

ONE IF BY LAND, TWO IF BY...

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No, those were a different sort of Minutemen. It is the Minutemen civil militias patrolling the U.S.-Mexico border who have recently claimed the renowned name used by Paul Revere and his cohorts during the American Revolution.

When I heard about the modern Minutemen's activities, ostensibly assisting the U.S. Border Patrol to turn back undocumented immigrants in New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and California, I felt this was a topic we should debate at The Commonwealth Club. When armed citizens take the enforcement of immigration policy into their own hands, something is fundamentally wrong. This is not how a society under the rule of law behaves.

Little did I know that I would be reaching into a hornet's nest by raising this topic. The Club invited Minutemen organizer Chris Simcox to be on a panel with California Democratic Party Chair Art Torres and immigration policy expert Hans Johnson from the Public Policy Institute of California. Somewhat to my surprise, Simcox accepted, and even asked if he could bring a Latino volunteer with him. We scheduled the discussion for September 16 in San Jose, at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, since the Minutemen activities are of particular concern to the Mexican-American community.

Then a brouhaha erupted, with some Mexican-American organizations protesting our hosting Simcox, especially on September 16 – which is Mexican Independence Day – and at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. It was clear that the event would be disrupted if it took place.

In deference to the Mexican-American community, we moved the date of the event. But then I received an e-mail from Mr. Simcox, pulling out of the program and describing The Club as a “cowardly” and “anti-American” organization for changing the date.

I have tried to sort out the reasons for the strong emotions about this proposed forum, and have concluded there were several factors. One was pure cultural misunderstanding. Some of the community organizations that objected indicated they believed The Club was somehow supporting Simcox's position by having him on this panel, which is far from the case. So the nature of what The Club does – examining all views on major issues without endorsing any of them – is not as universally understood or accepted as we would hope.

A second aspect is politics. The extremes among both the immigrant rights and anti-immigration groups used this controversy to rally their supporters, questioning the intentions of The Club and the Mexican Heritage Plaza in organizing the event.

But I could not help but draw a more fundamental conclusion, and it is that a number of groups in our society do not really want to discuss or change our current immigration

situation. These range from businesses that benefit from cheap immigrant labor to elements of the immigrant community here in California who do not want to disrupt the ability of migrants to come to the U.S. to work.

I strongly differ from this view, and believe it is in fact urgent that we face the issue of immigration and what the Minutemen are doing, for several reasons. First, with armed private militias roaming the border, someone is bound to get hurt – the immigrants, the militia members, innocent bystanders. Border enforcement is not a private matter, and the question of whether these patrols are legal or should be condoned by our government must be squarely faced.

Second, the presence of the civil patrols indicates that the Border Patrol isn't doing its job, or is being asked to do an impossible job. We either need to fund it and train it adequately or find some other way of dealing with border security.

Third, most international security experts have concluded that in the post-9/11 period, al-Qaida and other terrorist groups are first concentrating on splitting U.S. allies from us by attacking them – as in the bombings in Spain and Britain. Once this is accomplished, they will once again target the U.S. homeland, and one of the most convenient methods would be to penetrate U.S. borders with weapons – including, perhaps, weapons of mass destruction. Today, even in this period of heightened security, the U.S.-Mexico border is quite porous. Anybody or anything can slip through – drugs, people, weapons – and that is just not acceptable.

Fourth, our current approach to controlling immigration is simply not working; our policy and our practice are incongruent. Other countries have more civilized ways of regulating immigration, and should be examined as models. A legalized guest-worker program, where visas are issued for temporary workers, is one example of the type of fundamental reform of our system that is necessary, rather than minor tinkering with a failing approach.

Suffice it to say that this issue remains an important one, and The Club will reschedule a program examining immigration policy, because it concerns not only our economy and civil rights, but our very safety as a nation. Ω



Recruiting poster for the Minutemen.

Image courtesy of www.minutemanhq.com