

PARSING APART ANTI-IMMIGRATION ORGANIZATIONS:
THINKERS, DOERS, AND ENABLING CONDITIONS

Isaiah Devin Murray

Border Tech Lab

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Anti-immigration groups have been present in waves throughout American history. Immigrants have been an essential part of the American story and they are an essence of what makes our country what it is. With anti-immigration groups advocating for the closing down of border and tighter security, politicians are left with the decision of what to do. This paper aims to explore and compare the causes and effects of the enabling conditions for the rise of anti-immigration groups along the United States - Mexico border and the components of such groups – their motivations and difficulties.

The United States – Mexico border has been under scrutiny arguably since the 1920s. Although, there was actually no evidence that suggested that these immigrants were impacting these aspects of American society, many Americans blamed Mexican immigrant for the loss of jobs, high crime rates, lack of resources, and believed that they were going to contribute to the dilution of the mainstream American culture.¹ These sentiments circulated as an irrational fear among people who distrusted real data and took on the “Don’t- confuse-me-with-the facts” stance.² People genuinely felt that Mexican immigrants are taking more from the system than they are giving to it. Knowing that this anti-immigration sentiment is not embedded in fact, but times in American when the state of the country is not so good, immigrants are the scapegoat. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Mexico makes up the largest immigrant group from the 1960’s to the present, at a total of 26.5%.³ Because of this Mexicans can be targeted by

¹ Wayne A. Cornelius, *America in the Era of Limits: Migrants, Nativists, and the Future of U.S.-Mexican Relations* (La Jolla, Calif. (Q-060, La Jolla 92093): Center for U.S-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1982), 6.

² Cornelius, 19.

³ “Largest U.S. Immigrant Groups over Time, 1960-Present,” migrationpolicy.org, October 2, 2013, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/largest-immigrant-groups-over-time>.

xenophobic sentiment and that has emerged in immigration policy and in anti-immigration groups.

In 1982, Wayne A. Cornelius published a working paper on the nativist's reaction to Mexican immigration into the United States. He based his work on various public opinion surveys conducted nationally and within certain cities from 1950 to 1982, letters, and telephoned comments. However, he was not able to receive data from in depth interviews with nativist organizations holding nativists views, therefore positioning his conclusions not as incomplete but exploratory. He argues that once the rhetoric of limits is introduced into American society, a closing culture begins to be practiced.⁴ He mentions Orrin E. Klapp's explanation of this rhetoric:

“When an alien group or strange information invades a community, it should be no surprise to find that the closing centers on sharpening of collective identity and preserving it from the noise of conflicting styles... way of life, life-style, collective identity, seem to be one of the important things protected by closing to immigration. Such concerns may easily underlie closing rationale on other grounds such as property protection or even fear of ‘lawlessness’.”⁵

Closing off society from foreigners allows for the maintenance of “collective identity” and values which could take limits in different forms. Common topics of limits include the limit to providing jobs, integrating the poor into society, the “limit of altruism”⁶ and even something

⁴ Cornelius, *America in the Era of Limits*, 9.

⁵ Orrin Edgar Klapp, *Opening and Closing: Strategies of Information Adaptation in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 140.

⁶ Garrett Hardin, *The Limits of Altruism: An Ecologist's View of Survival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

he calls compassion fatigue.⁷ Politically, these terms can persuade someone to legitimately blame immigrants for domestic issues and lead people to think that the United States has reached its “absorptive capacity”⁸.

From 1920 to 1964, there was a spawning of “roundup” and deportation campaigns aimed specifically at Mexicans. What Cornelius argues in this paper is that if these “surges of anti-Mexican nationalism is a cyclical phenomenon could be something that’s seems to happen at least once in a generation”.⁹ These groups capitalize on the sentiment during “the time of exception in which the securitization of the border is linked to trepidation, existential gaps, and juridical absences.”¹⁰ One of the more recent anti-immigration groups is the Minutemen Project led by Chris Simcox.

Border Rhetorics, a book written by D. Robert DeChaine, he reiterates what Wayne A. Cornelius said before him, “Medical metaphors of immigrants as pollutants are potent by themselves, but they gain magnitude when that are tethered to other metaphoric clusters associated with securitization and criminality rhetorics.”¹¹ The Minutemen Project used this to gain their legitimacy among the public by publishing information on the World Wide Web that made them appear lawful, fair, and diplomatic about issues along the border. Their mission was to observe, report, and direct the border patrol to suspected Illegal Alien or Illegal Activities.¹² The Minutemen Project functions as an appendage to the legitimate border patrol fueled by the

⁷ Cornelius, 18.

⁸ Cornelius, 18.

⁹ Cornelius, 5.

¹⁰ D. Robert DeChaine, ed., *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 108.

¹¹ DeChaine, 109.

¹² DeChaine, 109.

political rhetoric surrounding immigrants from Mexico. The rhetoric of limits and the enabling conditions of national discontent leads to scapegoat immigrants especially when done collectively. The knowledge of their activities then reaches the state and create the perceptual need for vigilantes”.¹³

When looking at these movements it is useful to disentangle the thinkers, the followers, and the motives for people partaking in a social movement to fully understand the political implications and the public sentiment on the issue. From an outsider perspective anyone who is in a movement identifies with its larger goal, but what is suggested is that everyone is a part of the organization because they may receive some form of fulfillment that may not be in line with goal to begin with. Some people may participate in pastime of military. Some may act in fear of the future (browning of America). The demographics in America are changing and nativists may be fighting to maintain how things used to be. America’s hegemonic society is being challenged with a diversifying body of citizenry. Those who fear the changes may go great lengths to push back on these changes – even to serve as part of a border vigilante organization.

Considering the current presence of the political rhetoric that enables these anti-immigration activist groups, by observing how these groups operate internally a fuller picture of their motivations and impacts can be outlined. Observing contemporary literature on these nativist groups by researchers Roxanne Lynn Doty and Harel Shapira who both published their extensive accounts of ethnographic research with anti-immigration groups organizations in 2009 and 2013 respectively can uncover some answers to questions about internal operations.

¹³ DeChaine, 109.

Thematically, across these literatures it can be said that the border is always a highly politicized place. It is the physical place that seems to be an end to the domestic issues that we have. The rhetoric states that if the borders are secure so is the future of America, although there is not enough evidence to prove that Mexican immigrants are in fact ruining American society. Regardless of the facts, nativists in America adopt xenophobic ideals, and some organize around them. In the literature here, border surveillance groups spawn from this sentiment.

In Harel Shapira's chapter she states that the Minutemen organization (a border vigilante group) has two key players: the ideologists like Chris Simcox, the founder of the organization, and the actual minutemen, the people who surveil the border.¹⁴ She argued that anyone could be a Chris Simcox, but not everyone can be a minuteman. Being a minuteman requires you to travel to the border and surveil for hours. People who take a liking to this are "people who are trying to escape the sense of meaninglessness that defines their current lives as aging veterans and find a renewed sense of meaning and purpose."¹⁵ Considering this in the evolution of anti-immigration groups it is important to distinguish the actors and the thinkers. Who takes the action? Who does the thinking? Is there overlap? Are they mutually exclusive? In her appendix she complicates what it means to participate in a social movement. Observing the Minuteman group and its dissolving, Shapira predicts that there was no clear collective mission in the group. People had their own personal investments for being a part of the organization. She mentions that people used affiliation with the organization as a political opportunity. There may be a clear direction

¹⁴ Harel Shapira, *Waiting for José: The Minutemen's Pursuit of America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 150.

¹⁵ Shapira, 152.

for the movement but the reasons for someone to join are personal and as soon as their personal needs are not being met, they leave the organization.¹⁶

Additionally, she states that after doing life history research with members of the Minutemen Project, she realized that beliefs do not matter, the minutemen's grievances were brought up, but not any solutions to them. To help them in this process, they act at the border, engaging in a social world in the practice of soldiering. Not because of an enabling political climate do they surveil, they do so to remedy the lost sense of self.¹⁷

In Roxanne Doty's research she states that the mere presence of the border vigilante groups has encouraged many politicians and decision makers to pass policy and projects that are nativist in nature. Policies of exceptionalism at local, state, and national levels have come to be without the consideration of quieter voices in the community. In isolation these organizations have little foothold, but because political discourse contains this rhetoric, the effects are amplified and felt throughout the nation and along the border.¹⁸

She continues to complicate the term "vigilantism" in her work. She states that the term is "highly emotionally charged" and "imbued with controversy".¹⁹ Some of the terms she mentioned in her are *classic vigilantism*, directed at horse thieves, counterfeiters, outlaws, and 'Bad men', *neovigilantism* which is directed at specific groups such as the Jews, African-Americans, Catholics, immigrants. Another form of vigilantism is the *southern-style-vigilantism* which is based on overt racism and extreme forms of physical violence and lastly *western-style*

¹⁶ Shapira, 154.

¹⁷ Shapira, 158.

¹⁸ Roxanne Lynn Doty, *The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 100.

¹⁹ Doty, 23.

vigilantism which justifies itself in the name of upholding unenforced laws.²⁰ Those who are involved in the Minutemen project are engaging arguably with a mix between “*southern-style vigilantism*” and “*western-style vigilantism*”. These citizens are engaging with the highly politicized frontier with the idea of white supremacy and the idea of upholding the law because the national government is not doing a good enough of a job.

She, also like Wayne A. Cornelius, mentions the ties that the vigilante groups have to the idea in white supremacy. Chris Simcox, former leader of the Minutemen organization, made a posting explicitly saying that, “he is calling all White men to the front lines to do battle! He groups seeks nothing less than an end to the Browning of America.”²¹ What is surprising about this claim and this call to action is that Chris Simcox does not have any experience living along the border. He moved from California to Tombstone, Arizona and this fact has been one of the major critiques of the organization as a whole – many of the members moved from other places to dictate what was best for the community without even being from the community.²²

Chris Simcox, former leader in the Minuteman project had tried to be a part of the Border Patrol, but they would not accept him. His contradictory statements of “shaming the state” and then wanting to become a part of it may tend towards the sentiment of being a dislocated citizen. Initially Simcox wanted to join the border patrol to improve the conditions of illegal immigration, but their rejection led to believe that the state was not doing their job and he decided to establish the militia. He did not want to start a militia organization, but this was his last resort. The success of this organization was not based on the similar beliefs in ideology that

²⁰ Doty, 24.

²¹ Doty, 59.

²² Doty, 25.

helped found this organization with others, it was the fact they were similar in age. With the Minutemen Project, he had established a convening space for people who were already acting privately to secure the borders and there were many people like this in Southern Arizona.²³

The Minutemen Organization rallied people around the idea of patrolling the border, but this notion will lead nowhere. The next question to ask is what keeps people there. Chris Simcox had started a political action committee after traveling around the states giving lectures and hiring public relations personnel and finance managers. These decisions were not in line with what the volunteers wanted. Member began to fell separate from the organization and feared that the organization had become a political institution. This concern festered, and an argument broke out between Chris Simcox (the ideologue) and Blowfish (the soldier), ending where Simcox asked Blowfish to leave the organization. These two people were the essence of the division in the organization. The members felt that Blowfish represented their interests and petitioned to bring him back.²⁴ Chris said the petition was illegal and the then members began to resign from the organization. In one of the letters of resignation a member wrote, “After spending 30 years in the Corps and thinking I found an outfit like the minutemen that would fill a void in where America is heading... Border watches have become like ‘old home week’, renewing acquaintances, visiting with old comrades, having fun, being appreciated by the local residents... Should the border watches be discontinued, I would be deeply saddened.”²⁵

This project rallied people to hunt down illegal immigrants in spirits of aiding a faltering national border patrol. A distinction to make in this action is that those who are xenophobic do

²³ Shapira, *Waiting for José*, 147.

²⁴ Shapira, 150.

²⁵ Shapira, 151.

not have to secure the border with a vigilante group as such. People who actively participate in these border watches are lost veterans who are seeking a social world to find meaning in their lives. From an outside perspective these organizations may appear to be a unified front, but each member has their individual motivations for being a part of the organization and when they are not met, they leave the organization. Participation in these organizations are symptoms of someone feeling they are losing a grip on the way things used to be. America is changing, and these groups are trying to reestablish themselves as the real America, when in fact the real America does not revolve around the preferences of the white male. Political climate can inspire these initiatives to come about, but those who participate in them may firstly identify with the mission of the organization and then realize that they in fact fulfilling their need of purpose in the American society.

This anti-immigration rhetoric can be used as a tool to manifest the nationalist/nativist sentiment among the American public, but not there are people who will internalize this rhetoric and use it for political gain, but others may use the rhetoric as fuel for their actions along the border. Chris Simcox may have agreed with the political rhetoric and started the Minutemen project, but after two years of running the organization, his own follower base turned away from him and made their own organization, because they felt that their interests were not being represented nor supported. Because these groups are founded on little to no evidence of a real harm that immigrants are posing it may be easier to disengage from the organization. There may not be any real statistics on the amount of people they have detained as a result of the Minutemen Project, nor may they be formally recognized by the border patrol as a legitimate appendage to their work. The soldiers in the Minutemen Project participate in “border watching” for a sense of brotherhood and purpose. Many of them are veterans and white men who have traveled from

other places to the border - a reason for people to remain critical about how well they really represent their interests. With all these factors intermingling, the organization may have faced many internal conflicts, however some members were elected to congress – a political success.

Despite the splintering of the Minutemen Organization after everyone left Chris Simcox in the original group, the Minutemen dissemination displayed that there are in fact different actors in a movement group. There are the ideologists and the doers. Chris Simcox was an ideologist and “Blowfish” was a doer. These two conflicting personalities appeal to different people within the organization. This division in the group may have affected the loyalty and the respect that these people had for the organization and ultimately, Chris Simcox.

The creation and the dissolving of anti-immigration groups like the Minutemen were theorized to be cyclical in nature, meaning they come and go at different points in time, especially in times when the rhetoric of limits is introduced. These times of political rhetoric are used by political opportunists and the people join these movements to become a part of something.

Looking ahead, from the studies on these anti-immigration activist organizations, when considering the introduction of new surveillance technology, especially drones, the diversion of border surveillance may dissipate. People engaged with border surveillance enjoyed the comradery they had and not necessarily the rhetoric they supported. They were able to engage in a past time. With drone technology, this is a possible technology to individualize the team effort of border surveillance. Maybe this new activity will engage another sector of people who may not necessarily support anti-immigration efforts, but find some enjoyment in flying drones, like what happened with the Minutemen Project.

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