

Border-monitoring movement survives, expands

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Body

The Minuteman Project was launched earlier this year amid fears that racist crackpots would rough up illegal immigrants trying to slip into this country.

But there was no bloodshed when the hundreds of volunteers converged in the Arizona desert in April to watch for border crossers and report them to immigration authorities.

Since then, the Minuteman **movement** has taken hold, with Minuteman-inspired organizations launched in several states. One of the **movement**'s co-founders made a surprisingly strong showing in a bid for Congress earlier this month in California. Even critics of the **movement** acknowledge its participants are not all bigots or extremists.

Attention surrounding immigration problems helped attract "a fairly broad cross-section of middle Americans," said Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which monitors hate groups. "This is partly driven by politicians falling all over each other over an issue that they feel had some real resonance."

Potok added, "There are real strains of racism and anti-Semitism in this **movement**." Still, "the **movement** has attracted people who are not Klansmen or neo-Nazis."

The Minuteman Project was the brainchild of Jim Gilchrist, a retired accountant from Orange County, who recruited participants through the Internet. The idea, according to project organizers, was partly to draw attention to problems on the Arizona-Mexico border, the most porous stretch of the 2,000-mile southern border.

The group said about 900 people showed up for the April project. Schoolteachers and retired veterans, businessmen and former corporate executives, some of them armed, parked their pickups and RVs along a dusty, rutted road near Naco, sitting in lawn chairs with binoculars to look for anyone trying to slip illegally into the country.

Organizers said the volunteers' calls helped lead authorities to about 330 illegal immigrants. Critics -- the U.S. Border Patrol among them -- said the Minutemen were little more than a nuisance. Among other things, officials said the volunteers disrupted Border Patrol operations by unwittingly tripping sensors that alert agents to intruders.

Nevertheless, the Minuteman Project succeeded in drawing attention to illegal immigration.

In October, still more volunteers repeated the exercise in other states on the Mexican and Canadian borders. Chris Simcox, one of the **movement**'s co-founders, said three dozen new chapters had formed by mid-November.

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“It has moved into politics on the local, state and federal level, what we hope is in every district in this country,” Simcox said. “We mean business.”

On Dec. 6, Gilchrist, a former Republican running as a third-party candidate in a special House election in Orange County, finished a strong third with 25 percent of the vote.

“It was a clear sign from grass-roots organizations that politicians ought to pay attention to the illegal-immigration issue,” Jack Pitney, a government professor at Claremont McKenna College, said at the time.

Gilchrist had hoped his showing could push federal immigration policy to the forefront in next year's congressional races and influence the 2008 presidential race. Many people in the district, located about two hours from the Mexican border, have been frustrated with the growing population of illegal immigrants.

Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates limits on immigration, said the Minuteman Project reflects a visceral reaction to the “national intrusion” by illegal immigrants.

“There's a genuineness to this that has won over the hearts and minds of the American public,” Stein said.

Celestino Fernandez, a sociologist at the University of Arizona, said it is the latest chapter in this country's history of resistance to waves of immigration -- first to an influx of Chinese, later to people from southern and eastern Europe.

“They're reasonable people, yes, they're good people, but they're also reacting against demographic changes, just like every prior generation has reacted against demographic changes of people whom they perceive as different,” he said.

The Minutemen see Latinos everywhere -- “more in their states, whether it's the South or the Midwest or East or New York City,” Fernandez said. “They keep reading about the border and it's like a sieve -- people coming across, and aren't they going to control it, and the government's not doing anything.”

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