



TYCHE HENDRICKS

THE WIND

**STORIES FROM THE
U.S.-MEXICO BORDERLANDS**

DOESN'T NEED A PASSPORT

Jacumba

"The border is a sham"

BRITT CRAIG BACKED HIS OLD brown van gingerly off the dirt road and parked under a piñon tree in the dry, rocky hills of eastern San Diego County. As he waited for night to fall, he made camp in this clearing on a ridge, a scant quarter mile from the Mexican border. He opened the van's rear door, and his two portly black cats, Janie and Homegirl, hopped out to explore the lay of the land.

Craig, fifty-six, a decorated Vietnam veteran, had driven 2,500 miles from St. Augustine, Florida, to join a little band of Minuteman volunteers patrolling the border for illegal immigrants here outside Jacumba, California. It was the third time he had made the journey in six months, nursing the 1986 Ford Econoline van across the miles. He had lost one cat along the way, brother to the remaining pair, but the drive had given him plenty of time to reflect on his life and the sense of purpose he had gained from joining the Minutemen.

"The increase in the level of illegal immigration has gotten exponential in the last couple of years," said Craig, who was drawn to the first, highly publicized Minuteman muster in Arizona in April 2005 by a call for citizens to do the job the government was neglecting: protect the homeland from illegal incursions. "We have heightened the awareness of the fact that the border is a sham. It's dysfunctional. A border is like your skin. There's



Figure 17. Vietnam veteran Britt Craig keeps a vigil beside the U.S. border fence in eastern San Diego County and awaits nightfall, when he and his fellow Minutemen will scout for illegal immigrants. Photo by Sandy Huffaker Jr.

got to be a place where you stop and something else begins. A nation can't exist without a border for long."

Just down the hill from Craig's campsite, the ten-foot-tall border fence of welded steel landing mats gave way to a five-foot-tall section, low enough to look across at the hilly Mexican hamlet of Jacume. At this low point in the fence, families with members living on either side have customarily met for informal cross-border exchanges. This day a daughter drove up on the Mexican side to receive a package of prescription medicine from her father across the corrugated barrier. They chatted for a few minutes, then exchanged a kiss before driving off. Later—it was Mexican Independence Day—a small but jolly binational party of Mexicans and Mexican Americans assembled to share a supper of *carne asada* over the fence and reenact the *grito*, or rallying cry, that commemorated the start of Mexico's battle for liberation from Spain. But Craig was not involved in, or even aware of, the celebration. For him, the border was not meant to be a meeting place; it was a protective boundary for his country. And it was failing.

Craig had been living on a sailboat moored at the St. Augustine marina, which was cheaper than renting an apartment. He was getting by as a sidewalk musician, strumming the guitar and singing his bluesy, country ballads ("folk music for the talk radio set," he called it), when he first learned about the civilian border patrols, more than likely on the Internet. "I'm not sure exactly how I tumbled to it," he said, his voice rolling with the soft cadences of his native Georgia. "I wasn't actively looking for something."

A rangy, muscular man with a ruddy complexion and a shock of blond hair under his broad-brimmed canvas hat, Craig wore a black patch over his left eye, a constant reminder of the war's enduring scars. The other Minutemen called him "the pirate."

Craig shook some dry cat food into a cast-iron skillet and set it on the ground with a dish of water. Then he extracted an ammunition cartridge from the van and clicked a ten-round magazine into the 9-millimeter Beretta 92 semiautomatic pistol concealed in his waistband under a Libertarian party T-shirt. A bumper sticker on the van's front fender read, "Blaming guns for Columbine is like blaming spoons for Rosie O'Donnell being fat!"

"Now I'm here to seal the border," said Craig. "But when I first went to the Arizona showdown, I looked at it as more of a Second Amendment thing. They said, 'Arm yourselves. Call yourselves Minutemen.' I came out because it was a citizens' militia, which I believe in. Militia got a bad name, but it's a good process. They don't like you to say militia, but that's what it is. We are vigilantes."

Craig's two-way radio crackled to life. "Kingfish, this is Jefe. Come in." It was Jim Chase, the commander of this bare-bones endeavor he called the California Minutemen, reporting the positions of his other scouts. The evening's operation had begun with a strategy session at a makeshift sandbag bunker smack up against the steel-plate border fence behind the Jacumba library. The eight men and one woman led by Chase, himself a former marine wounded in Vietnam, strapped on binoculars and sidearms and fanned out to monitor a series of smuggling trails. Craig took the central posting on the hill to act as the group's communication hub because his was the only cell phone that would get a signal. Anyone who spotted migrants or drug smugglers was to radio him, and he would phone the Border Patrol. The stationary assignment suited him, he said, because he didn't want to leave the cats alone in the van for long stretches.

It was out of admiration for Chase that Craig had returned for this September border vigil. An energetic, gray-haired man with a Santa Claus

belly and Teva sandals, Chase had emerged as a minor leader in the April 2005 Minuteman event. But he soon split off from that effort, in part because he favored carrying rifles and shotguns at the border, while the leaders, Chris Simcox and Jim Gilchrist, were adamant that volunteers stick with pistols so as not to project too militaristic an image in the press. "He's fearless, but he's stepping on some toes," said Craig, who also supported long guns. "He's a highly moral person who loves his country."

The weapons were not only for protection against smugglers, Chase asserted, but to resist intimidation by anti-Minuteman protesters, who had flocked to the border actions in the early weeks and months. "I don't like anybody to be out there if he doesn't have a gun," said Chase when, a little later, he stopped by Craig's camp to touch base. "The Che Guevara communists and the Aztlanders told me we're in a war." Then he backed off the aggressive rhetoric. "All we are is supporters of immigration law. Our enemy, if we have an enemy, is the Bush administration that's not enforcing the law."

Chase, fifty-eight, a retired postal worker from Oceanside, had gained a reputation as a hothead, using his Web site to encourage volunteers to come to the border with baseball bats, machetes, and stun guns.¹ He got into public spats with not only Simcox and Gilchrist but another would-be leader, Andy Ramirez, who tried unsuccessfully to start his own border operation in California, dubbed Friends of the Border Patrol. Ramirez renounced weapons altogether and raised a fuss to the press when he said Chase had suggested bringing "snipers" to the border, a charge Chase disputed.²

Chase liked to talk. And like many in the movement, he began conversations by focusing not on garden-variety illegal immigration but on the threat of criminals crossing the border and his desire to uphold the rule of law. "My main reason is: Al Qaeda, drug smugglers, felons," he said, squatting by Craig under the piñon tree. "We're trying to show the people of the United States that you can shut an area down." As he talked, though, Chase's tone shifted to one of frustration and discomfort with the social changes connected to immigration. "The press puts it out as 'Poor Juan and Maria coming across the border because they just want a job.' Yeah, there's Juan and Maria, but there's also a lot of scum who come across. You know, charity begins at home, and there's only so much pie to go around. These people don't assimilate. I know one guy up here, he's been in the country for twenty-five years and he doesn't speak any English." Chase's small crew of volunteers was outmatched by the smugglers,

he went on, but at least it was taking a stand. "I feel like we are kind of peeing against the wind, but we have to do something."

The border militia movement arose at a time when the U.S. government was already putting unprecedented resources into border enforcement. The Border Patrol's budget in 2005 was triple that of a decade earlier. The federal buildup was initially spurred by a vehement reaction against illegal immigration in Southern California during the recession of the early 1990s, a political response that became central to the gubernatorial campaign of Pete Wilson and culminated in the passage in 1994 of Proposition 187—a measure that would have cut off education and health services to illegal immigrants had it not been struck down in the courts.

The resulting Border Patrol strategy, known as "prevention through deterrence," escalated a quasi-militarization of the border during the Clinton administration. It began with Operation Blockade (later renamed Operation Hold the Line) in El Paso in 1993, followed by Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994. An increased force of Border Patrol agents, combined with more fencing, lights, cameras, motion detectors, and night vision scopes, succeeded in choking off illegal crossings in those urban areas. In the process, it shifted unauthorized immigration to more remote stretches of the border, notably into Arizona.

Just as the highly visible crossings of undocumented immigrants into San Diego in the early 1990s became a rallying point for Wilson's campaign, so the arrival of migrants in southeastern Arizona in the early years of the next decade became a focal point for the emergence of the militias there. At the same time, cultural tensions and economic insecurity in other parts of the country where the unauthorized population was growing created a climate receptive to the message of the Minutemen.

The outrage about uncontrolled immigration expressed by the Minutemen and crystallized by elected officials such as Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado built political will for tougher measures at the border and beyond. Though a punitive House bill pushed by Rep. James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin in 2005 did not pass the U.S. Senate, it set the terms of the immigration debate, and the following year Congress passed and the president signed a bill for seven hundred miles of fencing along the border. The Bush administration subsequently ratcheted up the pace of workplace raids and deportations, the so-called "interior enforcement" of immigration law, which had been ignored for years.

Spending on border enforcement continued to grow, and from 1992 to 2009 the Border Patrol's force had more than quadrupled, to almost

nineteen thousand agents, and its annual budget had grown more than sevenfold to \$3.5 billion.³ Fencing of some kind had been built along more than six hundred miles of border.⁴ By 2009, it had cost \$2.4 billion.⁵ The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service put the eventual tab as high as \$49 billion, counting not just construction but maintenance over the expected twenty-five-year life span of the fence.⁶ Even that price tag did not include the cost of land acquisition or the lawsuits that were likely to arise, however.

In response to the political call to seal the border, U.S. Customs and Border Protection also developed plans for a “virtual fence” of infrared cameras, ground sensors, radar, airborne drones, and other monitoring technology. The agency initially estimated that that entire project, dubbed the Secure Border Initiative Network, would cost \$2.5 billion. In late 2006, the Department of Homeland Security’s inspector general told Congress that the cost could actually reach \$30 billion.⁷ And the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) repeatedly chastised the department for lacking a specific plan that spelled out costs, time frame, and measurable outcomes. The GAO said the program was at “considerable risk” of wasting taxpayer money.⁸ The government contracted with the Boeing Corp. to develop an initial twenty-eight miles of virtual fence in a heavily trafficked stretch of the border around Sasabe, Arizona. By the end of 2008, Boeing had been paid almost \$1 billion for the project.⁹ But members of Congress complained that Boeing’s rollout was not only months behind schedule but riddled with technical problems.¹⁰ Nevertheless, President Obama’s Homeland Security secretary, Janet Napolitano, reiterated support for the virtual fence at a border security conference in El Paso in the summer of 2009.¹¹

Though the government’s border enforcement strategy has continued to escalate, there has been debate among scholars and political leaders as to whether it has been effective. The number of arrests of would-be immigrants trying to enter the United States from Mexico, a very rough gauge of the number of crossings, has fluctuated over the years but dropped dramatically in 2008 and 2009.¹² But whether the decrease has been due to tougher border enforcement or increased interior enforcement (with word of immigration raids traveling back to Mexico and Central America and deterring people from migrating), or whether it has been primarily a consequence of the slowing U.S. economy is a matter for controversy.

Whatever the case, the growing issue of illegal immigration in the early 2000s spawned the Minutemen. The story of the movement is a jumbled tale of unlikely characters who were driven as much by their own frac-

tured psyches as by a larger mission. They nevertheless struck a raw nerve with Americans concerned by illegal immigration and succeeded in influencing the debate. The Minuteman movement was the brainchild of Gilchrist and Simcox. Gilchrist, a retired Orange County accountant and also a Vietnam veteran, contacted Simcox after hearing him speak on the radio about how he was rounding up undocumented immigrants along the border in southeastern Arizona.¹³ Together they devised the Minuteman Project and captured public attention with rhetoric and imagery evoking the small bands of rugged American patriots who took up arms to fight for nationhood during the Revolutionary War.

Simcox had been tracking illegal border crossers for a few years already, with a “committee of vigilantes” he first dubbed the Tombstone Militia in 2002 and later called Civil Homeland Defense.¹⁴ He and a handful of armed compatriots would stake out commonly used routes at night, catch a group of migrants in the beams of their flashlights, then close in and detain them until the Border Patrol arrived, according to Bill Dore, a Douglas man who participated. Simcox, a former Los Angeles schoolteacher, had landed in the Arizona desert after a post-9/11 breakdown cost him his job, his marriage, and his relationship with his adolescent son. He went to Tombstone and found work in the daily reenactments for tourists of the Gunfight at the OK Corral. Then he bought the local paper, the *Tombstone Tumbleweed*, and turned it into a broadside for his “call to arms” to protect America from invasion.¹⁵

Simcox was not the only one drawn to Cochise County, in southeastern Arizona, to try out vigilantism. Some longtime residents there, chiefly Douglas rancher and towing company owner Roger Barnett and his brother Donald, had been rounding up unauthorized migrants for years and turning them over to the Border Patrol. The Barnetts’ example drew others to the county who were keen to emulate them, donning camouflage fatigues, taking up guns, and tracking immigrants.¹⁶ In 2002, another Californian, Glenn Spencer, moved to the town of Sierra Vista and established his own operation, American Border Patrol—which boasted an unmanned aerial drone and other high-tech tools—as well as maintaining his anti-immigrant Web site, American Patrol. The following year, a Texan named Jack Foote and a former Southern California bounty hunter named Casey Nethercott established a base in Douglas for their border militia, Ranch Rescue, the most paramilitary group of all.

In 2005 Simcox and Gilchrist launched the Minuteman Project, calling on volunteers to help stop the “invasion” of illegal immigrants. They

broadcast their message through mainstream news outlets, which were captivated by the story of a grassroots militia. In the weeks leading up to the group's first and biggest gathering, the April 2005 muster, the pair trumpeted the news that thousands of people were heeding the call. But the actual number of participants fell far below those predictions. Journalists on the ground with the Minutemen in Arizona reported that roughly two hundred volunteers turned out during the first week of the event, which was the most heavily attended.¹⁷ Over the next couple of years, periodic calls for border volunteers yielded no more than a few dozen participants.

The people who came out for patrols ranged from border landowners weary of illegal migrants trooping across their property to construction workers anxious about losing their jobs and nostalgic for a time when they didn't hear Spanish spoken in their neighborhoods. One who showed up was Britt Craig. He was among a cadre of regular volunteers, many of them retired or underemployed, and quite a number of them Vietnam veterans, who embraced the crusade.

Craig was drawn to the operation in part because a civilian militia appealed to his libertarian sensibilities and in part for the sheer outdoorsy exhilaration of it. "There isn't much that moves me like this," he said. "It's an extended hunting and fishing trip."

Craig grew up in Thomasville, Georgia, a small town sixty miles south of Albany, where his father was a public affairs officer for the U.S. civil defense agency and his mother kept house. He was named for an uncle, Britt Craig, an Atlanta newspaperman who figured in the Broadway musical *Parade*. Craig never knew his uncle, who died young, but was impressed with the fact that he had become a biplane pilot and taught aerial acrobatics.

As a kid, Craig was happiest out in the woods. He loved guns. He watched every cowboy movie he could find. At seventeen, he enlisted in the army and went to Vietnam as an infantryman with the First Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. He was sent into combat in the northern highlands and it thrilled him. "It forged a high tolerance for excitement," he said. "It's very difficult to find that same thing in civilian life."

In a place called Chu Lai, a grenade booby trap took out Craig's left eye, damaged nerves in his right leg, and left him with a "twinky" trigger finger. He was just nineteen and his dream of a life in the military was dead. "When I got injured I was lying around in Walter Reed Hospital and a colonel comes by," Craig remembered. "I asked him, 'Am I going to be able to stay on jump status?' He said, 'No combat arms for you.' I said,

'I want out.' That was the end of the world for me. That was my career plan, shot all to hell."

But it wasn't the worst. As a full moon rose in Jacumba's inky twilight, Craig sat cross-legged on a bed of pine needles and let his thoughts revisit the bitter slap he felt on returning to a country that was ambivalent, if not openly hostile to him. "I joined the army, volunteered for the paratroopers, volunteered for Vietnam, and I come back and I'm the anti-Christ," he said, his words catching in his throat. "We [veterans] were something apart. I remember going to a fair and there was a shooting-gallery thing, and this guy made a big fuss about me being a good shot. To him, I was the *other*. Even in trying to compliment me, it was the demonization of all of us."

After his injuries healed, Craig was frustrated and footloose. He worked as a roadie for bands and as a commercial fisherman. He wrote songs and self-produced a couple of CDs. "I never really did anything thoughtful and appropriate," said the soft-spoken vet. "I just bounced around. Did a lot of things, but nothing you'd really call a career." When it got too hard to deal with America, he moved to Puerto Rico and lived there for years, coming back eventually to sort out a dispute with the Veterans Administration. Lately he'd been collecting his military pension and finding work when he needed extra cash. "I float a genteel poverty," said Craig.

In his early twenties, Craig fathered a son. He tried to remain in the boy's life though he didn't stay with his son's mother. "It was not, 'Daddy's home, fetch the pipe and slippers,'" he observed. "But I had quite a bit of influence and time with him." Craig's kid pursued a much more traditional path than he ever had, growing up to be a stockbroker with an Atlanta brokerage house. "I'm bemused but proud of him," said the vet. Then, as Craig was cementing his commitment to the Minutemen, his son surprised him by enlisting in the army, prepared for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. "It's his expression of patriotism, of really not liking what's going on with the terrorism thing."

For Craig, volunteering for border duty was his own act of patriotism. But it also served a more personal need. "This gives me the opportunity to get the 1945 homecoming that I didn't get in 1968," he said. "In my hometown, people are very, very supportive. They tell me, 'Good job. Way to go!'"

Browsing through a box of food donated by Minuteman supporters, Craig found a bag of hamburger buns and ate a couple, washing them down with 7-Up. It would have to do for supper. He said he had met a lot of veterans among the Minutemen and he believed many were thinking

about more than curbing uncontrolled immigration. "Gilchrist mentioned being a vet and it was kind of a distress call," he said. "It did influence me to go back him up. It resonated with a lot of other people too. . . . In Arizona there were an amazing number of Vietnam-era people trying to work something out. I suspect it's trying to rectify what had become a love-hate relationship with the United States. This has been a really good place for me to work that out. I'm glad I lived long enough."

A proliferation of new groups was inspired by the Minutemen. One was Chase's outfit (the name of which would change repeatedly, from the California Minutemen to the United States Border Patrol Auxiliary and later California Border Watch). In addition to the crews tracking illegal immigrants in communities that touch the Mexican border, there were numerous far-flung groups such as the Colorado Minuteman Project, Florida Minutemen Patriots, and Iowa Minuteman Civil Defense Corps calling for tough immigration enforcement. Even in the politically liberal San Francisco Bay Area a group called the Golden Gate Minutemen attracted a small following. The San Diego Minutemen made a practice of harassing migrant workers living in a makeshift encampment in a rough canyon north of town until a wildfire forced the migrants to flee, abandoning the campsite.¹⁸

Though the original Minuteman organization was riven repeatedly by factional infighting and none of the spin-off groups commanded more than a handful of supporters, the name that Simcox and Gilchrist had coined became a household word. The movement struck a chord with Americans anxious about an increasingly globalized society. And the Minutemen gained a voice in the national political debate over immigration control.

The fears and frustrations driving the restrictionist movement were expressed vividly by some of those who attended a workshop in San Diego in the autumn of 2005 for Ramirez's group, Friends of the Border Patrol, which planned to deploy its own border watch teams. Though the effort never got off the ground, a couple of dozen people turned out for the day-long training at a hotel beside a freeway.

Skip Coleman, a retired Las Vegas police lieutenant, said he was drawn to groups trying to restrict illegal immigration because in his city's booming economy he could see immigrants—presumably undocumented—rushing to fill jobs he felt should belong to Americans. "Bush said illegals came to take jobs Americans didn't want, but construction is being slowly taken over by illegal aliens," said Coleman, fifty-eight. "The service jobs, maids

and so on, those jobs have been taken over and now they're branching out into middle-class jobs. Americans are being shut out." Not only that, he went on, "when they flood across the border, they're swamping our social services, and there's more crime." Coleman said that if Ramirez and his group were as professional as they sounded, he was willing to drive the 350 miles to Southern California a couple of times a month to offer a few days of service patrolling the border. "I want to do something for my country," he said. "I want to preserve my way of life that I like very much."

Beverly Crawford, a self-described "retired repo lady" and a grandmother of seven, said she had been shocked by the cultural change when she moved back to Southern California from Washington State three years earlier. "I thought, 'This is not right.' Everything was written in Spanish first and the American language second," she said. "Everywhere I go into a store, I don't find an American standing behind the counter. I'm hoping we can get back the way we were twenty years ago, when we were an American state." Crawford, fifty-four, said it was the first time she had ever really gotten involved with a cause, but she was moved to act on behalf of her grandchildren. "I hate to think that our country is going downhill," she said. "Our ancestors fought for it and we're letting it slip through our fingers. I feel like they've taken away a lot of our rights, because when I go into grocery stores, they don't want to hear English. I'd like to be able to put my footprint into helping."

Tim Whitney, fifty, who lived in Chula Vista, a growing city in San Diego County that nearly touches Mexico, said he wished that Mexican immigrants would go back home and build up their own economy, rather than seeking prosperity in the United States. "I'm tired of people coming here and then making me the enemy. I'm tired of the word *racist* being thrown out there to stop the argument," he said during a break in the training session, his body tense with agitation. "The truth is, we need to stop it, we need to put people on the border and keep people out." A construction worker, Whitney said he had become used to working in crews that were overwhelmingly made up of immigrants. But he had taken a fall and was sidelined with an injury, getting by on workers' compensation insurance. "I have trouble with the capitalists, too. They should pay their people better," he went on. "Time was, a carpenter could send his kids through school and his wife didn't have to work. Illegal aliens? Yeah, they're helping our economy . . . by the rich getting richer." As he talked, sweat beaded on his anguished face. "But what do I know? I'm just a dumb-ass who never got an education. Because we're rich Americans, is that a

reason to hate me? I'm not rich, I'm poor." He had decided to get out on the border, he said bitterly, because "I want to feel like I have something to say. I want to feel like I have some power."

The anxiety Whitney and others voiced, over immigrants elbowing in on American jobs, reflects real concerns over changes in the U.S. economy, some scholars say. And while the influx of foreign-born workers into the U.S. construction industry is real, there are larger shifts under way that don't have much to do with immigrants. Restructuring and outsourcing in the American economy are causing insecurity, especially for older and less educated workers, said Frank Bean, a sociology professor who heads the Center for Research on Immigration, Population, and Public Policy at the University of California at Irvine. "It doesn't take as many workers to make steel as it used to. And jobs get moved to other countries," he said. "Of course new jobs are being created all the time, but if a fifty-five-year-old person's job is restructured, it's not as easy for that person to reinvent himself into a new job as it is for a twenty-five-year-old." The forces behind the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs are hard to see, said Bean, "but the immigrants are all around, in the restaurants and here and there."

The social cost of absorbing immigrants is also a real concern to people, especially at a time when important aspects of the American social safety net are in flux, said Bean, the author of *Immigration and Opportunity: Race, Ethnicity, and Employment in the United States*. When the U.S. economy hits a recession, jobs are scarcer and local and state tax revenues drop, but the costs of health care, education, and criminal justice for immigrants—the same as for the rest of the population—continue. "That can hit the ordinary citizen kind of hard," he said. "And there are lots of things going on in American society that are increasing insecurity: pensions are disappearing, the social security system gets attacked from the right and the left, health insurance is under threat. It's not a time, as compared to twenty years ago, when people can feel too secure."

On top of the economic insecurity that can trigger animus toward immigrants, there's often a sense of dislocation as American society expands to encompass unfamiliar cultures. "The price of immigration is a challenging one for any society because it means you have to confront newcomers," said Harvard University public policy professor Robert Putnam. "Old-timers have to confront issues of identity and connection. Our natural instinct is to want to be around other people who are like us. Therefore it takes time to develop a new 'we.' The most important challenge facing

any society is to create a new, more encompassing 'we,' not in terms of skin color or religion, but in terms of Americanness."

Putnam is the author of *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*, a 2007 study that found that the more diverse a community, the less civic engagement exists among its members. The United States has successfully incorporated immigrants before, he said, notably in the wake of the last big immigration wave a century ago. "The pledge of allegiance was created in 1906 as part of a process of creating a sense of national identity," said Putnam. "You could be American without being a WASP as long as you pledged to support these principles. It's a doable task. It will take some time, but we have to all realize and learn to live with difference."

Most Americans have immigration stories in their own family history, but they share a visceral sense that it's unfair to sneak across the border into this country, Putnam added. "The public, for better or worse, makes a huge distinction between legal and illegal immigration," he said. "Insofar as the issue gets cast as illegal immigration, a substantial majority of Americans are opposed to it. It triggers issues about the rule of law and the fundamental notion that you don't cut in line in front of other people." Very few Americans want to be seen as opposing immigration itself, said Putnam, so discomfort with foreigners is often framed in terms of fair play and rejecting those who don't abide by immigration laws.

The arrival of new waves of immigrants, over the course of American history, has frequently triggered a violent response from more established groups, said Susan Olzak, a Stanford University sociologist. Such a backlash was in evidence after the massive street protests in the spring of 2006, when immigrants marched through American cities demanding respect and fair treatment. "Surges in the number of immigrants or migrants often produce certain kinds of political and collective actions, sometimes mob attacks," said Olzak. "This has happened against the Chinese, southern and eastern Europeans, and black migrants moving to the North. In many ways I don't think it's new. What's new is the political mobilization and activity and participation of Mexican Americans."

A number of politicians and other public figures have seized on and amplified the popular concern for the rule of law, the post-9/11 fear of terrorism, and the more inchoate economic and cultural anxieties that immigration—and the new visibility of immigrants—has triggered. Tancred built his reputation on his uncompromising opposition to immigration. The former Colorado congressman, who made a bid for the 2008



Figure 18. Outside Sasabe, Sonora, a group of migrants, including a young girl, prepare to cross the border fence illegally and hike across the punishing Arizona desert. Photo by Carlos Avila González/San Francisco Chronicle.

Republican presidential nomination, called not only for tough enforcement to prevent and punish illegal immigration but for the nation's borders to be closed to all legal immigrants and for the American-born children of undocumented immigrants to be denied U.S. citizenship.¹⁹ Rep. Sensenbrenner made headlines with his bill that sought to beef up border fencing and enforcement and, most punitively, to make "unlawful presence" in the country a felony rather than an administrative violation and to criminalize those who would aid illegal immigrants. San Diego representatives Duncan Hunter and Brian Bilbray, along with New York representative Pete King, former Colorado governor Roger Lamm, Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio, and others, have all made political hay out of a tough stance on the border and illegal immigration.

Meanwhile, national media figures, including Lou Dobbs on CNN and Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck on Fox, made the real and perceived transgressions of illegal immigrants into regular fodder for their nationally broad-

cast television shows. And an assortment of blatantly nativist freelance pundits, including Patrick Buchanan and Peter Brimelow, have contributed to a climate of intolerance. These voices have celebrated the vigilante activism of the Minutemen and have given credence to the positions of those who espouse anti-immigrant and at times openly racist views. Dobbs featured Simcox repeatedly on his show, as well as the late Madeleine Cosman, who raised alarms about illegal aliens as sexual predators and carriers of leprosy and other diseases. Dobbs hosted Glenn Spencer, whose American Patrol Web site spewed anti-Mexican vitriol and warned of an impending "reconquest" of the Southwest by Mexico. Another guest was Barbara Coe, who helped write California's Proposition 187 and who has claimed membership in the white nationalist Council of Conservative Citizens. O'Reilly has frequently referred to Mexican immigrants as "wetbacks" and has played fast and loose with immigration statistics.

Lost in the cacophony has been any sense of historical or economic context to explain why Mexican and other migrant workers come to the United States without legal authorization. With undocumented immigrants spreading into new regions of the United States (and in the absence of comprehensive national immigration reform), the cultural and political debate has been waged in local communities across the country that are often ill prepared to integrate immigrants and especially susceptible to the nativist message of Minuteman groups and their supporters.

Meanwhile, an assortment of national immigration restrictionist organizations has engaged in advocacy that bolsters the anti-immigrant cause. Many of the groups—from the Center for Immigration Studies, a conservative Washington, D.C., think tank, to the Federation for American Immigration Reform, US English, Numbers USA, and other pressure groups—were founded and funded by Michigan ophthalmologist John Tanton, known as the godfather of the anti-immigration movement, who came to his restrictionist stance by way of environmentalism.²⁰

These anti-immigrant views (which go beyond the debate over the causes and solutions to undocumented immigration) have gained legitimacy and visibility through such think tanks, elected officials, and national television hosts. Meanwhile, on-air "shock jocks" have taken the message a step further with racist and violent humor targeting immigrants and Latinos. When undocumented immigrant students waged a weeklong fast in favor of the DREAM Act, a bill that would give them legal residence, radio personality Michael Savage quipped in July 2007, "Let them fast until they starve to death, then that solves the problem." A year earlier,

Phoenix radio talk show host Brian James suggested on the air, “What we’ll do is randomly pick one night—every week—when we will kill whoever crosses the border. Step over there and you die.” James lost his job over the comment, though he later told the *Arizona Republic* his remarks had been taken out of context.

Anti-immigrant sentiment bled over into racist messages, especially in the spring of 2006 when Latino activism culminated in a surge of pro-immigrant marches and rallies across the country. Strategic Forecasting Inc., a consulting firm that monitors foreign and domestic terrorism, noted an uptick in recruiting by white supremacists “whose chat rooms are abuzz with anti-immigration sentiment directed especially against illegal Mexican and other Latin American immigrants. White supremacist groups such as the National Vanguard and the National Socialist Movement hope to use the immigration issue as a public relations and recruiting tool.”²¹ Several Latino elected officials in California reported death threats and hate mail at about the same time. And a computer game called Border Patrol appeared on a white supremacist group’s Web site among its “Racist Games.” In it, players would watch crudely animated illegal immigrants, including a pregnant woman with two children in tow, run across the desert, then shoot the figures to win points, splattering blood across the screen.

Simcox and Gilchrist worked to distance themselves from the neo-Nazis who were drawn to the Minuteman cause. They featured “the granny brigade” and emphasized the presence of retirees in lawn chairs with binoculars to help project a sanitized version of a border militia.

Other vigilante groups were not so media savvy. Ranch Rescue leader Casey Nethercott was blunt, if unconvincing, in his denial of violence and bigotry when interviewed in February 2004 about felony charges he faced in South Texas for allegedly detaining and beating two illegal Salvadoran immigrants the year before. “They made it up,” Nethercott said of the charges, as he patted his Rottweiler. “If I had pistol-whipped these people, they’d have been dead. . . . They’re making me out to be a racist and a liar, and they’re lying.”

At a compound of neglected ranch buildings on his property in Douglas, Arizona, dubbed Camp Thunderbird, Nethercott grabbed a walkie-talkie, barked an order to his hulking, gun-toting sentry, “Tiny,” and sped off to join a pair of volunteers who were patrolling along the Mexican border of the ranch. Out among the dry, spiny mesquite bushes that covered the land, Nethercott’s deputies had stumbled upon a Ford Bronco, abandoned, they believed, by drug smugglers. The men hammered at the steer-

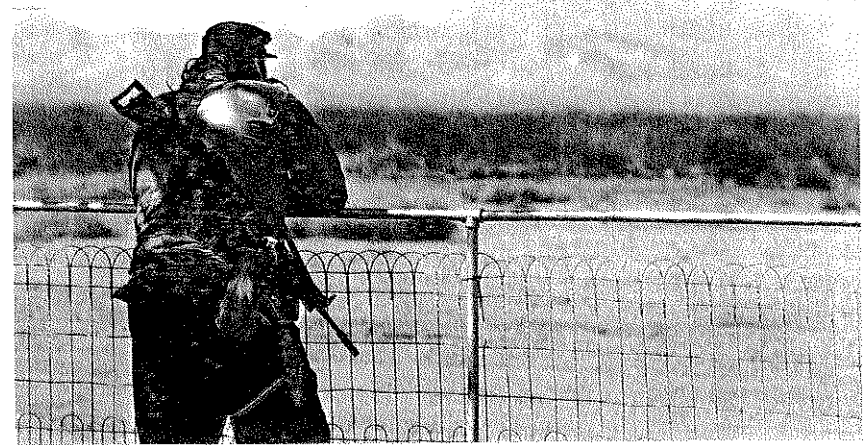


Figure 19. Vigilante Kalen Riddle stands sentry on the Ranch Rescue compound in Douglas, Arizona. Photo by Carlos Avila González/San Francisco Chronicle.

ing column with a pick and a crowbar, trying to release the wheels so they could tow the vehicle back to their compound.

“We’ve got about five more years and this country is ruined,” Nethercott said. “Illegals are destroying our fabric of life.” He and Foote had advertised on the Internet for recruits to come down with firearms and camping gear to join Ranch Rescue’s border protection efforts. Their Web site featured photographs of men in camouflage posing with bales of marijuana they said they had intercepted in the Arizona desert. One of those who showed up was twenty-one-year-old Tiny, whose real name was Kalen Riddle. He had arrived a few days earlier from his home in Aberdeen, Washington, after a friend showed him the Ranch Rescue Web site. “Someone needs to be doing the government’s job,” said the towering, heavyset Riddle as he scanned the perimeter of the base. “I was unemployed.”

Another volunteer, sixty-four-year-old Bill Dore, said he had retired to Douglas five years earlier when his job as a television technician went overseas. He said that he understood the attraction the United States poses for migrants from Mexico and other developing countries but that he devoted his time to patrolling the border to keep illegal immigrants out. “Our

country is going down the tubes," he said, hanging around Nethercott's ramshackle ranch house. "The people coming across here, they don't want to be assimilated. They don't want to use our language."

Cochise County law enforcement officials largely left Ranch Rescue and the other groups alone, and a spokeswoman for the Cochise County sheriff said that "as long as they remain within the limits of Arizona law, they're treated like everybody else. If they're firing their weapons to create an endangerment situation . . . or if they physically hold [the immigrants] or point a gun at them, [that's illegal]." A spokesman for the U.S. Border Patrol said that he welcomed the watchful presence of ranchers and civilian patrol groups. "Every law enforcement agency appreciates a neighborhood watch," he said, then added, "I would caution them to be very careful not to violate someone's civil liberties."

Eventually, though, the group's erratic, inflammatory behavior couldn't be ignored. In 2004 Nethercott and Riddle ended up in a tense standoff at the ranch with Border Patrol agents who drew their guns after Nethercott allegedly failed to comply with a traffic stop and threatened agents with a shootout.²² Two weeks later, FBI agents acted to arrest Nethercott outside the Douglas Safeway supermarket on assault charges. They ended up shooting and seriously wounding Riddle after agents thought he was reaching for a gun.²³ A subsequent search of the ranch turned up fifteen assault rifles, several handguns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, and M-80-type explosives, according to news reports.²⁴

Nethercott, who had previously served time in California for assault, was acquitted in the Arizona case but stood trial on the Texas charges of beating the Salvadoran migrants. Though the jury deadlocked on the pistol-whipping, he was sentenced to five years in prison in Texas for gun possession, which is illegal for a felon.²⁵ The Salvadorans (aided by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Southern Poverty Law Center) subsequently sued Foote and Nethercott. They won a \$1 million judgment against them and took title to Nethercott's seventy-acre property in Douglas. Foote was also charged in Arizona that year with illegal possession of a firearm.²⁶ The men's combined legal troubles led to the collapse of Ranch Rescue.

Foote and Nethercott were not the only Cochise County militia leaders who had run-ins with the law. Glenn Spencer was sentenced to a year's probation and a \$2,500 fine in 2004 for recklessly firing a gun and hitting a neighbor's garage. Chris Simcox was convicted in 2004 of carrying a concealed weapon on federal land while tracking migrants, then lying to a

federal officer about it. He was sentenced to a year's probation. Roger Barnett never faced criminal charges but lost a civil suit in 2006 brought by two Mexican American families he had detained at gunpoint on his land, mistaking them for migrants. A jury ordered Barnett to pay the families almost \$99,000 in damages. He and his wife and brother also faced a suit in federal court that accused them of threatening sixteen illegal immigrants with dogs and guns and kicking one woman in the group.²⁷

In a 2005 petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a Tucson immigrant rights organization, Border Action Network, detailed sixty-five incidents compiled by the Mexican consulate in Douglas and a number of other incidents drawn from reports to the Cochise County sheriff and the U.S. Border Patrol in which immigrants were forcibly detained or otherwise abused by vigilantes between 1999 and 2005. Though many of the cases included physical violence or threats made at gunpoint, prosecutors consistently failed to bring charges, the petition said.²⁸ Many more cases likely went unreported, the group maintained, because undocumented immigrants either feared coming forward or were removed from the country.

Bats whirled over the quiet hill where Craig sat by his van. Musing about his experiences on the border, he chuckled at the memory of one particularly ironic moment in Willcox, Arizona, just after the first Minuteman showdown had ended. "These four kids came along and they were obviously illegals, they didn't speak a word of English," he said. "They were looking for a ride, wanted to get out of Arizona. I lived in Puerto Rico so I can get by in Spanish. I said, 'You made it over. You're here. God bless you. Have a good life. But I just spent three weeks trying to seal the border, so I can't give you a ride. My friends would kill me.'"

The radio was quiet. So far none of his crew had spotted any suspicious incursions. Then, with the crunch of shoes on gravel, a local property owner appeared on the dirt road. He had come out to investigate the Minutemen. "I heard you guys were coming," he told Craig, with guarded tolerance. "I do my own patrols when there's a full moon." He looked up at the great orange orb suspended above the horizon. He was vexed, he said, by the problem of illegal immigration from Mexico. "The only thing you can do is hope some of the money trickles down to the peasants over there, because they're desperate." Then he sauntered back down the road toward the border.

After a bit, another local sputtered up on a rickety motorbike. The small volatile man, who gave his name as Walt, worked as a caretaker for the

landowner who had permitted Chase's crew to use his property. Walt railed against the threat posed to the American way of life by "wetbacks," "faggots" and other deviants. Craig responded with southern good manners, courteous but reserved.

The conversation was interrupted by the hum of an automobile. A Honda CRV pulled up and parked, and out sprang Judy, a cheerful middle-aged nurse from San Diego. "I came up here because I need a piece of this piñon tree," she said. "I'm doing a talk at the natural history museum on pine trees. I have a Coulter pine, which has the biggest cone, and I need a piñon cone, which is the smallest. I knew I would find it here." Judy was torn about the Minutemen. They were interlopers on this familiar land, and some looked a bit threatening. On the other hand, the drug smugglers from Mexico were getting terribly brazen, and if the Minutemen could put a stop to it, good. "Oh look! The bats are out! Goodie!" she interjected. As she chattered to Craig about meteor showers, Walt revved up his bike and departed. Soon she too, took her pine branches and bade Craig good night.

Quiet descended, and darkness. A coyote howled. Homegirl, who, like her owner, was missing an eye, sidled close to get her head scratched. Craig sank down again on the pine needle duff. "I'm a happy man," he said. "I've got a mission, I've got compatriots. And I've got my cats."

Shortly after they first burst onto the scene, Simcox and Gilchrist parted ways in acrimony. Simcox continued to head up a border-monitoring operation he called the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps. The group enlisted help from Washington, D.C., consultants and maintained an active Internet presence and a busy e-mail fundraising campaign. Simcox and his new cohorts threw their energy into an effort to build a border fence on private lands, an action designed to highlight the government's lack of progress in securing the country. The original plan was for two layers of "Israeli-style" steel fencing, twelve to fifteen feet high, separated by a roadway and fortified with lights, motion sensors, ditching, and coils of barbed wire. The reality was a bit scaled back. The group erected ten miles of barbed wire fencing on a ranch in Palominas, Arizona, and then went to work on a one-mile steel-mesh fence on a ranch near Bisbee, Arizona.²⁹

Gilchrist returned to California in possession of the name of the original Minuteman Project, which he said would monitor businesses that hired illegal immigrants. Most of the group's efforts, including those of a small group of Southern California women, calling themselves Gilchrist

Angels, focused on picketing day labor pickup sites and hassling employers who hired casual workers, on the assumption that the majority of those workers were undocumented. Gilchrist also ran for Congress in 2005 on the American Independent Party ticket and won 25 percent of the vote, coming in third.³⁰

But both Simcox and Gilchrist were accused of financial malfeasance by fellow members of their new organizations, and their groups fractured further as a result. In 2006 Simcox came under scrutiny by the conservative *Washington Times* after Minuteman supporters began questioning what had happened to hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations. The dispute led to the departure of several leaders of the group and a lawsuit charging fraud and breach of contract filed by a Phoenix-area man who had mortgaged his home in order to donate \$100,000 to the fence project.³¹ In 2007, several of the ousted members of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps formed a new splinter group, the Patriots' Border Alliance, and announced on their Web site a competing border deployment called Operation: Allied Minutemen.³²

Gilchrist, meanwhile, was embroiled in his own battle with three of the seven board members of his Minuteman Project. The board members accused Gilchrist of failing to account for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and they voted to oust him as president. Gilchrist responded with a lawsuit in early 2007, saying the three had no voting power.³³ He withdrew the suit a little while later, abandoned the group, and incorporated a new organization, the Jim Gilchrist Minuteman Project.³⁴

While the Minuteman organizations fractured and their leaders became mired in internecine bickering, violence, and legal trouble, the movement nonetheless projected an image—of citizens taking action to secure their country—that continued to resonate with many Americans. For Craig, the movement gave him a mission that organized his life and offered a long-sought sense of peace.

Through it he also found love. "A Minute-lady activist wandered up to my hill," said Craig by cell phone one day. "I got married." Debbie Sattler, an insurance claims adjuster, had taken her twelve-year-old son to the Arizona muster, had helped start Gilchrist Angels in Orange County, and had thrown herself into illegal-immigration protests. Guests at their wedding, in July 2006, were asked to dress in red, white, and blue and to join a "patriotic rally" in Hollywood after the ceremony.

"One thing that got Debbie and me together was her deep, deep commitment with the Minuteman phenomenon," Craig said. "It really is nice

to have somebody that you share the larger thing with. It adds flavor and meaning to everything." Craig took to dividing his time between Sattler's condo in Mission Viejo and the hill in Campo, California, that had become his regular border outpost. "I do about four days on the border and then wave signs with her three days a week," he said. The National Guard patrols, vaunted by the Bush administration, had come and gone. Chase had receded from the border watch scene, and the scouts like Craig who patrolled eastern San Diego County had dwindled to a small handful of lone wolves. For Craig, the border started as a symbol. It still was that, but in the course of his spending time there, the borderlands had become a real and important place for him—not a place of cross-cultural connection but a compelling piece of land.

Craig made another trip back east, trading the old van for a one-ton box truck he had inherited from his brother-in-law in South Carolina, and returned to California with his guitars and some old family photographs. "I'm not as optimistic as I was," said Craig, thinking of the hopes he had once had that a citizen's militia could close the border. But still he kept his vigil under the brilliant stars, pistol at the ready, staying true to the movement that had given his life meaning again.