

Border-watch squabble

Civilian patrols mushrooming, along with the infighting

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Three months after hundreds of people descended on southern Arizona to stage civilian border patrols as part of the Minuteman Project, the anti-illegal-immigration movement has snowballed, with offshoot groups forming along the southern border and in other states.

But as the movement has grown, along with the media attention surrounding it, it has also splintered. Rival factions have emerged, squabbling over issues ranging from political correctness to use of the "Minuteman" name, and even over e-mail etiquette.

Some leaders of offshoot groups have launched verbal grenades at each other in the media and via news releases; others have traded insults online.

One group leader who feels particularly picked on says he has cut ties with Minuteman leadership and plans to operate solo.

And last month, Minuteman Project co-founder Jim Gilchrist dismissed two volunteers – whom he characterized as "wackos" – for sending querulous responses after he issued two e-mails to members of his group that threatened excommunication for those who didn't stop sniping at one another.



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune
 Chris Simcox (with glasses around neck) and Jim Gilchrist (in white shirt) worked together on the Minuteman Project in southern Arizona in April.

He signed one of his missives from "An American with better things to do than baby-sit quarrelsome adults."

"It's so counterproductive. It gets people distracted," said Gilchrist, a retired Orange County accountant who presides over Minuteman Project Inc., which he said is awaiting nonprofit status, and hopes to soon pursue employers who hire unauthorized workers.

"If I were to set up some rules of conduct, it would be to stop the argumentative attitude and be pleasant."

In late April, Gilchrist and project co-founder Chris Simcox, a California transplant to southern Arizona who owns the *Tombstone Tumbleweed* newspaper, parted ways amid difficulties, although, according to Gilchrist, they remain on good terms.

Simcox has since renamed his Civil Homeland Defense patrol group as Minuteman Civil Defense Corps Inc. and has been establishing chapters in other states, with hopes of staging a borderwide patrol event in October.

The Border Patrol's official position has been that it does not condone civilian patrols and that guarding the border should be left to trained professionals.

Members of the scrapping groups – including those sanctioned by Gilchrist and Simcox and those not – give different reasons for the infighting.

But many agree the international media attention showered on the

Minuteman Project, while it energized the anti-illegal-immigration movement, has also created a monster of sorts.

"When we left Arizona in April, too many people had seen the glamour," said Mike Gaddy, who is active in a Simcox-sanctioned Minuteman group in Farmington, N.M. " 'Gosh, I was on Sean Hannity. Gosh, I was interviewed by *The Baltimore Sun*. Gosh, I was interviewed on Spanish radio.' Egos are a terrible thing."

Like several others, Gaddy sees the elbowing as competitive. He says it bothers him that there are people in the movement who have political aspirations.

Gilchrist, for one, is contemplating a bid for Congress.

Andy Ramirez, whose Chino-based Friends of the Border Patrol group plans to set up patrols in San Diego County in mid-September, ran unsuccessfully for the state Assembly twice as a Democrat in the mid-1990s.

He has not announced plans to run again, but Ramirez said recently that he doesn't rule out the possibility of eventually running for federal office.

Both Gilchrist and Simcox, who does not plan to run for office, now have a Washington, D.C.-based spokeswoman who worked as a publicist for Alan Keyes, a failed Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate.

War of words

In recent months, Ramirez has engaged in a war of words with Jim Chase of Oceanside, who until lately led a group called United States Border Patrol Auxiliary. Chase recently changed the name to Border Watch; Ramirez is calling his September event "FBP Border Watch."

The two men have been going at each other in the media and via news releases.

In May, Ramirez sent out a release stating he had dissociated himself from Chase after "receiving several alarming e-mails" from him. Ramirez then reported that Chase, who had announced plans for a patrol event in mid-July, condoned the use of snipers.

Chase has denied the accusation, saying it was a misunderstanding; Ramirez insists he heard correctly.

The public back-and-forth, among other disagreements, has driven Chase to announce that he is dropping out of the larger anti-illegal-immigration movement spearheaded by the Minuteman organizers.

"I keep hearing all these things: I'm a rogue. I'm a Rambo. I want to shoot the heads off people," Chase said. "I'm a flower child compared to Gilchrist and Simcox."

Chase complains that Simcox's Arizona group, as it organizes new patrols, has taken "around 90 percent of my men away." He won't confirm whether he will still set up patrols in the Campo area July 16.

"Anything I do is going to be hidden, covert," said Chase, calling the infighting "absolutely silly."

Chase is still working with other groups along the border, including a New Mexico group called the New Mexico Minutemen that is engaged in a rivalry with Gaddy's similarly named Minuteman group.

According to Gary Cole, operations manager for Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, efforts are being made to bring outside groups into the organization, which he said is awaiting nonprofit status. But there are some who don't want to join.

The Defense Corps' guidelines discourage volunteers from pursuing or confronting undocumented immigrants, Cole said,



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Friends of the Border Patrol's Andy Ramirez accepted a check from Nadine Sanford of the Carlsbad Republican Women Federated in May.

and ban the use of rifles and shotguns in states where volunteers can freely carry firearms. This is a bone of contention with some groups, he said.

Different groups

"The different wannabees want different things," Cole said. "You have different groups that want to go out and be far more militaristic than we are. Outside listening points, sniping points ... trip wires, all sorts of things. They feel we are way too politically correct."

The fear, Cole said, is that any mishap or violation of the law by a rogue group calling itself "Minutemen" could taint everyone involved.

Gilchrist said he has sought copyright protection for the "Minuteman Project" name, though he says he differs from Simcox on the general use of "Minuteman" or "Minutemen" by others.

"We are in a quandary as to how do we settle this," Gilchrist said. "If they want to use Minuteman, you can't stop them. To try to stop them would be to upset them."

Texas Minutemen leader Shannon McGauley says his group adheres to Minuteman operating procedures, but that he isn't interested in joining with Simcox. He says he trained with Gilchrist in Arizona and received his blessing to use the Minuteman name.

"We're all real Minutemen," McGauley said. "We all went to Arizona together and served in the desert with those snakes, where the trash was, with the scorpions. Our objectives are the same, but we just want to keep it a Texas operation. I don't want to be part of some corporation."

His group's Web site posts e-mails allegedly from both Gilchrist and Simcox, with one from the latter chastising them for how they identified themselves.

Caustic e-mails are the weapon of choice for many involved in the squabbling.

"In the name of the father, son, and holy spirit, come on James ... be a man or be an ass," reads one correspondence Gilchrist said he received from Chase in Oceanside. The two men generally get along, Gilchrist said, though not always via e-mail.

'A sledgehammer'

"The best thing for Jim to do is take a sledgehammer to his computer," Gilchrist said.

Those who have stood by watching the catfights are by turns annoyed or amused, depending on which side of the illegal-immigration debate they stand on.

"It's called check your cotton-picking ego at the door," complained Barbara Coe, a veteran anti-illegal-immigration crusader who heads the controversial California Coalition for Immigration Reform in Huntington Beach.

"To me it is just incredible, with as much as has been accomplished thanks to Jim Gilchrist, that anybody would do anything to make even a little bump in the road."

Christian Ramirez of the American Friends Service Committee, a human rights group affiliated with the Quakers that has condemned the Minutemen and their successors, says he's not surprised.

"There has always been bickering among these types of organizations," Ramirez said. "There is always someone trying to become the leader of the anti-illegal-immigration movement, because it is such a fashionable thing. People are just fighting to see who is going to get more media attention."

Chris Bauder, president of Local 1613 of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents San Diego-area agents, thinks the squabbles have to do with clashing ambitions, namely political ones.

"I think it's because they have underlying reasons for doing it, and that is what is causing all these problems," Bauder said. "It's political. That is how we have decided to view it. It is another political arena in which to watch the entertainers perform."

Gilchrist says things have been quiet in his group since he sent out warnings and dropped the worst squabblers. But clashes continue elsewhere, and some on the inside worry these could deflate the momentum the anti-illegal-immigration movement has built in recent months.

"What I would like to see is unity," said Gaddy in New Mexico. "But I'm afraid it's never going to happen, because no one wants to share the glory."

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