello and bootleg operators” who profited from their position along the national line. In these narratives, northern bordertowns like Windsor, Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Toronto, and Detroit also functioned as fluid spaces that united the central tropes of the postwar drug panic—race, mobility, and the power of organized syndicates. As one \textit{Maclean’s Magazine} article explained to its readers, the headquarters of the “underworld lords” in Canada was “said to be in Toronto, hooked up with supply lines passing from Mexico through New York and Minneapolis. In boom years, their transactions have run


\textsuperscript{22} “Baja California Offers Sun, Fun,” \textit{Milwaukee Sentinel}, November 24, 1958, p. 8. See also “Fictional Picture of Mexico as Crime Sanctuary False—Unless You’re Mexican,” \textit{Ocala Star-Banner}, May 1, 1955, p. 3.

Papers regularly reported coordinated anti-drug efforts between American and Canadian officials, such as the 1959 sting that netted criminals from Montreal to New York and constituted the “biggest criminal narcotics case in Canadian history.” Others focused on small-scale smugglers who attempted to sneak by customs officials with smaller quantities of illegal drugs. Such was the case of Italian-Canadian Giuseppe Indelicato of Windsor, who tried to bring heroin across the Detroit-Windsor border by claiming it was cake frosting. In this instance, the seemingly innocent cross-border tourist actually turned out to be carrying over $300,000 worth of heroin.

Contemporary publications also stressed the interconnected nature of the drug trade between Canada, the United States, and Mexico, a development aided by the sophisticated organization of crime syndicates and the porousness of the national lines. These stories explained that nefarious traffickers often used the legal divide that separated border cities as a way to evade arrest. As one South Carolina newspaper warned, “Good Neighbor Canada will wake up any day [now] with as hard a headache as ours, over a national dope and crime scandal.” Claiming that cities across Canada were seeing a rise in drug use, especially among young people, the author stated that the problem was caused by the extensive smuggling networks that successfully brought heroin into Canada from either Mexico or the “Orient.” “The reason is,” the article explained, “the executive (mobster controlled) work of the Canadian underworld is done in Detroit and Buffalo, which are beyond the jurisdiction of the Mounties and other law enforcement agencies north of the border. And the parallel executive affairs for much of Buffalo, Detroit, and other nefarious traffic are headquartered in Canada, beyond the jurisdiction of the US Federal and other policing.” Traffickers “shrewdly operated in this fashion,” according to the author, “so that books, witnesses, collateral data, etc. can’t be subpoenaed on either side of the line.” In this way, sophisticated drug networks used the legal divides separating the cities along the borders as a way to evade detection and arrest, subsequently opening up a relatively free flow of illegal goods across North America and beyond.

By the late 1940s, accounts of vice and crime along the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders also emerged in popular forms of entertainment, including films and television shows. Like larger media narratives, films presented the issue of drug smuggling as a battle between heroic male officers and nefarious drug traffickers, wherein the former struggled to protect innocent citizens (usually white female protagonists) from the latter. The 1949 film *Johnny Stool Pigeon* follows the story of FBN agent George Morton and convicted felon Johnny Evans as they go undercover to expose a heroin smuggling ring. The unlikely duo track the smugglers from San Francisco north across the Canadian border to Vancouver, then back south across the Mexican border to Nogales. By contrasting the cold

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27 “What Some Guys Do for Publicity” Jack Lait (*Herald-Journal* Sept. 12, 1951 p. 6)
northern frontier city of Vancouver with the rugged, wide-open spaces of Tucson and Nogales, the film depicts the expansive transnational networks through which smugglers operated. The white-ethnic traffickers in Vancouver work in tandem with the Mexican smugglers in Arizona, and both use seemingly legitimate nightclubs, tourist resorts, and import/export businesses to hide their shady transactions. Ultimately, though, these operations are no match for the “skill, intelligence, and courage” displayed by narcotics and customs officers. In the end, the officers succeed in foiling the smugglers’ plans to kill Agent Morton in Nogales and arrest them before they can flee their Tucson hideout. The final narration assures audiences, “Within a matter of hours the greatest international narcotics ring since the war was stopped cold before it ever got started. In simultaneous raids Martinez and his gang were rounded up by Mexican authorities, and 1700 miles away in Vancouver, British Colombia, the McCannis mob was taken into custody.”

Johnny Stool Pigeon thus simultaneously portrays the very real dangers posed by transnational drug smugglers while reinforcing the power and moral authority of federal officers, who in the end are able to protect the North American public from the wiles of these shady individuals.

Similarly, Orson Welles’s 1959 film Touch of Evil begins with the famous shot of its main characters Mike and Susan Vargas crossing the border from Mexico into the United States. The Mexican side is portrayed as a seedy, yet bustling border city, replete with signs reading “Girls, Girls, Girls,” brothels run by old-time madams, and saloons full of drunken Americans. Early in the film, Vargas explains to his wife that the lawlessness she is witnessing in the Mexican bordertown is a result of its position along the national line, and not indicative of the rest of the country. As he reminds her, “This isn’t the real Mexico. You know that. All border towns bring out the worst in a country.” Yet the film also reinforces racial stereotypes that contrast the cunning and evil Mexican criminals with the innocent, white female protagonist. Several characters are central to cultural stereotypes of postwar bordertowns: virile and shady Mexican gangsters, American tourists enjoying the vice districts, and upstanding enforcement authorities. Much like contemporary media reports, Touch of Evil and Johnny Stool Pigeon portray bordertowns as spaces that enable lawlessness and vice and emphasize the mobility of dangerous transnational criminals who attempt to elude federal authorities by sneaking across national boundary lines. Federal agents emerge as the heroes, while the Mexican gangsters are portrayed as cunning and devious members of expansive organized syndicates.

Two television shows likewise capitalized on, and helped to perpetuate, North Americans’ fascination with cross-border crime in the postwar years. In 1959, CBS released a series called Border Patrol. As the name suggests, it follows the exploits of a fictitious deputy chief of the Border Patrol, Don Jagger, as he crosses between the US-Mexico and US-Canada borders in search of dope dealers, illegal

29 Touch of Evil, DVD, directed by Orson Welles, Universal International Pictures, Universal City, CA, 1959.
immigrants, gun runners, and various other criminals. The show, which only aired for one season, was overshadowed by *The Untouchables*, an immensely popular TV series that also debuted that year. Set in Prohibition-era Chicago, it follows Special Agent Elliot Ness and his investigative team as they attempt to fight organized crime and vice. Episodes like “The Canada Run,” “Mexican Stake Out,” and “The White Slavers” brought viewers into the worlds of dangerous criminals who ran cross-border enterprises based on drugs, bootleg liquor, numbers running, and prostitution. They allowed North American viewers to enter the seedy bars, brothels, gambling dens, and other illicit spaces that made up the underworld, all from the comfort of their own homes. Viewers were also assured that, whether on the hunt for Mexican Brown heroin or Canadian Gold whiskey, the protagonists of these shows would continue to emerge successful and to foil the nefarious intentions of the global criminals working in border cities.

**The 1955 Senate Committees: Projecting Consensus at the Federal Level**

The consistent outpouring of news stories, magazine articles, television shows, and films depicting a growing drug problem had convinced many North Americans that something needed to be done to stop it. Within this context, the Canadian and American federal governments decided to assess the actual extent of the drug problem and how they could eliminate the social evil from their respective nations. In 1955, the senates in both countries established special committees designed to do just that. As the largest federal investigations into illegal narcotics in the postwar years, these massive undertakings were conducted over the course of several months and in over fifteen major North American cities—from Montreal to Vancouver and New York to Los Angeles. The hearings were well publicized, and North Americans could read highlights from the hearings as the venue moved from city to city.

The senate committees purported to take a comprehensive approach to the drug problem, one that would help to cut through the escalating public rhetoric, which, in the words of one RCMP officer, “favored sensationalism rather than accuracy.” They heard testimonies from a variety of witnesses on the extent and nature of the drug problem, including breakdowns by city, state, and province. The senators also reviewed the current law to determine what policies were working and what changes needed to be made. Overall, as one Canadian official explained, the hearings were designed to provide “sober, factual, and objective examinations.” The use of the word sober here is telling. Despite their professed “balanced approach,” the committees collected their information in large part from legal authorities and federal enforcement officers who were tasked with enforcing anti-drug laws and with punishing users and sellers on a daily basis. Rather than countering popular rhetoric that framed drug traffickers and addicts as dangerous and unwanted outsiders, these supposedly neutral investigations in fact served to

30 For a brief summary of the show’s episodes, see http://www.episodewworld.com/show/Border_Patrol/season=all/english/plotguide.
reinforce the perception that upstanding federal officials were needed to fight a growing problem across North America.\textsuperscript{32}

Given the global nature of the drug trade, as well as the extensive media coverage of organized crime and transnational smugglers in both countries, it is not surprising that the hearings discussed their nations’ borders in detail. The senators heard testimonies from a wide variety of individuals about where heroin was produced, how it was imported, and who was in charge of these activities. Canadian and American law enforcement officials generally agreed on the sources of illicit narcotics, which, according to their testimonies, were produced externally in Mexico, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and China and trafficked through various trade routes, usually through European countries like France and Italy or Asian trade routes based in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{33} There was some evidence that the main sources of heroin had shifted from the Middle East in the early postwar period to mainland China by the mid-1950s, in part the result of the opening of global trade routes following the war. In the case of marijuana, supplies tended to originate in Mexico and were smuggled across the border and, occasionally, up to Canada.\textsuperscript{34}

While drug networks were expansive and stretched across many different countries, federal officials paid particular attention to imports from Communist China. Linking these imports to larger sinister political objectives, the committees heard a wide range of evidence that China was attempting to sneak heroin into North America as a way to destroy its free and prosperous nations from the inside.\textsuperscript{35} For example, in his testimony before the US Senate Committee, Anslinger explained that a recent increase in the importation of potent heroin on the west coast, coming from Communist China, had already been responsible for the death of several users across the country. The Chinese government was purposefully trying to harm North American citizens, according to his testimony, and the problem would continue to grow over the coming years if the federal government failed to act swiftly.\textsuperscript{36} Senator Daniel’s remarks before the hearings in Texas stated the problem more bluntly: “[Drug addiction] is a vicious thing, it is a cancer on our society. We have to do something to stop this drug traffic if we want to save our boys and girls and communities and country. It is tied into subversion. Red China is pushing this heroin here.”\textsuperscript{37} The image of Chinese Communists threatening the safety of the nation’s children fit well with the villain/hero binary because it enabled federal officials to frame the fight against drug trafficking as part of a larger moral battle between “good guys” and “bad guys,” between harmful outsiders and innocent citizens.\textsuperscript{38} As Senator Daniel asked, “I don’t know of any way that they can destroy


\textsuperscript{33} Canada, \textit{Proceedings of the Special Committee}, p. 63.


\textsuperscript{35} Musto, \textit{The American Disease}, p. 231.

\textsuperscript{36} United States, \textit{Illicit Narcotics Traffic}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 3410.

a country more quietly, more cunningly, than to get thousands of people on heroin, do you?”

With this emphasis on the moral and political threat posed by external producers of the heroin, the senators were especially concerned with the actual process of smuggling and how criminals moved this material out of the country of origin and into North American markets. According to W. H. Mulligan, Chief Constable of Vancouver, traffickers created crafty and effective ways to smuggle drugs across both land and sea borders. He stated that the heroin that arrived in Vancouver was either transported on vessels from Asia or smuggled up from cities in the eastern United States and brought across Canada by “automobiles, trains, planes, and by mail.” As he explained, “there are numerous ways, depending on the ingenuity of the distributor. Drugs are often sent through the mail in small parcels, in a talcum powder tin, or hidden in other types of cosmetics; it may be in rubber containers in the gas tank of a car; it may be secreted in the false bottom of a suitcase or other type of baggage.”

Similarly, Commissioner Nicholson of the RCMP testified that generally drugs were smuggled into major American port cities, then brought north across the US-Canada border. He brought several exhibits to show the senators how this was accomplished, including a one kilo tin can, a religious book with the inside cut out, a Chinese magazine similarly cut out, and a shoe with a hollow heel. Significantly, his choices of a religious book and a Chinese magazine are telling—they reinforced both the immoral nature of the drug trade and the racialized images of Chinese Communists attempting to harm Canadian nationals. Further, all of these products could easily be smuggled in automobiles, thereby evading detection by even careful border inspectors.

The ease with which people could smuggle drugs across the US-Canada and US-Mexico borders raised the question of how Canadian, American, and Mexican officials were working to stem this flow. Senior enforcement officials attempted to shed light on this question by explaining the complex web of agencies involved in anti-trafficking efforts. Though the enforcement of prohibition policies was officially under the purview of the RCMP and the FBN, immigration and customs authorities were often considered the first line of defence in narcotics cases. As General J. M. Swing, the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization, explained to the US Senate Committee, “In performance of their regular duties [immigration officers] are called upon to make still watches at known crossing points along the international boundary; they must inspect pedestrian traffic, automobiles, rail, and air traffic travelling inland from the border—thus, they normally come into contact with many persons of questionable character.” Customs officials were likewise trained to identify such “questionable characters.”

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40 Canada, Proceedings of the Special Committee, p. 63.
41 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
42 According to the US Commissioner of Customs, of the 2,508 customs inspectors on duty in 1955, 173 of them focused on detailed cases that included narcotics investigations. Further, over 1,200 immigration officers were also sworn in as customs officers, which gave them more legal authority to intervene in narcotics cases, including the “very broad” search and seizure laws under section 1581 of the US Code (United States, Illicit Narcotics Traffic, p. 148).
large portion of American resources and attention went to the Mexican border since it was a significant source of drug importation—of both marijuana grown in Mexico and heroin smuggled from the East. Yet the United States also had officers regularly stationed in Canada who worked closely with Canadian officials to reduce illegal smuggling. This included a “flying squad” of six plain-clothed officers who patrolled the Great Lakes region to detect smugglers. The RCMP also had a liaison officer stationed in Washington, DC, who regularly met with “all enforcement agencies in the United States,” including meeting frequently with the FBN on “joint problems.”

Canadian and American federal officials were quick to praise the congenial relationship between their respective enforcement officers, promoting their mutual dedication to drug prohibition as a sign of close diplomatic ties. This relationship was seen as early as the opening day of the hearings, when American senators warmly welcomed the chairman of the Canadian Senate Committee and its chief counsel. The Canadian senator was asked to provide the first comments before the US Senate Committee. He spoke of the significance of the drug problem, the common situation facing Canada and the United States and the appreciation he felt for being invited to work with the American senators. The language of affection and close neighbourly ties continued throughout both hearings. For example, in his description of the various agencies involved in enforcing narcotics legislation in Canada, the head of the RCMP claimed that it “would be discourteous if I did not mention as well the close link we have with the US Bureau of Narcotics and the great help we get from that agency. We get the very best type of help from that Bureau.”

Similarly, McClellan of the RCMP asserted that “the R.C.M. Police have been most fortunate in the quality of the co-operation which we receive from the United States Bureau of Narcotics, and in particular, the Agents of that Bureau at the border points” throughout Southern Ontario.

Several high-level American officials likewise praised the cooperation they received from Mexican authorities, arguing that what was once a troubled relationship had much improved by the postwar years. As the head of the FBN explained, “There was a time when there were gun battles along the border there among the smugglers and the enforcement officers....” Thanks to close cooperation, this was no longer the case. Indeed, Anslinger criticized newspapers in American border states for blaming the drug problem on Mexican officials, arguing instead that they deserved praise for their ability to reduce drug-related crime over the course of the previous decade. Similarly, the US Commissioner of Customs described the cooperation his agency received from Mexico as “excellent.” “I was tremendously impressed,” he said, “with the relations between our customs men, our forces there, and the Mexico police authorities.... Our reports from Mexico City are very voluminous and very wonderful, in my opinion. I think

that is probably our best ... representation abroad.” Indeed, the highest officials in Mexico, including the Minister of Health, the Attorney General, and President Ruiz Cortines all publicly supported enforcement efforts, and it was “because of their support that [the FBN was] able to get some of the big gangsters...”

To demonstrate a united front, senior enforcement officials provided numerous examples of specific cases in which cross-border interaction had facilitated drug-related busts and arrests of smugglers operating across the American, Canadian, and Mexican borders. One case was that of George Mallock, described by American customs officials as “a very bad egg.” He and his brother John Mallock had been key players in the drug trafficking business in Canada in the late 1940s and early 1950s. George was eventually arrested for a drug offence in Vancouver, but he skipped bail and hid from authorities for three years. In 1955, he decided to cross the US-Canada border and head for Mexico to avoid the warrant out for his arrest. American and Mexican authorities were alerted to his whereabouts and eventually found him in Mexico City. There, Mexican officials arrested George and extradited him to Canada, where he was sentenced to 27.5 years in a Canadian prison. His brother John was not so lucky and was killed by the Mexican authorities while trying to escape.

One of the most impressive examples of inter-agency cooperation led to the arrest of Antoine D’Agostino, “considered by international law enforcement authorities as one of the most important international narcotics violators.” In 1937, D’Agostino moved from his native Bone, Algeria, to Marseilles, France, where he began working with a group of notorious Corsican criminals who specialized in narcotics, international jewellery robberies, counterfeiting, and gold smuggling. In 1948, he fled his death penalty conviction in Toulouse (after being charged with treason for supplying French troops with heroin during the war) and subsequently began a large smuggling network out of Montreal, Quebec. Once busted by Canadian authorities, D’Agostino left Canada and headed for New York City, where he joined another gang of Corsicans. After the FBN cracked down on this smuggling network, D’Agostino went underground. Though his whereabouts were unknown between 1951 and 1953, he re-surfaced in Mexico City, where he was arrested on March 7, 1955, and sent back to New York City to face narcotics charges. Canada likewise filed extradition charges to bring D’Agostino back to Montreal, after which the French government indicated that they would extradite him for execution upon termination of the charges in the United States and Canada. In what was a truly international effort, federal authorities working in Canada, the United States, and Mexico were able to track down this notorious and dangerous drug trafficker and subsequently bring him to justice.

Much like the media narratives and pop culture representations of cross-border drug smuggling, the testimonies of federal officials served the dual purpose of delineating particular images of dangerous drug smugglers and presenting federal enforcement officers as the heroes needed to fight them. Federal officials discussed

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49 Ibid., p. 108.
50 Ibid., pp. 707-708.
51 Ibid., p. 81.
the problem of organized syndicates and Communist subversion, framing anti-trafficking efforts as a struggle between nefarious outsiders and upstanding enforcement officers. The highly public hearings of the senate committees provided an ideal platform for federal officials to promote their prohibitionist agendas and to boast about their successful sophisticated tactics. For agencies whose operating budgets depended on both a perceived need for their services and a positive success rate, projecting images of cross-border cooperation and success was clearly important. Indeed, aligning itself with the political objectives of the Cold War enabled the FBN to increase its operating budget from $1.6 million in 1950 to $4 million in 1959. The public senate committee hearings played no small role in helping such agencies build their political capital.

Officials’ testimonies before the committees, though, also had broader implications for definitions of citizenship in the postwar years. By perpetuating images of heroes and villains along the border, American and Canadian officials were engaging in a discourse of state-making that drew a line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and between desirable and undesirable community members. Situating these lines within a prohibitionist framework, which emphasized criminalization over treatment, federal agents reinforced racialized images of dangerous outsiders and vulnerable citizens to solidify their agencies’ importance within the global struggle against Communism. By recounting the successful arrests of smugglers like George Mallock and Antoine D’Agostino, federal enforcement officers also provided tangible evidence that a prohibitionist agenda could in fact be shared by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. In this way, federal enforcement officers presented their mission not only as stopping the spread of drug trafficking and addiction, but also as facilitating close diplomatic ties with their neighbours, whom they saw as integral to their ability to be successful in their fight against the global drug trade. As their testimonies made clear, the fight against drugs was truly a global one, and therefore winning the war would ultimately depend on the ability of Canada and the United States to protect their boundaries and maintain authority in the fluid spaces of the borderlands.

**The Villain/Hero Binary and the Realities of Policing on the Border**

While stories of federal agents taking down key members of the underworld made for good publicity and helped project a positive image of federal enforcement agencies at the senate investigations, they often failed to reflect the daily experiences of many officials tasked with enforcing the national line. Often the image of cross-border cooperation and consensus was undermined by the testimonies of law enforcement officers working on the ground in border cities. Ironically, the very villain/hero binary embedded in anti-drug rhetoric facilitated this divide between federal objectives and local approaches. Expressing frustration with the wide-open nature of border cities and a perceived lack of cooperation coming from the governments across the line, local officers sometimes offered testimonies that proved damaging to federal diplomatic objectives. The rhetoric of prohibition

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52 Hernandez, *Migra*, p. 211.
highlighted an inherent problem: it was tricky to cultivate a close relationship with neighbouring nations while framing one’s domestic drug problem as an import from dangerous outsiders.

One of the most blatant divides between the testimonies of senior federal officials and those of officers working on the ground was the language they used to describe the law-breakers with whom they came into contact. The representations of transnational smugglers, in which the media and federal officials afforded the high-level traffickers some degree of agency, stood in stark contrast to the images of demoralized addicts, peddlers, and prostitutes with whom lower-level officers dealt on a regular basis. Rather than portraying drug users and dealers as “sophisticated” and “cunning” criminals, local police officers, border patrol agents, and immigration officials defined them as pathetic individuals who inhabited the lowest levels of society. As the Commissioner Nicholson of the RCMP vividly described, “From the standpoint of the police who see them day to day, they are a dreary lot of parasites supporting themselves ... by crime and prostitution.... They are in truth the dregs of society.”

Another RCMP officer similarly explained that drug peddlers “contribute nothing to society” but instead “prey on society in conditions of degradation, filth, and depravity.”

These morally bankrupt individuals were right at home in bordertowns, which, according to local law enforcement agents, attracted the lowest type of criminals. This was especially true, they testified, in the rough-and-tumble cities along the US-Mexico border. In the hearings held in Texas and southern California, border patrol officers, immigration inspectors, and local law enforcement officers described the situation in cities like Juarez and Tijuana, emphasizing the ease with which even the most novice tourist could find any type of illicit goods or services he or she desired. In his discussion of Juarez, a local news reporter stated that one need only head over to the “slum” area known as the Bellavista District, which was home to over fifteen establishments where one could purchase heroin. The reporter’s discussion of these “slum” areas was reinforced by photographs of city streets where Americans could easily locate heroin dealers and prostitutes. Two photos (Figures 1 and 2) show the Banos Jordan, a bathhouse run by “La Nacha,” (“the queen of the border”), a notorious trafficker and madam who had been operating out of Juarez since the 1920s. These pictures, which were accompanied by fifteen mug shots of Mexican and Chinese smugglers who operated out of the region (see the examples in Figure 3), helped to solidify racial connections between the traffickers on the Mexican border and the illicit spaces in which they operated. From the grungy streets of the Bellavista District to the bustling nightlife in Tijuana, local enforcement officers recounted stories of the lurid vice districts and illicit businesses booming in the border region. In the

54 Canada, Proceedings of the Special Committee, p. 28.
55 Ibid., p. 316.
57 Ibid., p. 3305.
words of one Texas law enforcement agent, “No question you can get [heroin] down there if you have the money; or marijuana either.”

Notions of racial and cultural difference often led American enforcement officers on the ground to criticize the way in which Mexican authorities handled the drug issue. Bernard McLeaish, a customs agent working out of Brownsville, Texas, explicitly framed his experiences along the border in the language of “us versus them,” testifying that Mexicans were culturally much more tolerant of vice than Americans. As he explained to the committee, “If you stay on the Mexican border for any length of time you will understand the Mexican philosophy is quite different from ours. What is immoral to us in the United States is not immoral to them in Mexico.” This was true, McLeaish asserted, of both the Mexican

58 Ibid., p. 2380.
people and Mexican authorities. Further, in wider public discussions, American authorities called heroin originating in Mexico “Mexican Brown heroin,” likewise creating an implicit connection between the production of the illegal substance and a perception of racial difference with their southern neighbours. The term “Mexican Brown heroin” angered Mexican authorities so much that they appealed to the United Nations to ban members from using the term at the agency’s meetings. The UN Council agreed that this placed an unfair stigma on Mexico and concluded that member countries should recognize the term as both unjustified and inaccurate.

American senators found themselves walking a fine line between soliciting feedback from local officers working on the ground and being careful not to cause further damage to the relationship between American and Mexican authorities. Indeed, the senators seemed keenly aware that any suggestion of racial or cultural differences between Mexicans and Americans before the US Senate Committee risked straining diplomatic tensions between the two nations. This is precisely what occurred after the testimony of Walter Naylor, the Chief Narcotics Division Officer for the Department of Public Safety in Texas. Naylor had blamed much of the drug problem on Mexican traffickers and on Mexican authorities from whom he received very little cooperation. He described the ease with which anyone could purchase drugs in Mexican border towns and the willingness of Mexican authorities to turn a blind eye. This problem went all the way up the chain of command, according to Naylor. He described one instance when high-ranking Mexican officials had backed out of a meeting to address this issue and refused to reschedule. In a condescending tone, Naylor claimed, “We thought we might be able to assist the Mexican Government in their problems, if they do have a problem, and we think they do. I offered the Mexican consul the use of my men to use as undercover agent ... [but w]e haven’t heard any more [from them].”

59 Ibid., p. 2818.
60 Ibid., pp. 314-315.
61 Ibid., p. 2383.
When Senator Daniel asked Naylor what he thought of the Mexican officials, and whether he received any cooperation from them, Naylor flatly responded, “No, sir.”

Much to the US Senate Committee’s frustration, Naylor’s testimony sparked outrage on the part of Mexican officials and left the American senators doing damage control. Senator Daniel brought Naylor back to testify so that he would have a chance to explain the evidence he used in making his accusations about Mexican authorities. While Naylor mainly stood by his original assertions (citing newspaper reports as his evidence that 90 per cent of the heroin in Texas came from Mexico), Senator Daniel emphatically tried to insist that the goal was not to offend Mexican officials, whom they considered to be great allies in the fight against trafficking. Yet, beneath even such conciliatory words, Daniel also struck a tone that blamed this misunderstanding on Mexican authorities, who had been invited to sit in on the hearings in Texas but had declined. “Had they been there,” he said, “... I am sure they would have known that every time anything was said about Mexico, about 10 times as much was said about our own citizens and our own people and our own laws. We have a mutual problem on the border.”

“I wish they had done like Canada and like the Mexican officials in Los Angeles, and be present and here....”

Senator Daniel’s lamentation that Mexican authorities had declined an invitation to participate in the Texas hearings reflected a larger trend in which American and Canadian authorities used their relationship as the example of sophisticated cross-border ties that Mexican authorities should work to emulate. Anslinger, for example, paternalistically suggested in his opening remarks before the US Senate Committee that “those men who are down there on the firing line” along the US-Mexico border get together for informal meetings similar to those held by officials working along the US-Canada border. He openly contrasted the violent and unpredictable nature of the southern border with the peacefulness and orderliness of the northern border, suggesting that the Mexican authorities could learn much by emulating the cooperation provided by the Canadian officials.

There was no suggestion of racial, ethnic, or cultural differences between Americans and Canadians. Instead, the world’s “longest undefended border” was once again upheld as the example of how modern states should interact with their neighbours and how they could work together to defend their mutual interests.

Yet a close examination of the testimonies of local enforcement officers working along the US-Canada border likewise suggests that they too were often frustrated with the situation with which they had to deal on a daily basis in northern border cities. Ironically, while Mexican officials were concerned with the overemphasis Americans placed on Mexico as the source of their drug problem,
Canadian authorities expressed frustration that they received too little attention from their American counterparts. Indeed, American officials spent considerably less time trying to assess the problems along the northern border. Although they interviewed both enforcement agents and former users about their experiences with smuggling along the US-Canada border, the senators did not pursue the issue with nearly as much zeal as they did when interviewing users along the southern border.\(^{67}\) There were no accompanying photographs or maps of Canadian border towns, nor did the issue of cross-border smuggling in cities like Detroit and Buffalo dominate the investigations as it did in cities like El Paso and San Diego.

The tendency of American authorities to downplay the cross-border issue along their northern border frustrated Canadian authorities. After all, the United States was Canada’s main source of heroin and marijuana in the postwar years, much as Mexico was a key supplier for the American drug market. In his testimony before the Canadian Senate Committee, George McClellan, Commander of the Ontario division of the RCMP, expressed the frustrating and, at times, hopeless situation local law enforcement agents faced when trying to curtail cross-border vice in cities like Windsor, Hamilton, and Toronto. Their proximity to major American cities and the long “undefended” border between the countries were central enforcement challenges for local agents. As McClellan explained, “there is a heavy flow of international traffic in both directions, by rail, air, and automobile. This ... free flow of traffic in accordance with the mutual trust and understanding between the two countries ... poses many problems for both Canadian and US Immigration and Customs Officials....”\(^{68}\) McClellan said that it would be completely impossible “to establish any rigid system of checking traffic without completely tying up the free movement of people and goods essential to our international commerce and tourist trade.” For McClellan, this heavy traffic, combined with the fact that “most affluent elements of the criminal underworld on the United States side reside in areas easily accessible to the Ontario and Quebec borders,” made smuggling relatively easy for traffickers and made regulation extremely difficult for Canadian officials.\(^{69}\) In his estimation, then, the mutual trust and close relationship between the United States and Canada actually made it easier for smugglers to sneak through the national line.

The veiled frustrations expressed by Canadian authorities like McClellan to the 1955 committees had erupted explicitly five years earlier, when the Kefauver Committee passed through the city of Detroit. In many ways a precursor to the expansive 1955 investigations, the Kefauver Committee’s hearings in Detroit were well publicized across Canada and raised concerns about the relationship between organized crime across the US-Canada divide. Tensions between American and Canadian officials arose in November of 1950, when a Canadian newspaper printed a story titled “Windsor Wire Service: Predict US Senate Will Rap Ontario.” The article claimed that the US Senate was going to reprimand the Ontario government’s response to vice activities and suggested that the US Senate

\(^{67}\) Ibid., pp. 75, 107, 150, 216, 1593, 2138, 2134, 4519, 4290.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 313.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., p. 312.
would take a strong-armed approach to dealing with their Canadian neighbours. This had broader implications for illegal industries in the region, it asserted, since “the same people who are involved in the gambling racketes are mixed up with narcotics and prostitution....” According to the article, “speculation by police officials here is that the Ontario Provincial Government [OPP] will receive a severe condemnation by the US Senate” and would be expected to take strong action to “clean up Windsor.”\(^{70}\)

Premier of Ontario Leslie M. Frost considered this to be a diplomatic affront and quickly contacted Kefauver to prevent a public lashing by the US Senate. Frost took this one step further, though, and used it as an opportunity to suggest that in fact American authorities had failed to do their duty to prevent cross-border vice and smuggling. In a letter sent to Kefauver on November 23, 1950, Frost defended the work of Canadian agents, blasted the lack of cooperation from American officials, and suggested further meetings between Canadian and American police forces to deal with the problem. After providing a detailed account of the approach taken by Ontario officials over the last couple of years, which involved authorities at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, Frost asserted that “the problem is international in nature.... May I draw your attention to the fact that the problems in regard to gambling and vice which we have in the Province of Ontario have their origin in the United States in nearly all cases. Our Forces here cannot effectively deal with the problem without the cooperation of the United States law enforcement agencies.” According to the premier, if the Detroit side would give the Windsor police as much cooperation as the OPP gave their American counterparts, vice in Windsor, which was “difficult if not impossible to cope with,” could be very much curtailed. Frost closed his letter by inviting Kefauver to visit the Canadian side of the border next time he was in the area, since it would “be a pleasure to meet him” and “to know we would get some real action.”\(^{71}\)

Though nothing serious came of this exchange—the Kefauver Committee did not publicly “rap” Ontario enforcement officials, and Frost and Kefauver ended their correspondence on civil terms—it does provide some insight into the frustrations that occurred between American and Canadian authorities tasked with regulating vice in cities near the national line. Though Canadian and American authorities shared similar goals and both recognized the importance of effectively policing the national border between them, each side had different priorities. Authorities in the booming metropolis of Detroit were primarily concerned with the ways in which drugs were brought into their city from other large American cities like New York and Chicago, as well as cities along the southern border. In contrast, Ontario officials were keenly aware of their position along the national line, in that American-run syndicates often enabled narcotics and other vice operations to flourish in adjacent Canadian cities. As the correspondence between Frost and Kefauver suggests, Canadian officials often felt they had little chance of curtailing vice in their own cities without the help of their neighbours to the south.


and this cooperation was not nearly as extensive as Canadians officials would have liked.

The diplomatic ruptures that occurred between Canada, the United States, and Mexico suggest that, despite lofty rhetoric on the part of federal officials, a cohesive prohibitionist agenda was extremely difficult to enact along the borders running across North America. The tendency to blame the drug problem on “others,” so prevalent in the hero/villain binary—be they racial and ethnic outsiders, lax Mexican authorities, or American criminals—profoundly shaped the perspectives of local officers working in border cities. Dealing daily with the permeability of the border, these officers rarely spoke of a comprehensive cross-border strategy in the fight against transnational crime. Instead, officers working to try to stamp out illicit, cross-border crime were keenly aware of the inefficiencies in cross-border policing tactics that made their jobs difficult. Unlike the fictional characters of Eliot Ness or George Morton, who always “got their man,” local officers often felt overwhelmed by their task of stopping smugglers across the high-volume border crossing points. As a result, prohibition policies were much more difficult to enact than federal officials let on, and inter-agency cooperation was often undermined by local officers’ tendencies to blame the drug problem on the lax efforts of seemingly lazy enforcement officers on the other side of the national line.

Conclusion
As the 1955 committees drew to a close, the senators put forward a series of recommendations on how best to address the drug problems in their respective nations. These recommendations ultimately reflected the committees’ dedication to a prohibitionist ideology that defined illegal narcotic use as immoral and drug users themselves as undesirable citizens. In the end, they both recommended increased policing, harsher sentences, and other punitive measures such as aggressive enforcement of drug-related crimes like theft and prostitution. The US Senate Committee’s recommendations were implemented the following year, in the Narcotic Control Act of 1956, which raised the minimum sentence on some drug offences to five years and allowed a jury to impose the death penalty on anyone over the age of eighteen convicted of trafficking heroin to minors.

Likewise, the Canadian Senate Committee’s recommendations were implemented in the 1961 Narcotic Control Act, which increased the maximum penalty for trafficking, possession for the purposes of trafficking, and importing and exporting from fourteen years to life. The Canadian law also enacted a mandatory minimum sentence of seven years for importing and exporting, making it the third highest minimum sentence requirement, behind only murder and treason. By the end of the postwar period, blaming social ills on unwanted outsiders clearly had very real effects on men and women involved in the drug trade. Now subject to the harshest

73 Musto, The American Disease, p. 231.
penalties enacted to date in either country, traffickers ultimately bore the brunt of 
the blame for North America’s drug problem.

Public debates played a crucial role in creating a climate in which these 
decidedly harsh penalties could be enacted at the federal level. Indeed, throughout 
the late 1940s and 1950s, news stories, pop culture representations, and well-
publicized federal hearings had effectively created links between transnational 
drug trafficking, racial minorities, and Communist subversion. Working within 
a Cold War moral framework, these disparate groups established the hero/villain 
binary, which perpetuated the notion that North Americans were increasingly 
susceptible to the dangerous wiles of unwanted outsiders. By constantly depicting 
violent confrontations between drug traffickers and law enforcement officers, these 
deeply racialized images likewise affirmed the notion that a strong enforcement 
presence was needed along the national line. Drug traffickers, mafia bosses, and 
Communist agents had to be stopped at the border, and federal officers were just 
the ones to take on this job.

Since protecting the nation was a central goal in these moral narratives, border 
cities became key battlegrounds in the war against vice and crime. Cities as disparate 
as Vancouver, Windsor, Buffalo, Juarez, and Tijuana all shared one common feature 
in postwar public debates: they were portrayed as spaces particularly susceptible 
to corruption and crime due to their positions near the national line. While we 
have become accustomed to viewing the US-Canada and US-Mexico borderlands 
as significantly different spaces, postwar rhetoric about cross-border trafficking 
demonstrates that important similarities united North Americans’ perceptions of 
cities along both borders. Emerging at a time when North Americans were both 
travelling across the borders at an unprecedented level and increasingly fearful of 
subversion from the outside, bordertowns came to represent spaces of adventure 
and danger, intrigue and fear. The profound tension between celebrating mobility 
and fearing the unwanted, polluting possibilities of cross-border interaction was 
at the heart of postwar border rhetoric. In this way, contemporary perceptions of 
bordertowns as “wide open” were shaped in important ways by Cold War moral 
politics and debates over the nature of citizenship in what many North Americans 
saw as an increasingly global world.

Finally, though the emphasis on traffickers as dangerous criminals enabled 
federal officers to push for stricter enforcement policies that would bolster the 
political importance of their respective agencies, the very success of the villain/ 
hero binary sometimes worked against their larger diplomatic objectives. An 
examination of the testimonies of local law enforcement agents before the 1955 
Senate committees highlights the contradictions inherent in trying to pin the drug 
problem on racial, ethnic, and political others, while trying to maintain close 
diplomatic ties with neighbouring nations. When Texas officers blamed the “wide 
open” nature of southern bordertowns on the supposed moral weaknesses of 
their Mexican neighbours, they made it much more difficult for federal officials 
to project a united front in the struggle against crime on the southern border. 
Likewise, though American and Canadian authorities often touted the bonds of 
friendship and shared cultural values that enabled enforcement officers to work
together across the northern border, Canadian officials were also often frustrated by the lack of attention they received from their neighbours to the south. In these moments, the rhetoric of cross-border friendship and cooperation clearly did not match the reality of enforcing prohibition policies in local border communities. The very fact that illegal drug trafficking continued across the US-Mexico and US-Canada borders despite these prohibition policies, and would actually grow substantially in the following decade, suggests that we need to be sceptical of federal proclamations about the effectiveness of anti-drug policies in the postwar era. Their inability to police the long borders that connected Canada, the United States, and Mexico demonstrates the resilience of illicit economies and their ability to adapt to local environments—especially in the bordertowns that brought North Americans together in the postwar years.