

Vigilantes patrol US border: the politics of the Minuteman Project

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20 May 2005

Last month, the Minuteman Project (MMP) was launched on the US-Mexico border in Arizona. Participants in the project came from across the country to monitor a 23-mile-long stretch of the border. Organizers claimed that the US Border Patrol is spread too thin and is unable to adequately fulfill its duties. Underlying this pretense of merely assisting law enforcement, however, is an ideology of paranoia, xenophobia and racism.

The right-wing outfit has won significant support from within the political establishment, particularly from the Republican Party. The promotion of the group has been part of a persistent attempt by sections of the American ruling elite to solidify a base of support by encouraging the most retrograde ideological conceptions. Plans are in the works for an extension of such volunteer border patrol projects to other states on the US-Mexico border, including California.

While the Minuteman Project in Arizona lasted one month, ending April 30, some volunteers have elected to stay on and take part in the broader border-monitoring activities of Civil Homeland Defense, the sponsoring organization of the project.

The organizers claim to have assembled over 800 volunteers for the month, all of whom completed a training program and spent at least one day on the border. They say the project was an overwhelming success, citing a sharp drop in the number of apprehensions in the area patrolled by MMP as evidence that the flow of undocumented immigrants was significantly reduced during the period. The activities of the group were widely publicized in Mexico, serving as a warning to those who would plan to cross the border into Arizona.

The project was initially met with skepticism and concern by the US Border Patrol and public officials, who feared the possibility of violent confrontations between volunteers and immigrants. The Arizona chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union organized volunteers of its own to monitor the Minutemen as legal observers and to report any incidents of violence or violations of human or civil rights against the immigrants. The Minuteman Project and the Civil Homeland Defense agreed, in light of public concern, not to allow its members to carry rifles or shotguns, although they were allowed to carry handguns on their patrols.

While none of the Minutemen themselves were charged with any crimes of violence, during the vigilante exercise an Army reservist, Sgt. Patrick Haab, illegally detained seven undocumented Mexican immigrants at gunpoint after confronting them at a rest stop in Arizona on April 10. While he was initially charged with assault

with a deadly weapon, right-wing Arizona prosecutors declined to prosecute him. He has since become a fixture on the conservative talk radio circuit and has been celebrated by the Minutemen and other anti-immigrant groups.

The Minuteman Project insists on its web site that it has “no affiliation with, nor will we accept any assistance by or interference from separatists, racists or supremacy groups or individuals, no matter what their race, color, or creed.” Yet there is no doubt that their crusade is inspired by national chauvinism and racism. Employing near apocalyptic language, the Minutemen portray themselves as front-line warriors in a battle to “save the country” from so-called illegal aliens:

“[T]he men and women volunteering for this mission,” according to a statement posted on their web site, “are those who are willing to sacrifice their time, and the comforts of a cozy home, to muster for something much more important than acquiring more ‘toys’ to play with while their nation is devoured and plundered by the menace of tens of millions of invading illegal aliens.”

The statement continues by warning, “[If the Minutemen do not succeed], historians will write about how a lax America let its unique and coveted form of government and society sink into a quagmire of mutual acrimony among the various sub-nations that will comprise the new self-destructing America.”

These statements, and several others like them, give the lie to the public relations spin the project’s organizers have attempted to sell to the media. Their concerns that the real views of their supporters would be exposed led to orders that volunteers refuse to speak to reporters. But, just in case a member found him or herself caught in an interview, the organizers provided “guidelines” to follow.

Members were told to give generic statements such as “illegal immigration is hurting the economy” or “hurting the environment.” These answers were to serve as a cover for the real motivations of many of the members. A team of undercover reporters from KOLD Channel 13 (Tucson) infiltrated the MMP in order to penetrate the deceptive front established by the leadership. The reporters had conversations with a number of members who had no idea they were being recorded. Some of the statements are clearly racist; others are steeped in ignorance and irrational fear. For example: “If the border’s gone, they’re going to be pushing drugs on every one of our kids at school,” or, “You walk into a McDonald’s and you wake up and realize the entire third world is here.”

The Minutemen received support from numerous figures in the Arizona Republican Party, as well as endorsements from national politicians.

Republican legislators in Arizona traveled to Tombstone at the start of the Minuteman Project to express their agreement with the organization's aims. State Representative Russell Pearce said, "I felt we needed to make that trip down there and show our undying support for these patriots. They are the heroes." He was accompanied by Republican State Representatives Chuck Gary, Andy Biggs and Jack Harper.

In late April, California Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the GOP's leading "moderates," endorsed the Minutemen, indicating that he would welcome a similar project in his state. "When the government, the state or the country doesn't do its job, then the private citizens go out and it's like a neighborhood patrol," stated Schwarzenegger. The Minuteman Project is planning on joining up with a similar group based in California, the Friends of the Border Patrol, to monitor a section of the border near San Diego in August. Five hundred volunteers have already signed up to participate.

Seventy-one members of the House of Representatives (69 Republicans and 2 Democrats) comprise the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus (CIRC), which explicitly supports the Minuteman Project. On April 27, Chairman Tom Tancredo (Republican of Colorado), the chairman of the CIRC, said: "I would like to thank the Minutemen on behalf of the millions of Americans who can't be here with you today. You have the courage to say to the government of the United States, 'Do your duty! Protect our borders! Protect our communities! Protect our families! Protect our jobs!'"

The main aim of the Minuteman Project and its supporters is to channel economic and social grievances—held by broad sections of the population in the US—against immigrants. In an interview with the *Arizona Republic*, the Minuteman Project's founder, Jim Gilchrist, explained why he started the organization. Gilchrist said that he was unable to get subsidized housing for his mother because the system was flooded with requests from "illegal aliens."

"I thought this was the United States of America, for US citizens," he said. "But I realized slowly it wasn't. It was for whoever got here by whatever means necessary, whether they were legal or not."

The conclusion that he would have his followers draw is clear: in order to provide services for people in the United States, it is above all necessary to get rid of immigrants who are supposedly taking American jobs and American services.

If this perspective finds resonance within sections of poor and working class Americans, then the trade unions also bear responsibility. The retreat of the AFL-CIO in the 1980s, under a sustained assault from the Reagan administration, was accompanied by a racist scapegoating of "foreign workers" who were said to be "stealing our jobs." Decades of accommodation to corporate demands—in direct opposition to the interests of the workers they claimed to represent—left the unions rotten ripe for such a shameful infection.

To the extent there has been any opposition to the Minutemen

from within the political establishment, it has mainly been from the perspective of securing the interests of American corporations. The White House issued mild criticisms of the Minuteman Project publicly, with Bush labeling its participants "vigilantes," however the federal government made no attempt to block the group's activities.

The opposition of the Bush administration to the Minuteman Project was based not on any disagreement with the xenophobic politics of the group. It rather had much more to do with concerns over the potential damage the group's activities could do to US-Mexican relations and the White House's effort to secure a permanent source of cheap labor for American businesses through the creation of a guest worker program.

This was also the outlook of certain Democratic Party officials in Arizona. Democratic representatives from the Arizona state legislature traveled to Tombstone with protesters. Rep. Ben Miranda declared, "What I was pleasantly surprised with is that businesses down there heed the value of a constant, capable, accessible workforce, and businesses were complaining as much about the problems associated with limiting access to this labor source and also about the tragedy along the border."

Opposition such as this has nothing to do with securing the interests of workers in Mexico or in the United States. While one faction of the ruling elite views groups such as the Minuteman Project as a useful means of building support on the basis of national chauvinism, another is concerned that the actions of such groups might hinder the supply of cheap labor on the US-Mexican border.

Workers in the US must adopt an entirely different perspective. Behind the reasoning of individuals like Gilchrist and his followers is the assumption that "American citizens" must be locked in a struggle with so-called "illegals" for basic social services and jobs. This assumption is based on one of the most widespread falsehoods in contemporary America—that the resources do not exist to provide everyone with a decent standard of living and stable employment.

The resources certainly exist; they are simply concentrated in the private hands of a few wealthy individuals. The destruction of jobs and social programs in the US is due not to immigration, but to the persistent drive for profit on the part of American corporations. The very same corporations are exploiting workers both in the United States and Mexico, regardless of race or national origin. The distinction between "native" and "alien" workers becomes meaningless in this light. *Their interests are identical.*

Only a movement that seeks to unite workers of all nationalities on the basis of these common interests will be capable of defeating the utterly backward conceptions advanced by the Minuteman Project. This movement must include on its banner the call for open borders and an end to a social system based on the exploitation of all workers.



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