The Sequestration of Organized Crime in the US

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct the process of securitizing organized crime in the US. Overall, the process of securitization here is marked by a gradual intensification that began in the 1950s with several political committee initiatives to define organized crime in the US. The committee hearings, particularly the Kefauver Committee hearing in the early 1950s, were highly public events interspersed with intensive media reporting and excessive live TV coverage. This public attention turned an essentially technocratic event of defining organized crime by crime professionals, crime experts and politicians into a public spectacle. In the context of the committee initiatives the coalition of support grew steadily, starting with grass-roots initiatives outside the realm of formal authority in the US, until a powerful coalition of leading politicians, journalists and influential bureaucratic actors, eventually headed by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and, initially, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), could be established in the course of the 1960s. The chapter starts with a brief analysis of the political context and its processes of authorization in the US before turning to a closer examination of the language of securitizing moves in this context.

The political context in the US and its structurations of authority

To understand the political context in the US, it is important to note that organized crime was initially established in that country against the background of a structure of formal authority that was highly fragmented and dispersed. From the 19th century up until the early 20th century, the structure of US law enforcement was highly decentralized,
with most law enforcement duties being delegated to county or city officials (see Glaab and Brown, 1976). Approximately 40,000 single police units worked alongside each other without effective coordination or substantial enforcement duties at the federal level. This resulted in various perceived problems of law enforcement, which became worse with an increase in criminality and corruption in the second half of the 19th century. The developments reached a perceived crisis point in the late 19th century, with several autonomous spheres of power, private armies and political machine systems having taken root in major US cities and violent ‘class struggle’-like fights between capitalists and labour increasing the perception of an excessively anarchic early urban America.

The perception of a severe crisis in US law enforcement, and that many criminal activities had an interstate character, stirred up initiatives to reform the existing enforcement system, and states began to create their own police forces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the New Deal finally launched the first large-scale ‘war on crime’, which established ten acts against crime and expanded the authority of the Bureau of Investigation, which until then had only been an agency in the Department of Justice, doubled its budget and renamed it the FBI, these issues were initially only hesitantly dealt with at the political level, and individual states only hesitantly began to reform their enforcement systems, created their own police forces and began to address the issue of interstate cooperation to fight more professional and permanent forms of crime.1

The highly fragmented structure of authority in the US context had two main consequences for the process of securitization that followed. First, the authority of securitizing actors was not (yet) consolidated and centralized, and thus not clearly defined by any clear-cut institutional position (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, initially, neither the security bureaucracy (Bigo, 1996; 2002) nor the political leadership (Wæver, 1995) could effectively position themselves as authorities. This situation was exacerbated by significant internal disagreements within the security bureaucracy, as the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover was for a long time strictly opposed to the argument that organized crime existed in the US (see Smith, 1975: 187).

Thus, the early US campaign against organized crime, which eventually intensified into a process of securitization, was instead, at least initially, dominated by several grass-roots initiatives, mainly related to the so-called citizens’ crime commission movement outside the formal institutional realm of US politics, which were launched to provide