

The Minuteman Project

A month on the border

Reportage by Fred Elbel

After extended and careful planning, a project to place volunteers on a stretch of Arizona's border with Mexico got underway. The purpose was to show in "neighborhood watch" fashion that more eyes and ears at the fences could radically reduce the numbers of illegal aliens crossing into the United States.

The Minuteman Project kicked off on April 1, 2005, with a crowded news conference. TV trucks lined the streets of Tombstone, Arizona – headquarters for the project – in dramatic contrast to the Old West background with its stagecoaches and staged shootouts. Project co-founders Chris Simcox and Jim Gilchrist spoke, as did Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO), Bay Buchanan, and others.

Leaders of the Minuteman Project had hoped for media attention but we were stunned that the event received far more attention than anyone could have anticipated. Calls from the media deluged the ramshackle *Tumbleweed* newspaper office for 12 hours a day. Phone lines were jammed and email overflowed. By the end of the first day organizers realized they were under an unstoppable media onslaught and near-chaos would be the norm for the duration. We had a tiger by the tail!

Volunteers from all over the country were interviewed, registered and oriented daily in Tombstone. At the border they received additional training. The instruction was constantly repeated: "no contact with illegals." Volunteers were to remain in stationary locations and make contact with the Border Patrol when they observed suspicious activity. While approximately ten percent of the volunteers were armed, as allowed by Arizona law, instructions were very clear that the

unholstering of a weapon for any reason whatsoever would lead to immediate dismissal.

Participants monitored the dusty border road east of Naco, a location that offered expansive views of high desert surrounded by mountain ranges. Volunteers from all walks of life came for at least a week; many stayed for the entire month. While photographing volunteers for the website,* I met one man who had driven 2,800 miles from New York. Another couple were parked in their semi. A doctor closed her practice to join in doing the job that Congress and the President have refused to do. Many said this was one of the most significant and rewarding experiences of their lifetime.

The rugged Huachuca Mountains area southwest of Sierra Vista – notorious for illegal alien traffic and armed drug running – was also monitored by volunteers. Spanish-language conversations heard on two-way radios confirmed that drug traffickers had been locked out. A grateful local woman thanked volunteers, offering bags of homemade cookies and explaining that this was the first time in years she had gotten a safe night's sleep.

Crucial to the success of the project was the fact that there were no serious incidents, even though the ACLU and other "legal observers" were showing openly antagonistic behavior toward border watchers. Congressman Tancredo sent a congratulatory letter to organizers Simcox and Gilchrist for a "job well done" and invited them to Washington to address the House Immigration Reform Caucus during the "Feet to the Fire" immigration lobbying week.

The Minuteman Project was open to unfettered observation by the media which contributed to the project's tremendous success. Members of the American media converged on the border, as did members of the press from Spain, Germany, Russia, France and Sweden – countries dealing with significant immigration problems of their own. There was coverage by media in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Simcox and Gilchrist were interviewed on scores of TV and radio programs. Lou Dobbs made a surprise visit to personally observe the project; Sean Hannity of Fox News telecast two

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evenings of live coverage from the border.

During the first week, Mexican *federales* had been spotted diverting potential illegal aliens and drug runners away from the Minuteman-monitored sector, proving that Mexican authorities, too, could secure their side of the border if they had the will to do so. While official statements by the U.S. Border Patrol criticized the project as ineffective, the Tucson Sector's Border Patrol union said quite the opposite. They provided a public statement of resounding support, and individual agents said confidentially that they sincerely appreciated our efforts.

California Governor Schwarzenegger praised the project while criticizing the federal government for not doing its job. This was in contrast to the comments of President Bush who referred to project volunteers as "vigilantes."

The April 2005 Minuteman Project demonstrated that one should never underestimate what a small group of determined Americans can accomplish. A 23-mile section of the border was virtually shut down from foreign invasion by 860 volunteers, proving beyond a doubt that a physical presence – even of retirees in lawn chairs – can effectively secure the border.

The Minuteman Project will continue until it can be relieved by the military and the National Guard – sovereign Americans stepping up to do the job their elected officials refuse to do. •

** For a photo-journal of the Minuteman Project see www.minutemanhq.com/project/. For pictures of the situation on the Arizona border see www.DesertInvasion.us.*

Amid Fuss, Project Works

A Letter to the Editor of USAToday, posted April 13, 2005

Hundreds of Minuteman Project volunteers have done what the president has refused to do: They have helped to effectively halt illegal crossings in a 23-mile section of the Arizona-Mexico border. Volunteers have shown how easy it would be for the U.S. government to do the same.

Consider the horrors and threats our "neighbor watch" has frustrated along that section: No longer are bandits harming and killing migrants. Illegal crossers aren't being robbed, raped and kidnapped. Deaths from exposure of illegals abandoned by "coyote" guides have stopped. Women and children destined for sex-slave dens aren't being smuggled in.

Intruders from terror-sponsoring countries aren't getting through. Heavily armed drug traffickers are not now roaming the section with relative impunity. Criminals, including convicted murderers and agents of international organized crime, have been shut out. For now, relative peace has been restored to where Minutemen (some of them grandmothers in lawn chairs) are observing, reporting and avoiding contact with illegals.

The outpouring of support has been profound from locals who, for the first time in

years, have peace, quiet and sleep — free from the ongoing clop-clop of helicopters and the fear of endless foreign trespassers.

Some Minutemen carry side arms, raising well-expressed concerns over the potential for accidents, or worse. Most of those volunteers, however, are retired police and military members who have carried weapons all of their adult lives and are intimately respectful of their potential, and of their utility at night where life-threatening wildlife — including rattlesnakes, bears and mountain lions — rule the desert's floor and arroyos.

Project opponents seem brokenhearted over its successes. Last week, an off-duty volunteer happened upon a border crosser who appeared in need. He provided the man a bowl of cereal, gave him \$20, a hug and a T-shirt with playful wording. The American Civil Liberties Union called that benign encounter a "potential powder keg." Apparently, the hapless legal observers equate our humanitarian aid with an extremist agenda. However, we believed it the right thing to do.

Deploying civilian observers may not be the best way to guard a nation. But until the government reassumes its responsibility, expect to see more.