

Shell Games: The “Minutemen” and Vigilante Anti-Immigrant Politics

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The mission of the Center for New Community is to build community, justice, and equality. The Center's Building Democracy Initiative works to counter emerging threats to civil and human rights.

SHELL GAMES: THE “MINUTEMEN” AND VIGILANTE ANTI-IMMIGRANT POLITICS

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the landmark Immigration Act of 1965, a cornerstone of Civil Rights legislation along with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Reflecting the spirit of the times, the Act was crafted as a corrective to the country’s history of racism and discrimination in immigration. It removed barriers based on national origin, and measures favoring immigrants from Western European countries. It also opened the door to more diverse patterns of immigration.

Four decades later, those gains are under attack. Today anti-immigrant sentiment is sweeping the country like wildfire. Stoked by political successes in and out of the Beltway and fanned by anti-immigrant organizations, nativism has moved from the margins to the mainstream.

In this context, the anti-immigrant “Minutemen Project” has emerged. From an inauspicious start, the number of armed anti-immigrant vigilantes conducting their own “patrols” has grown dramatically.

After their highly publicized “maneuvers” in April in Arizona, the Minutemen Project has spawned at least forty new groups in more than a dozen states.¹ In October, Minutemen groups are preparing events in several new states. Attracting volunteers and well-wishers from all over the country, the Minutemen are the latest and largest in a string of vigilante efforts to “secure” the border against the entry of undocumented immigrants.

Border Watch – Klan Style

“For the first time in many years a group of citizens have banded together and offered their services in cooperation with law enforcement personnel in an effort to preserve the ‘rights’, the dignity, and way of life of the American people... It is encouraging to see men of this calibre coming forward to help when needed.”²

The aforementioned quote comes from a letter sent to the President. Though undoubtedly a plethora of letters like this have been sent to George W. Bush (particularly after he denounced the Minutemen)³, this letter was sent to President Carter – back in 1977.

The strategy of border vigilantism as a political spectacle did not originate with the Minutemen Project, Glenn Spencer's American Border Patrol, Ranch Rescue, or even the militia groups that inspired Chris Simcox. Instead, the “men of this calibre” who hatched the idea were leaders in the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, more than a quarter century ago.

The Klan Border Watch was launched on Oct 16, 1977 at the San Ysidro, California Port of Entry by Grand Dragon Tom Metzger and Imperial Wizard David Duke, who claimed that the patrols would stretch from California to Texas. It was conceived to recapture the Klan's glory days. With nearly 4 million members in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was highly influential in the passage of the 1924 National Origins Act, thereby making racism part of official US immigration policy until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965.

While Metzger handled the California operations, the Texas side was run by Louis Beam (who would go on to terrorize Vietnamese fishers in Galveston Bay a few years later.) They predicted that thousands would participate, though only dozens materialized. To Duke, a Klan Border Watch was a necessary part of “the battle to halt the flow of illegal aliens streaming across the border from Mexico.”⁴

More important than actually stopping border crossers, the Klan Border Watch was conceived as a way to “arouse public opinion to such a degree that they [the Federal Government] would be forced to better equip the beleaguered U.S. Border Patrol.”⁵

Meet the Minutemen

The two men who initiated the Minuteman Project (which now also includes MinutemanHQ and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps) are Chris Simcox and James Gilchrist.

At 43, Simcox is the younger man, but he's been involved with “secure the border” activities longer. For 13 years, Simcox taught kindergarten at the Wildwood School in Los Angeles, a well-respected private academy known for both its academic rigor and commitment to tolerance and diversity.⁶ After 9/11, however, Simcox's life reportedly “fell apart.” He lost his job and his family, contributing to the development of his anti-immigrant mania.⁷

In January 2003, the bone-thin, hyperactive Simcox was arrested by federal park rangers as he was hunting for undocumented immigrants armed with a loaded pistol, a digital camera, walkie-talkies and paramilitary gear.⁸ In May 2004, he was convicted of carrying a concealed weapon on federal land while tracking migrants, as well as lying to a federal officer about it. He was sentenced to two years probation for the offenses.⁹

Following the conviction, Simcox continued to organize civilian border patrols and intensify his call for the militarization of the border. He has on many occasions made disparaging remarks about Mexicans, for example blaming Mexican immigrants for a laundry list of ills, including spreading tuberculosis in public schools. He is also prone to conspiracy mongering,

alleging that Red Chinese troops are spread out along the US-Mexican border, poised to invade. In a similar vein, Simcox claims to have hidden in terror on a mountainside while spying on a column of trucks guarded by men with assault rifles. Convinced that he was witnessing an invading army—nationality unclear in this case—he reported it to federal agents, who informed him that what he had seen was drug smugglers.¹⁰

Besides his solo patrols seeking undocumented immigrants in the hinterland of Arizona, Simcox made several unsuccessful attempts to form his own local anti-immigrant vigilante organizations. In December 2002, now-deceased white nationalist columnist Sam Francis wrote about Simcox’s Tombstone Militia, ready to go to war with border crossers he considered unauthorized. “Earlier this month,” wrote Francis, “a plainspoken gentleman of Arizona named Chris Simcox announced that a citizens’ group he founded—the Tombstone Militia—was about to undertake the function of protecting his state’s and the country’s borders from invasion.”¹¹

In a characteristically bombastic statement to the *Washington Times*, Simcox seemed to invite federal intervention into his paramilitary activities: “I dare the President of the United States to arrest Americans who are protecting their own country. We will no longer tolerate the ineptness of the government in dealing with these criminals and drug dealers. It is a monumental disgrace that our government is letting the American people down, turning us into the expendable casualties of the war on terrorism.”¹²

Yet Simcox’s “militia” was going nowhere fast—other than piquing the interest of white nationalists like Francis—even after he renamed it the less vicious sounding Civil Homeland Defense.¹³ Foreshadowing the exaggerations he would later make about the numbers of people the Minutemen would put on the border, in 2003 he was prone to claim 600 members of his group, while Tombstone residents had a different perception. A main street bartender told reporter Max Blumenthal, “Chris can only get a three-man patrol going,” adding that “the kind of people who want to join his group can’t even pass a background check.”¹⁴

Simcox’s fortunes didn’t start to turn until he partnered with James Gilchrist. A 57 year-old Vietnam Vet and retired accountant from Orange County, California, Gilchrist is the organizational brains behind the Minutemen. He got religion on *ad hoc* border defense after hearing Simcox speaking as a guest on rightwing talk radio in the fall of 2004.¹⁵ Gilchrist called up Simcox after the broadcast and volunteered to help him organize volunteer civilian border patrols.

Making good use of the internet, Gilchrist targeted his appeals to veterans, ex-Border Patrol agents and others vulnerable to messages calling for them to “serve” their country, appealing to their sense of patriotism and frustration with the status quo.

Under Gilchrist’s guidance, the Minuteman Project has tried to rhetorically distance itself from both paramilitarism and racism. Yet Gilchrist himself is prone to hysterical remarks about immigrants and to conspiracy mongering, as evidenced by these remarks,

From what I have seen in videos, to me there is a clear and present danger of insurrection, sedition and succession by those who buy into the fact that this really is Mexico’s territory and doesn’t belong to the United States and should be taken back.¹⁶

Gilchrist's words are a succinct statement of the so-called *reconquista* conspiracy theory which holds that Mexico is quietly infiltrating a fifth-column of revolutionaries into the United States with the purpose of territorial conquest. Moreover the infiltration is being accomplished with the treasonous collusion of various “liberal elite” institutions, e.g. the Catholic Church and the Ford Foundation, and the applause of muddle-headed multiculturalists.

Gilchrist's conspiracist formulation of the problem he sees with undocumented immigration is only an extreme form of the basic xenophobic arguments repeating the time-tested formula of bigoted fear-mongering. In the early years of the twentieth century it was the “yellow peril”—which led to laws excluding those of Asian descent from immigrating to the United States. In the wake of the Civil War, and with the failure of Reconstruction, it was Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws, intended to keep the races forever separate and distinct.

In a May 2005 speech to a meeting of the California Coalition for Immigration Reform, a hardcore anti-immigrant group which promotes the *reconquista* conspiracy theory, Gilchrist said, “I’m damn proud to be a vigilante.”¹⁷ He believes that, “Illegal immigrants will destroy this country.”¹⁸ At a Memorial Day 2005 “summit” of anti-immigrant leaders in Las Vegas, Gilchrist commented, “Every time a Mexican flag is planted on American soil, it is a declaration of war.”¹⁹

Arizona Media Circus

Officially launched in October 2004, the Minutemen Project is in essence civilians taking it upon themselves to guard the international border against intrusion from those whom they decide are unwanted. To date the organization’s biggest claim to fame comes from the high-profile “deployment” of somewhere between 150 and 200 volunteers along a narrow 24-mile strip of the Arizona-Mexico border in April 2005.

This “deployment” quickly took on the semblance of the surreal with Minutemen clashing with ACLU legal observers. The observers were present to ensure the civil rights of anyone whom the Minutemen might harass or detain. By most accounts there were nearly as many observers as Minutemen, both of whom were often outnumbered by the media. As Marc Cooper, writing for the *L.A. Weekly* put it,

Indeed, the Minuteman Project of 2005, which brought out more than 200 reporters and a caravan of satellite trucks to this hardscrabble patch of southeastern Arizona desert, produced more than 1,000 press reports in its first

few days, and was pumped up with millions of dollars' worth of free pre-event hype by the cable networks, was, in fact, one of the great media simulacra of recent times.²⁰

In spite of the fact that the month-long non-event -- comprised mostly of retired white men sitting around in lawn chairs, watching the dust blow and the hawks circle -- was almost entirely a media creation, the Minutemen themselves seemed to take an almost perverse glee in bashing the reporters who had trudged out to Arizona desert. Cooper reports asking co-organizer Simcox why he didn't discourage his volunteers from carrying guns. Simcox replied: “We've done this on purpose to show your bias and your vile distortions,” and went on to elaborate, “We don't discourage the guns on purpose,” Simcox said. “Your reaction exposes the most extreme sort of persecution complex by the media.”²¹

The Minutemen are keenly aware that a large part of what they are up to is playing for the media. A sign outside of the Minuteman Project's dormitories (borrowed from a local bible college) advised: “Don't wear full camouflage wear. We want to present a non-military, non-threatening image for the press.”²² A Minuteman volunteer identified only as Ken, responded less belligerently but with essentially the same message as Simcox when asked about the guns: Pointing to the sidearm at his waist, Ken explained, “This helped us get this press coverage. That's the reason why we're here, not to use them,” and ‘Oh, men with guns!’ That's much better than, ‘Oh, men with walkie-talkies—they might throw them!’²³

Reporters with a critical eye who spent any amount of time covering the Minuteman deployment to the Arizona border consistently noted the eagerness of their colleagues to find a story. For example when the Minutemen staged a protest in front of the Border Patrol station in Douglas, Arizona on the first Saturday of their deployment, about a dozen Minutemen stood across the street from a handful of anti-Minutemen demonstrators. Cooper reports, “When a nose-to-nose shouting match broke out between two men from rival sides, six TV cameras, an equal number of photographers and just as many reporters crowded in, looking for a story, any story.”²⁴

Law and Disorder

Like Duke and Metzger's Klan border watchers, today's Minutemen cloak themselves in the language of law and order, stressing their opposition to illegal immigration. Yet there are many destructive forms of large-scale lawbreaking threatening the United States—e.g., toxic waste dumping and pension fund piracy—in which this “rule of law” crowd seems to have little interest. Moreover, the armed group vigilante activities of the Minutemen Project appear to be in violation of laws in most states which specifically prohibit such paramilitary activity.

During the April 2005 mobilization of the Minuteman Project in Arizona, Gilchrist reportedly asked if there were people in the audience who had military experience. Many of the late-middle-aged and elderly volunteers raised their hands. “This was a battalion-sized operation,” he told the eager crowd. “In October, this has to be an army-sized operation!”²⁵

Reporter Hermon Leon, present at the meeting held in the bible school cafeteria that served as the Project meeting hall, writes that the crowd responded enthusiastically to Gilchrist’s military metaphors. “You’re our Patrick Henry!” claims one elderly woman to a round of applause. An old man counters, “How about Paul Revere?” Following on his lead the woman who suggested Patrick Henry throws her hands in the air and chants, “The Mexicans are coming! The Mexicans are coming!”²⁶

Unlike the situation in Britain’s American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century, however, the tense situation along remote sections of the U.S.-Mexican border is a direct result of a previous round of anti-immigrant enforcement—Operation Gatekeeper. For undocumented immigrants, almost to a person in search of work, the Arizona desert is not a destination, but an obstacle created by the literal erection of fences around border cities like San Diego and El Paso in 1995. This action, along with more intensive Border Patrol enforcement, pushed would-be entrants out into the desert to face blistering heat, dehydration, the tender mercies of the human smugglers referred to as “coyotes,” and vigilantes, whether organized or not.

Anti-immigrant violence has become a major problem in the region. Roger Barnett, for example, another of the local vigilantes, may have placed hundreds of undocumented migrants under “citizen’s arrest,” holding them without authority, and against their will, to be turned over to the Border Patrol.²⁷

Moreover, as is inevitably the case, it is not just the “organized” vigilantes—who operate on a heady mixture of media spectacle and intimidation, but the “lone wolves” (or small packs) that are reassured by the relatively warm reception given to Simcox, Gilchrist and even Barnett by politicians such as Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

On May 21, 2000, for example, Miguel Angel Palafox, age 20, was shot in the neck by one of two black-clad horsemen near the border town of Sasabe, Arizona. Palafox managed to bind-up his wound with a t-shirt and stagger his way through the heat back to Mexico. “I thought I was going to die in the desert,” he said.²⁸ The riders have never been identified.

More tragically, in October 2002 two undocumented immigrants were shot to death and left by the roadside near the town of Red Rock, Arizona. According to a representative of the Mexican Consulate in Tucson, the victims were part of a larger group that was resting near the two. According to one of the survivors, two camo-clad masked men armed with machine guns fired on the group, most of whom were asleep, stopping only when the group scattered, resulting in the deaths.²⁹

Though there is no direct link between the efforts of Simcox and Gilchrist (or Barnett) and these still unsolved crimes, they serve to illustrate that the situation on the Border. Violence is common and the presence of even the best behaved or most rhetorically subdued vigilantes or private militias can only make a negative contribution to that dynamic. As one young mother, a life-long border resident, put it this way: “They don't live on the border, they don't know the border, they know hearsay, what they've read. They'll get some ego boost from saying they've defended the border.” She added that when the Minutemen depart, the migrants who will continue to cross her land will now do so assuming that local residents are both hostile and armed.³⁰

Racism by Any Other Name

Of course, neither Minutemen rhetoric, nor their ideological connections, are always harmless. In spite of repeated claims that there was no room for racism in Minuteman ranks, members of the neo-Nazi National Alliance eagerly joined the project. It also attracted white nationalists like Joe McCutchen, the Arkansas anti-Semite who founded the anti-immigrant Protect Arkansas Now.³¹

In a torturous interview with labor reporter John Earl, Gilchrist revealed just how racialized his own view are, even while in the process of denying the he or the Minutemen are motivated by racism. When Earl calls Gilchrist to account for the Confederate flag present at a Minuteman rally, pictures of which are posted to the organizational website, Gilchrist first tries to deny it, then disclaims all knowledge, and finally agrees that it will be taken down. The photos, however, remain as of this date (August 14, 2005) on the website and there is no way to “take down” the presence of this symbol of white supremacy from the April 2, 2005 rallies that kicked off the Arizona project in the towns of Naco and Douglas.³²

When Earl asked him if he could see that in spite of his no-racism policy, he was attracting racists, Gilchrist responded:

So is La Raza. So is Aztlan. So is MECHA. So is MALDEF. So were the KKK, the white supremacists, the Nazis. Am I in the category? God, I hope not! Was that my intention? No! Did I know that there were going to be some racially charged accusations when I launched this? Yeah. How did I decide to deal with it? Be as open as possible.³³

“As open as possible” seems to mean as open to racist conspiracy theories as possible. It is hard not to see the cavalier lumping of Latino/a organizations like MALDEF and NCLR with murderous vigilantes like the Klan (responsible for thousands of lynchings) and a genocidal regime like the

German National Socialists (responsible for millions of murders) as anything other than a particularly paranoid form of racism.

Nor is it only human rights groups that see the Minutemen as attracting racists. The recent resignation of Bill Parmley as leader of the Goliad, Texas Minuteman affiliate, as well as from his position as President of the newly forming Texas chapter as a whole is a case in point. In his resignation, Parmley cited racism in the ranks and a lack of organizational discipline as his prime reasons for quitting.

A petrochemical engineer and the driving force behind the organization of a Texas Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, Parmley discovered that ideas such as donating box drinks to the sheriff’s office to give to captured, dehydrated immigrants were not particularly popular. “Let the (expletive deleted) die,” commented one of his erstwhile compatriots.³⁴

While some like Parmley have quit in disgust, the anti-immigrant paramilitarism of the Minutemen has attracted numerous longtime far-right activists into the movement. In Alabama, for instance, the state head of the Alabama Minuteman Support Team is lead by militia leader Mike Vanderboegh.³⁵

At the same time, Gilchrist has turned to white nationalists in an attempt to parlay his Minutemen notoriety into political gain. Gilchrist has entered the October 4 special election for the California 48th District Representative seat as an American Independent Party (AIP) candidate. The AIP was created to support the 1968 campaign of arch-segregationist George Wallace. AIP was founded by William K. Shearer, who also served on the National Executive Committee of the white supremacist Populist Party in the 1980s.³⁶

Conclusions

While Simcox and Gilchrist, like other anti-immigrant leaders, officially disavow ideological white nationalism, these organizations are part of a larger cultural and political milieu—a milieu that makes the do-it-yourself border cops into sometimes comic heroes in the mainstream media, but that acknowledges they are nonetheless tapping into the spirit of the times. Recent polling indicates that most Americans, and particularly white Americans, are dissatisfied with current immigration policy.³⁷ A not inconsiderable portion of those dissatisfied also feel threatened by the changing demographics, and the Minutemen, as part of a larger white nationalist / anti-immigrant social movement, fill the niche of “legitimate radicals”—those willing to go beyond letter writing to advance their grievances. These “legitimate radicals” make anti-immigrant lobbyists, no matter how close their ties to organized racism, seem mainstream by comparison.

NOTES

- 1 For a complete listing of Minutemen groups, visit <http://www.buildingdemocracy.org>.
- 2 "Letters" *The Crusader*, Issue 28, 1977, pg. 7.
- 3 Michael Martinez, "Group set to watch U.S. border, Arizona rally attracts scores of volunteers," *Chicago Tribune*, April 2, 2005.
- 4 "Klan Border Watch Continues" *The Crusader*, Issue 28, 1977, pg. 1.
- 5 Ibid, pg. 1.
- 6 According to the Wildwood School's mission statement (URL: < <http://www.wildwood.org/> >): "Wildwood School is a K-12 independent school in Los Angeles, California. Wildwood provides a strong academic program in a non-competitive environment where children learn from each other as well as their teachers. The Wildwood experience develops an appreciation of individual and group differences, a desire to contribute to a diverse community, and a competency to adapt and lead in an ever-changing world."
- 7 Christopher Ketcham, "The Angry Patriot," Salon.com (May 11, 2005), URL: < www.salon.com > , Accessed: 12 Aug 2005.
- 8 Ibid.
- ⁹ Tyche Hendricks, "Dangerous Border: Militias round up illegal immigrants in desert Migrant advocates say deceptive patrols increase peril, seldom face legal scrutiny," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 31, 2004.
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- 12 Washington Times, "Arizona Militia Set to Patrol Border for Illegal Aliens," (December 9, 2002).
- 13 Max Blumenthal, "Vigilante Injustice," Salon.com (May 22, 2003), URL: < <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/05/22/vigilante/> > , Accessed: August 13, 2005.
- 14 Max Blumenthal, "Vigilante Injustice," Salon.com (May 22, 2003), URL: < <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/05/22/vigilante/> > , Accessed: August 13, 2005.
- 15 Jennifer Delson, "Profile: James Gilchrist," *Los Angeles Times* (April 11, 2005), p. B2.
- 16 John Earl, "Immigration Reformer Wants to Send 20 Million Immigrants Back to Mexico and Start a Revolution There," Orange County Organizer (URL: < <http://www.ocorganizer.com/html/gilchrist.html> > Accessed: July 15, 2005). Note that the quote excerpted in the text above, documenting Gilchrist's unflinching belief in the *reconquista* conspiracy is from an interview conducted with Gilchrist by Earl on June 14, 2005 in Costa Mesa, California.
- 17 Martin Wisckol, *The Orange County Register*, May 26, 2005.
- 18 Jennifer Delson, "PROFILE | JAMES GILCHRIST; One Man's Convictions Launched a Border Crusade," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2005 Part B; Pg. 2
- 19 From a contemporary eyewitness account of Gilchrist's speech in Las Vegas.
- 20 Marc Cooper, "Lawn-Chair Militias," L.A. Weekly (April 8, 2005), p.20.

21 Ibid.

22 Harmon Leon, "The Minuteman's 15 Minutes of Fame (Minute 14.5)," *SF Weekly* (June 22, 2005)., online version URL < <http://www.sfweekly.com/issues/2005-06-22/news/infiltrator.html> >, Accessed: August 9, 2005.

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24 Marc Cooper, "Lawn-Chair Militias," *L.A. Weekly* (April 8, 2005), p.20.

25 Harmon Leon, "The Minuteman's 15 Minutes of Fame (Minute 14.5)," *SF Weekly* (June 22, 2005)., online version URL < <http://www.sfweekly.com/issues/2005-06-22/news/infiltrator.html> >, Accessed: August 9, 2005.

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31 " SUCCESS OF PROTECT ARIZONA NOW INSPIRES PROTECT ARKANSAS NOW" (FEBRUARY 28, 2005), URL: http://www.buildingdemocracy.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=617&Itemid=0.

32 Url: < http://www.minutemanhq.com/project/photos/photos_2005apr02_rallies.html >

33 John Earl, "Immigration Reformer Wants to Send 20 Million Immigrants Back to Mexico and Start a Revolution There," *Orange County Organizer* (URL: < <http://www.ocorganizer.com/html/gilchrist.html> > Accessed: July 15, 2005).

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35 Toraine Norris, "Minutemen Plan to Patrol Mexican Border," *The Birmingham News*, August 11, 2005.

36 Jake Tapper, "Fanatics of the Far Right" *Salon.com* (Aug. 4, 1999) URL: <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/1999/08/04/taxpayers/index.html?pn=3>>.

37 According to a comprehensive examination of American public opinion in 2003 by the Pew Research Center nearly 8-in-10 Americans (77%) agreed with the statement: "we should restrict and control people coming into our country to live more than we do now," up from 72% in 1999. Perhaps more important is that anti-immigrant sentiment is growing increasingly strident, with 46% of Americans (and 53% of Republicans) willing to completely agree with the tighter restrictions statement. This is compared to 38% of all Americans and a similar percentage of Republicans who completely agreed in 1999. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, *Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized: 2004 Political Landscape* (New York: Pew Research Center, 2003), p. 11 & 27.