

Time's Up

The Minutemen turn on each other.

Zvika Krieger, The New Republic Published: Wednesday, November 19, 2008

ALISO VIEJO, CALIFORNIA--Jim Gilchrist, the founder of the Minuteman Project, lives in a one-story home in a gated community in Orange County. On a late August afternoon, the 59-year-old former accountant invited me into his backyard, which is strewn with potted plants, blue-and-white pinwheels, and a ladybug wind chime. "There are some Pakistani immigrants that live over there," he says, pointing over his fence, "and a nice Japanese family, and a Taiwanese family that lives around the corner. It's a great neighborhood."

Gilchrist, who has spent the past four years of his life trying to keep immigrants out of the country, is an unlikely booster for ethnically diverse neighborhoods. But, these days, it seems he would rather spend time in the company of immigrants than with his fellow anti-immigrant crusaders. "I get more hate mail from members of my own movement, from so-called Minutemen, than from the open-border people," he confesses. The only border that he regularly visits is the one between his own yard and his neighbors'. "I'd be wary of going down to the border myself these days," he says. "I'm worried about what [the Minutemen] would do with a sidearm."

This was supposed to have been a good year for Gilchrist and his Minutemen--not one where their guns were drawn on one another. Last November, Michael Barone predicted on RealClearPolitics that 2008 would be a "watershed" year for immigration, with candidates that take a liberal stand sure to find themselves "out on a pretty flimsy limb." Pundits labeled the presidential nominating contest the "Lou Dobbs Primary," with both CNN and NPR devoting a disproportionate amount of time to the issue in their early debates. Tom Tancredo and Duncan Hunter ran almost solely on the strength of their hard-line immigration stances, and even John McCain briefly flirted with "secure our border first" rhetoric.

But, after clinching the nomination, McCain became more moderate on the issue, and immigration became one of the few issues over which "obama [and] mccain [are] in agreement," as a *Los Angeles Times* headline declared earlier this year. The downturn in the economy further diverted voters' attention. Asked to rank the importance of immigration alongside seven other issues in a Gallup poll in June, voters ranked it dead last.

In this environment, Gilchrist's movement is falling apart, overtaken by new members whom he describes as "troublemakers with personality disorders and criminal propensities." In contrast, he insists that the group's original members were able to give voice to the immigration concerns of ordinary Americans because they demonstrated "a passionate allegiance to the United States of America and its priceless principles." There is no doubt that the Minutemen--aided by sympathizers in the media like Lou Dobbs--drove the national conversation in 2005. But whether the enormous wellspring of American anger over illegal immigration that they claim to have tapped into actually existed is another question.

Passing beneath a tulip-decorated sign that reads, "welcome friends," Gilchrist takes me into his dimly lit garage, where he has hung a collage of blurry photographs. Gilchrist spent 13 months as a Marine infantryman in Vietnam, where he received a Purple Heart. "Here we are hiking through the Laos border," he says, pointing at one of the photographs. "This guy was killed by a sniper. ... Not a day goes by that I don't think about my time there."

Gilchrist's experience in Vietnam helped him organize a small army of volunteers to fan out across the Arizona border with Mexico in search of illegal immigrants in early 2005. For his border patrol, Gilchrist rounded up six pilots, three airplanes, a fully staffed three-bed hospital, two rifle-wielding recon units of former Marines and Army Rangers ("which I handpicked"), two armed sentries, and hundreds of ground troops looking out for figures in the night.

Though the group fell far short of the "potentially several thousands" of volunteers it boasted in press releases, journalists showed up to watch in droves--there were, in fact, so many of them that, during evening patrols, Minutemen confused reporters with immigrants trying to cross the border. Dobbs hosted a number of segments with the group's leaders, and, at a rally near the border, Tancredo sung the group's praises: "You are heroes, with each one of you representing hundreds of thousands of Americans."

The press eagerly latched on to the Minutemen as representative of those hundreds of thousands of supposedly angry Americans as the battle over comprehensive immigration reform heated up on Capitol Hill. "The majority of Americans are fed up with illegal immigration and want something done about it," declared Bill O'Reilly, who hosted Gilchrist numerous times. "Three cheers for the Minutemen!" Sean Hannity, toting night-vision cameras, went on border patrols multiple times with the Minutemen, trips he then used to scold McCain, one of the bill's primary backers. "It's a devastating problem down there," he told the senator.

Minutemen today fondly reminisce about this brief, golden period of influence. Luca Zanna, co-founder of the Mohave County Minutemen, breathlessly recounts the time he spent on the border with Gilchrist and his fellow activists. "That spontaneity, that independence--it was beautiful," he says. "When you control the show, you decide what will be on the show. We had that for a moment."

After we leave his garage, Gilchrist gives me a tour of his house. The kitchen counter is piled high with copies of his 2006 book, *Minutemen: The Battle to Secure America's Borders* (co-written by Jerome Corsi, author of the recent bestseller *The Obama Nation*). As we talk, he fidgets with his cordless phone as if awaiting an important call. But the only one that comes in during the course of our two-hour conversation is from his mechanic. "TV has dropped off, radio dropped off a bit, newspapers quite a bit," Gilchrist admits. "Nobody cares about immigration anymore."

By 2007, Congress had failed to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill, and press interest in the Minutemen began to ebb. Its 15 minutes of fame up, the group splintered as a result of ego-driven battles between Gilchrist and the group's other founder, Chris Simcox. Gilchrist is locked in a battle over control of the group stemming from allegations that he misappropriated \$400,000 in donations. Simcox closed chapters and fired leaders in a half-dozen states last year after they questioned his management and financial accountability.

This year, there has been more evidence that, while immigration remains a legitimate issue, the supposed nationwide furor was a product of media hype. With the congressional debate over and the press increasingly ignoring the Minutemen, most Americans are professing moderate views on the issue. As of June, the percentage of Americans who want to reduce immigration levels has fallen within a percentage point of the 20-year low, while 64 percent of those polled say that immigration is a good thing for the country (the second-highest it's been since September 11). Even on Super Tuesday, the height of the presidential primary, exit polls found almost 60 percent of Republican voters favoring immigration policies that Lou Dobbs would deride as "amnesty."

Gilchrist, of course, doesn't see it this way. The original Minutemen weren't some radical fringe creating anger and fear where none existed. They represented mainstream America and the defense of the American dream. "Bring us your tired, your hungry, your poor--legally," he says, narrowing his steely blue eyes as if at imaginary illegal immigrants.

But even Gilchrist, sitting at his kitchen breakfast nook with pie-wielding Mammy salt-and-pepper shakers and a tablecloth decorated with Sambo-style figures eating watermelon, has concluded that most of the people left in the anti-immigration movement are "xenophobic, racist, schizophrenic, wackjob ne'er-do-wells." He's having a difficult time raising even half the money he raised in 2006. And his legal budget, which he was saving to fight "organizations that were violating [immigration] law," has been tied up with cases against members of his own movement, amounting to over \$200,000 in legal fees. His most recent suit was against someone using the Minuteman name to release a video "encouraging people to shoot illegal aliens to death with a rifle and bury their bodies in the desert." He wears a bulletproof vest at public events to protect himself from his own onetime supporters.

Gilchrist, his face leathered from spending days under the scorching desert sun, takes a drag of a Pall Mall cigarette as he ponders the unforeseen turn his movement has taken. "Twenty, forty years from now, my name may pop up in the history books. It may say, 'He was all wrong--Loon Gilchrist, he caused this,'" Gilchrist says. "Or because of what I did, 'He preserved our strength as an economic and world power.'"

But it's more likely that Gilchrist and even his breakaway followers will end up causing nothing at all. Enrique Morones, the founder of the San Diego-based immigrant advocacy group Border Angels recently arranged a 300-person prayer vigil for supporters of immigrant rights. An urgent "call to action" by the Minutemen yielded only one counter-protester.

CLOSE WINDOW