

INTRODUCTION

# All Quiet on the Southern Front



“GO AHEAD,” EARL SAYS AS HE PUSHES HIS CELL PHONE into my hand, “just say a couple of words.” Compelled by his enthusiasm, I take the phone and say hello to his wife. It’s a brief and awkward exchange, as it only could have been; I ask her about the weather in Tennessee and she asks me about the weather in Arizona. “Keep a watch over my Earl,” I hear her say as I hand the phone back to her husband.

Unless you have a satellite phone, it’s very rare to have reception on the patrol line. Cell phone towers are few and far between in this desolate place. And that’s a good thing. That way, even if you forget to turn it off, there’s no chance of your phone suddenly ringing and blowing your cover.

But Earl is very pleased when he turns on his phone and finds a signal. He is giddy about being out on patrol with me, an authentic Israeli, and wants to share the experience with his wife. He also wants to check up on her, and have her father, who makes the third of our three-man team, say hello.

Regardless, it’s only 6 p.m., there’s still light out, and as long as there is light rules are less rigid. The “illegals” don’t make their move until nightfall, and the hunt doesn’t really begin until then.

Earl is in his mid-forties, younger than most Minutemen. He is a large man, with broad shoulders and pale skin, which by now is badly reddened in the blistering southern Arizona sun. Flakes of dead skin pile up on his nose. Earl was born in Tennessee and has spent the majority of his life there; the main exception was his tour of duty in Iraq

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during the first Gulf War. Like most of the volunteers, he understands patrolling the border as an extension of his military service; Earl thinks of himself as a soldier in the war on terror. “I can’t go and fight in Iraq,” he tells me, “but I can come down here and make sure these borders are secure. . . . You better believe those terrorists are trying to come through over here.”

Back in Tennessee, Earl is the owner of a gun store. He jokes that one of the perks of his profession is that “no one’s ever gonna try to rob you.” He is an active member of the Tennessee Minutemen, heading his town’s local chapter. Lately he has been trying to recruit new members at gun shows, setting up a Minutemen information booth alongside his store’s table. At camp he offers volunteers a discount on their orders, “just for being patriots.”

Earlier that morning Earl invited me into his trailer and offered me some eggs, coffee, and a chance to go out on patrol. “Have you ever been out on the line?” he asked. I hadn’t, and I was apprehensive about going. He said I had to do it. “That’s where all the action is, that’s why I drove all the way down here.”

Like many Minutemen, Earl feels that America is in a state of crisis. He is nostalgic about the past and has an apocalyptic view of the future. “What’s happening is nothing less than invasion,” Earl angrily tells me, connecting his sense of America’s decline to the presence of Mexicans. “We have already lost California. I walk around parts of Los Angeles and no one speaks English, all the signs are in Spanish. I feel like a complete outsider in my own country.”

Earl is not alone. Starting in 2005,<sup>1</sup> hundreds of people, mostly retired, working class, male, and white, have traveled from all over the country to the border between the United States and Mexico. Their goal is deceptively simple: to prevent the collapse of America. Deploying under such titles as Operation Sovereignty and Operation Secure America, they station themselves along particular segments of the border that “line leaders” have designated as high-traffic areas through what they call reconnaissance. Then they sit and walk, and wait, for hours at a time, in order to, as they say, assist the Border Patrol in the apprehension of illegal immigrants. They come to defend their America. Some come with their spouses, others with friends, but mostly they come alone, often driving hundreds of miles instead of flying so that they can bring

their guns with them. Their enemy is an elusive and contradictory figure often referred to simply as “José Sanchez”; sometimes he is a drug dealer carrying AK-47s, at other times a rapist incapable of assimilating, and at yet other times a hard worker seeking a better life.

Between 2005 and 2008 I camped out with the Minutemen, patrolled the border with them, attended protests with them, and sat for hours with them debating America’s past, present, and future in order to understand how they define and defend America. Who are these people? What are they doing? What is this threat from which they seek to protect their country? And how can understanding them help us understand contemporary America?

I have found that to answer these questions, instead of focusing on the Minutemen’s beliefs and attitudes—their ideology in the broad sense—we need to focus on practices. While ideology may have helped bring the Minutemen down to the border, it does not explain what they do when they get there and why they find what they do meaningful. As we’ll see in the pages that follow, it is not that ideology does not matter—it certainly does—but by trying to understand the Minutemen through an exclusive focus on their ideology, both scholars and the popular media, as well as many Americans, have misunderstood this movement. By shifting the focus from isolated beliefs to the practice of politics, to what the Minutemen do and not simply what they say, we can acquire a more accurate portrait of who they are and why it is that they patrol the border.

I initially traveled to southern Arizona to conduct interviews with the hope that, face-to-face, the quality of my interviews would be better than if I conducted them over the telephone. Only then, after listening to robotic responses to questions about immigration while seeing a dynamic camp life in the backdrop in which the conversations were not so much about immigration policy as about patrol tactics and military experiences, did I realize that Earl and his compatriots came to the border neither to express nor to formulate an opinion, but rather to participate in a social world. And to understand the Minutemen I had to understand that world. Increasingly I realized that to understand the Minutemen I had to do more than just interview them, I had to patrol with them. As Earl himself put it about the patrols, “That’s why I drove all the way down here.”

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Unlike interviews or survey research, ethnography, based on the researcher's participation in the life of a community, is attuned to the study of practice. In ethnography the emphasis is not only what people say, but what people do. A subtle but important argument is built into the method: to understand a group demands not just an examination of the things its members say—particularly in response to a formal survey—but actually seeing them interact with one another.

To study the Minutemen by focusing only on their beliefs or attitudes, their ideology in the broad sense, would be to reduce them to stereotypes: to conservative, anti-immigrant, antigovernment talking heads. To ultimately understand the Minutemen, we need to place them in their camp and on the patrol line.

### On the Line

The stench of a rotting cattle carcass fills the air around our lawn chairs. We're Post 4 on the Alpha line, and there's a large pool of water 50 feet behind us where cattle are congregated. They take turns bowing their heads to drink water and lifting them to look at us.

I'm disturbed by the stench of the carcass. Earl has other concerns: the cattle are making noise. "If they keep going on like that all night I don't know how we're going to be able to hear the illegals if they come by?"

Shaking his head at the cows, Earl unclips his phone and calls his wife. He exchanges some courtesies and then tells her about me. "Well, I'm here with Pops and a young man who's originally from Israel." There's a pause and then, "Yeah, Israeli. He's a student writing a report on the Minutemen."

By nightfall the cattle have stopped making noise and so has Earl. Shortly after the sun goes down he gets up. He takes out his thermal scope and surveys the miles of scrub and sand beneath us. Kneeling down, his elbow rested on his knee to give the scope a calibrated balance, he swivels his neck back and forth for panoramic views across the darkened valley.

Earl suggests the two of us take turns with the surveillance. "We can run half-hour shifts." I understand, by this point, that his father-in-law, who is recovering from a stroke, is not going to participate. Earl doesn't seem too pressed to get him in on the action, and the father-in-law

doesn't seem too pressed to get in on it. Every now and then the father-in-law pokes a stick at the mice running around his lawn chair, and I am reminded that he is with us.

Thermal scopes are tricky. They work by detecting heat, but as Earl cautions me, all objects give off a certain amount of heat, and it's important to be able to distinguish cacti and jack rabbits from Mexicans. He instructs me to survey the landscape, using the scope "to get a good sense of what's there. That way later on you can pick up anything that's different." Directing me to focus on a mesquite tree nearby, he asks me to describe what I see.

I take the scope. It has the look and feel of a small handheld movie camera. I place my hand inside a strap and hold the scope up to my right eye. The world is reduced to a green haze. Nothing makes any sense. I consider how it is possible that this contraption helps one see.

Slowly my vision clears. I begin to see, to make out familiar objects in an unfamiliar way. Things are neither blackened out by the night nor their normal daytime colors. But I can see them. I can see what I should not be able to see.

Earl is pleased with my depiction of "a burning bush, like the one Moses must have seen." He gives a whispered chuckle. "What I want you to get into your head is that it's not moving; if it's an illegal, you're going to see that flash of heat moving."

For the next four hours we take our turns with the thermal scope. When I'm not doing my share I try as best I can to see, through the pitch black, what Earl is doing. He kneels, gets up, walks a few quiet steps, kneels back down, and pans slowly across the Valley below. When it's my turn I try to do the same.

Earl thinks he's spotted someone. It must be close to midnight. Crouched next to his chair, he whispers me over in excitement.

I'm handed the scope by an eager hand and directed to look 150 yards due north. I see nothing. I tell Earl. He takes the scope. He paces around in haste, crouching, looking. His breathing gets heavy. By now it's very cold, and when Earl opens his mouth it releases a cloud of steam.

"There he goes. There he goes. I'm calling it in."

Earl takes hold of the radio strapped to his camouflage jacket and calls the "comms room" back at the camp. "This is Tennessee at Alpha 4." He

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waits for acknowledgment and then continues in a pant, “I’ve got one headed due east. About 200 yards due north of our post.” Earl turns to me, breathing heavily, “It doesn’t feel so cold anymore, huh? That’ll get your adrenalin going.”

Earl is ecstatic but nervous. What if he has called in a dud? What if he has imagined a Mexican? But even worse: what if his call gets away?

An hour after Earl makes his call we hear the roar of a truck engine approaching. The engine makes a loud, ripping noise. It sounds like a lawnmower that’s constantly trying to start up. The truck, a beat up 1970s Chevy, belongs to a man they call “Blowfish.” If you saw his face, you’d understand how he got the name.

Blowfish is serving as the line leader. He is the most admired person at the camp. He used to be a Green Beret. They say he was involved in a number of classified special operations in Vietnam. Among these men, he is the stuff of myth. There’s an aura about him.

Blowfish parks his truck 50 feet from us. Earl runs over to him. Earl wants to know why the Border Patrol never showed up. Through a rolled-down window Blowfish explains that since there was only “one of them,” and since the Border Patrol doesn’t have many “assets” in the area, they didn’t bother to call it in.

Earl is dejected. Sensing this, Blowfish quickly adds, “But don’t worry, you’ll get credited with a sighting, we’ll put it down.”

In the Minutemen camp, recognition by Blowfish means a great deal.

Besides his mythic past, Blowfish does a number of things that give him his aura. Often he’ll come to camp displaying a rattlesnake he killed while driving in the desert. Other times he’ll make accurate predictions about an upcoming storm (many attribute his prophetic skills to his Cherokee Indian roots). But for the volunteers, what is most impressive about this man is that he doesn’t need to use headlights when he drives at night. Blowfish can navigate through the Arizona desert in pitch black.

Part of the role of the line leader is to check up on people during the shift. Unlike other members, who are required to remain stationary, the line leader is allowed to move around. Members on post recognize the importance of this, but they’re also upset by it. When the line leaders drive through the Valley, headlights illuminating the dark night, they blow everyone’s cover. “I don’t get the point,” a volunteer tells me. “Here

we are, supposed to be all quiet, and they come up with their engines blaring and headlights on. It just doesn't make sense to me."

But Blowfish is different. He understands. He drives with his "Generation-3" night-vision binoculars, holding them up to his eyes with one hand while steering with the other. Aided by the night-vision binoculars and his extensive knowledge of the desert terrain, Blowfish drives in darkness. And the men on the line respect him for that. "He knows this place better than the Border Patrol," Earl tells me later. I wonder if I should ask what difference it makes whether his lights are on or not, considering that noisy engine. But I've started to understand something. We aren't here to catch Mexicans.

Earl and Blowfish exchange a few more words, and as they do the space between them gets filled up by a pocket of steam. They're discussing the Gen-3 binoculars. Earl wants to know how much they cost. They were a bargain, worth around \$2,000. Blowfish paid a mere \$500. Earl is in disbelief. "Believe me," Blowfish explains, "I almost fell over when I saw the ad in the paper. I called the guy right away. It was some guy who bought them and never used them. He says to me, 'They're still in their original packaging.' I got in my truck and made that forty-minute drive in twenty. I showed up on his doorstep and said, 'Here's \$500 cash.'"

Earl takes Blowfish's binoculars and gives the terrain one of his signature panoramic surveys. "That's just amazing," he reports back. "I mean the crispness is amazing. It puts my thermals to shame." The two men exchange a few more words about the binoculars, offering their take on the difference between the Gen-1, Gen-2, and Gen-3 models.

Earl wants to know if he can show me the binoculars. "I've got this young man here with me," he tells Blowfish while pointing. "He's from Israel and I'd like to show these to him if it's all right with you." Even in a whisper, the deference comes across. I make out what I think is a nod and Earl walks the binoculars over to me.

I traveled down to the Valley for the first time in October 2005 and was alternately awed and terrified.

To get to the Valley you drive south on the interstate highway from Tucson for what seems like too long; no matter how many times you make the drive, it always feels like you've gone too far. But the truth is, you haven't gone far enough.

As I made the turn from the interstate into the road that leads into the Valley, I immediately sensed something was different. The gas station at the side of the road was filled with Border Patrol agents; a group of brown people in handcuffs were being lined up in front of a bus; uniformed members of the National Guard were talking on the side of the road; and in front of me was a truck loaded with military equipment. I was entering a war zone.

It's a good thing there's a big Minutemen sign at the entrance to the Anvil Ranch because, apart from mile markers, there is little in the way of signposts. And, even with the Minutemen sign there, you are just as likely to get lost in the vastness of the surrounding landscape and miss the turn onto the ranch.

Coming from New York, I found the vast emptiness of the area surrounding the ranch, its utter disconnect and remoteness, overwhelming. The tents, trailers, canopies, folding tables, chairs, portable toilets, and most of all men in camouflage that made up the Minutemen's camp stuck out in the ranch's otherwise barren landscape, which extended over thousands of acres. It was isolation in its purest form, and this military outpost seemed utterly out of place: an oasis of activity surrounded by miles upon miles of open desert.

Prior to starting my research on the Minutemen, I had been in e-mail communications with Shannon, the organization's media liaison, who had very graciously welcomed me to come to the ranch in southern Arizona where the group had set up its camp and based its border patrol operations.

I met Shannon and was surprised to find that although the name suggested otherwise, Shannon was in fact a male. It was the first a number of surprises.

Shannon handed me a badge that indicated I was a "media person." Thinking there was perhaps a mistake, I reminded him that I was a student and not a member of any media outlet. "But you are here to do interviews and write about us?" he said, framing it less as a question and more as a point of fact. I nodded, and he gestured me to an area where a series of vans were parked, cordoned off from the main center of the camp. It was the parking lot for members of the media, and I had to move my car there. As it turned out there was as many vehicles parked there as there were in what I now identified as the volunteers' parking area. Indeed, there were as many reporters as there were Minutemen.



As I walked around the ranch, I made it barely 50 feet before being approached by a burly volunteer inquiring as to who I was and what I was doing there. I explained, as I had in my communications with Shannon, that I was a student doing research for my PhD degree in sociology. Hoping to parlay the encounter into an interview, I asked him for his “thoughts about illegal immigration.” He responded by asking me for my “thoughts about the Minutemen.”

Before I could finish stuttering my way through a full account of how I inhabited the fieldworker’s mythic stance of “objectivity,” he asked if I had signed in and received a media badge. I took out the badge from my pocket and showed it to him while clarifying, as before, that I was not a journalist but rather a student. As if he hadn’t heard me, the volunteer advised me to always wear the media badge: “Otherwise, the way you look, people will think you are with the ACLU, and you’ll keep getting harassed just like I harassed you.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to make of his advice, which appeared to be genuine. We were in the middle of nowhere. Why was he asking about the American Civil Liberties Union? Nevertheless, I hung my badge around my neck and spent the rest of the day trying not to get in anyone’s way.

On my second day a female volunteer, who had just finished responding to my query regarding her “thoughts on illegal immigration” by correcting my phrasing (“They are not ‘illegal immigrants,’ they are illegal aliens—over here we tell it like it is, we aren’t afraid to call a spade a spade and an illegal an illegal”) told me that I looked like I could be from the ACLU. “You know, being young like you are, and with bushy hair like that,” she commented while pointing to my shoulder-length hair, “you look like you could be from the ACLU.” Once again, in this empty stretch of desert, the ACLU was invoked. Why, I thought to myself, were people suspicious about whether or not I was a member of the ACLU? Reflecting on the volunteers’ comments, I began to take notice of the fact that, at twenty-five, I was by far the youngest person there; most of the Minutemen looked like they could have been my grandparents.

As I walked around, suddenly self-conscious, I was happy to see a group of about ten people who appeared to be my age on the other side of the ranch’s fence. They were gathered just beyond the entrance gate. I

walked over to them, excited about the prospect of meeting some of the younger members of the Minutemen.

As I approached the group, I noticed that many of them were wearing t-shirts that had the words “Legal Observer / *Observador Legal*” written on them. Having seen some Minutemen wearing hats that said “Undocumented Border Patrol Agent,” and having been told that this was meant as an appropriation of “the way liberals call illegals ‘undocumented,’” I assumed that these t-shirts followed a similar humor, most likely insinuating that the people wearing them were “observing the law” by monitoring the border for illegal immigrants.

I asked the young people about their shirts and was told that they were all members of the ACLU and were there to monitor the Minutemen’s patrol activities, to “make sure that the vigilantes don’t kill anyone.” A few of them explained they were also members of groups called No More Deaths and Samaritans, which provide “humanitarian assistance to the migrants.”

I then understood why the ACLU was so present in the Minutemen’s minds and why I did not want to be mistaken for one of them. I decided to cut our conversation short, but it was too late, because from the corner of my eye I could see a group of Minutemen gathering near the ranch entrance, talking to each other while pointing at me.

I attempted to walk back to the camp with a confident attitude, looking directly in the eyes of the Minutemen as I strutted past. I hoped that my fearless demeanor would erase their suspicions. “Hold on there,” one of them said with an authoritative anger, “what’s your business over here?” With my eyes affixed to the guns holstered to their hips, I shakily explained to the group that I was a student and even made reference to my media badge. A few high-ranking members came over and accused me of being a “spy for the other side.” I tried to defend myself. I had no idea when I met the people across from the ranch that they were members of the ACLU. I didn’t even know what the ACLU was doing there.

As members of the ACLU gathered within earshot, Chris Simcox, the Minutemen president, pointed in their direction and angrily remarked, “We don’t associate with those people. They are racists, they are communists, and they are anti-American.” In a panic, I pleaded, “Even if they are, what does that have to do with me?” Without a word in my direction,

Simcox instructed the other Minutemen to take away my media badge and escort me from the campground. “Get him out of here, he’s a mole.”

I returned to New York, dejected by my experience. On the advice of my professors, I contacted Shannon once again with the hopes of being able to mend the situation and regain entry. Shannon apologized for what happened and invited me to come back: “MCDC [Minutemen Civil Defense Corps] wants media at our operations. Without media to cover what we do, there is no story on the border.”

I quickly returned to southern Arizona, and, along with getting a fresh haircut, I borrowed my father’s old army pants from his time in the Israeli military. I had noticed that most of the volunteers were dressed in military fatigues and figured I ought to make some effort to better integrate myself. Apart from these changes to my appearance, I brought a letter from Columbia University’s Department of Graduate Student Affairs, which affirmed that I was a PhD student conducting research as part of my degree requirements. The letter, written on official university letterhead and stamped with the official Columbia seal, asked the reader to treat me “with respect” and provide me “access to any archives or research documents.” I was ready.

Before reaching the Minutemen camp I passed a small grocery store on the side of the road. As I toured the aisles, the person at the cash register glanced at me suspiciously. When it came time for me to pay, he curtly scanned my items, told me how much I owed, and asked what brought me here. I explained that I was from New York, and that I was on my way to the Minutemen camp. He gave me a quick once-over and then asked, “Are you one of them?” I explained that I was not a Minuteman, but a student.

“Well that’s good. For a second there, I thought you might be with them.” Before I could decide whether I wanted to ask him for his opinion on the Minutemen, he continued, “You know you just missed them. Yeah, a whole group of them. They were congregating outside the store, having some kind of meeting. I told them to get the hell out of here. I told them I don’t condone what you guys are doing. Some of the guys were giving me shit, so I went back in and got my shotgun, and I said, ‘Maybe you didn’t hear me the first time.’”

Back at the camp, I confidently paraded around in my army pants, my letter strategically placed within easy reach in one of the side pockets.

I was determined to show it to people when they asked me who I was or became suspicious that I was affiliated with the ACLU. I was self-assured when, within my first fifteen minutes back in the camp, a volunteer questioned me about my identity. It was Earl.

I took out my letter and handed it to him while explaining that I was a student. After reviewing the letter, Earl looked at me and said, “Son, the only thing this says to me is that I shouldn’t trust you.”

Agitated, I demanded to know what he meant. “Well, let’s see, New York, Columbia University . . . what this letter certifies is that you are a liberal and that you’re probably part of the open borders lobby.” Before I could respond, Earl continued, “Anyway, what kind of a name is Harel? I mean that doesn’t sound too good either.”

I realized that I should start thinking about a different research topic. I explained to Earl, grudgingly, that I was born in Israel and moved to America as a child.

Earl removed his gun from his holster. My heart dropped. Laying the gun across the palm of his hand, he told me he uses a Glock-17, “just like they do in Israel.”

I listened warily. He told me his holster was made in Israel. “I figured if it’s from Israel you know it’s gonna be quality. . . . You know there is no group of people I have more respect for than the Israelis.” Incapacitated by this bizarre turn of events, I could only nod when Earl asked me if the pants I was wearing were from the “IDF” (Israeli Defense Forces). He recognized the stitching pattern from those he saw in the military supply catalogues. “Us military people know these things,” he proudly noted, “we study these things.” Regaining my composure, I explained that the pants belonged to my father. Before I could continue, while pointing to the empty desert that lay ahead of us, Earl announced, “This is our Gaza.” I kept silent; it was the start of a beautiful friendship.

### **Patriotic Racist Vigilante Heroes**

Like many Americans, I first heard about the Minutemen while reading the newspaper. It was April 2005 and the Minutemen were in the midst

of their first-ever patrol of the U.S.-Mexico border. The media was captivated. So was I.

In the pages of everything from local to international newspapers were photographs of camouflaged men prowling the desert, seemingly a moment away from committing violence. You have probably read these articles and seen these images. The liberal media describes the Minutemen as “sorry-ass gun freaks and sociopaths,”<sup>2</sup> while the conservative media characterizes them as “extraordinary men and women . . . heroes.”<sup>3</sup> In some accounts these people are patriots; in others, they are lunatics.

One thing is certain, these men and women, whatever their given labels suggest, have come to play an enormous role in our country’s debates about immigration. The problem is that our standard judgments, whether damning them or praising them, sidestep the complex dynamics of who these people are and what they do on the border.

Liberal media accounts suggest that when it comes to immigration, what the Minutemen and their supporters lack is sympathy. If only they understood the plight of the people coming across the border, they would change their minds. But if we are to understand the Minutemen, we need to understand how anger and sympathy can coexist.

Take Robert, a seventy-two-year-old volunteer and former member of the Marine Corps. When I tell Robert that I feel bad for the people coming across the border, his response is surprising to me: “You’re wanting to put yourself in the plight of the immigrant that’s coming here. And feel their pain. And I can understand that. . . . There have been times in my life when I needed a job. Where I couldn’t afford to pay the bills. . . . And I can understand about wanting to make a better life. We are Americans and that’s we do. That’s what we are raised to do, that is the American dream. Get an education, get a career, get a job. To better ourselves.”

Make no mistake: nearly all the Minutemen criticize Mexicans, often speaking of their lack of morals and violent temperaments. On numerous occasions volunteers refer to Mexicans as the “cancer of our society,” and almost all insinuate in one way or another that Mexicans are reconquering America; the word “invasion” is used much more than “immigration” to describe what is happening. Indeed, the Minutemen are convinced that they are aiding the war on terror by

stopping insurgents, both Hispanic and Arab. But while illegal immigrants and terrorists are often combined into one, and it appears that “José” represented an unambiguous threat, the Minutemen also make important distinctions. “José, the hard worker” is a recognized figure, and he is not their primary target. Indeed, as they often tell me, in no small measure to sway my own sympathies about what they are doing on the border, “You have to remember, it’s not just poor José Sanchez looking for a job who is coming across the border, there are also rapists and drug runners.” The Minutemen recognize that “poor José Sanchez” is coming across the border, and, as we will see, they contend with this in conflicting ways.

For the Minutemen there is a hierarchy of enemies. And in this hierarchy “coyotes,” the paid guides who lead illegal immigrants across the border, are the most vilified. They are the ultimate evil. And it is not simply for the reasons I expected. While I assumed the Minutemen spoke so negatively about coyotes because they are the ones who bring illegal immigrants across the border, the ones who bring over the so-called problem, it is far more complex. The coyotes are vilified in large part because of how they are believed to be treating the illegal immigrants they are in charge of bringing through the desert. That is, the moral indignation regarding the coyote has to do in large part with the way he treats “poor José Sanchez looking for a job.” As Robert tells me, “The coyotes are the lowest of the low. Scum. They abandon the people they bring over. They rape the women.” In the Minutemen’s patrols, to catch a coyote is considered the ultimate goal and brings the greatest sense of accomplishment.

Although they repeatedly speak of “backwards Mexican culture,” the Minutemen also speak about the positive cultural values of Mexicans. Just after telling me that he is “afraid of America turning into Mexico” and “angered by the fact that Mexicans don’t want to assimilate,” a volunteer named John says that “the Mexicans have good cultural values, like family values, that I wish we Americans had.”

And much as they talk about Mexicans as terrorists coming to take over America, on multiple occasions the Minutemen speak about how many of the people coming across the border don’t actually want to be coming across the border but are being “forced into it by drug lords.” And more than anything, most Minutemen also understand the very

real, very urgent, and often banal motivations of the people coming across. What we often don't understand, or don't appreciate, is that the Minutemen, too, understand that what motivates José is poverty and inequality, and that, placed in the same difficult position, they might take the same actions. "Heck," Robert tells me, "I might be doing the same thing if I were in his shoes." Far from an obvious problem, immigration is a complex issue to the group's members.

When scholars discuss the men and women who cross the border illegally, they are careful to reflect on the influence of larger social structures. Their depictions of the Minutemen, however, slide all too easily toward distorted stereotypes.

Yes, the Minutemen say that José should be deported. Yes, they say there should be a wall built along the border. Yes, they say that there shouldn't be an option to "press 2 for Spanish." Yes, they say that José has no loyalty to America, that he is violent and dangerous. But they also say that José is a hard worker, trying to "make a better life for his family." They say that he takes away jobs that Americans need, but they also say that he is being abused and exploited by big business. They say that globalization has brought Americans a more comfortable life, but that it has come at a cost: stable jobs, a sense of security, and a sense of responsibility to one another.

Just as the Minutemen are concerned with creating a sharp binary between legal and illegal, so too has public discourse about them focused on a restrictively simple question: are the Minutemen engaging in criminal activity, or are they following the rule of law? Liberal media accounts that damn them make claims about their criminal activity, while conservative media accounts that praise them make claims about the legality of their activity. And from this, one labels them as vigilantes; the other, as patriots.

In the numerous congressional meetings that have taken place over the past decade about the Minutemen, focused on understanding what they are doing and whether they should be supported or stopped, the question has been the same. Consider, for example, a bill proposed in the Arizona legislature that sought to brand Minutemen as domestic terrorists. The Democratic Arizona House member who introduced the bill testified, "These organizations attracted extremists around the country who have a total lack of respect for the law and who believe

that a violent response is appropriate to the problems Arizona is facing. The purpose of this legislation is to clarify that in the State of Arizona, the only individuals who have the authority to enforce these types of immigration laws are individuals who are affiliated with and authorized by local and State law enforcement agencies, the U.S. Border Patrol, and the Arizona National Guard.”<sup>4</sup>

Legislators who seek to support the group dispute these charges of illegality. In a special hearing convened in the U.S. House of Representatives on the Minutemen, Republicans repeatedly testified that so long as the Minutemen “obey the law” and do not “apprehend anyone,” they should be not only supported but praised.<sup>5</sup>

But just as the legal label does not explain who illegal immigrants are, it also does not explain who the Minutemen are. Illegality explains neither José nor Earl, it renders judgment about them; it doesn’t tell us who they are, how they act, or why they act the way they do.

The challenge of sociology is to help us move beyond the narrow accounts of the Minutemen, trapped in the twin straitjackets of racism and patriotism. But unfortunately sociologists have thus far not done a very good job. What limited scholarship on the Minutemen currently exists tends to reproduce the simplicity of the media and public accounts.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge the Minutemen pose to sociologists is that they undermine some of the established categories that have been used to define and understand them. Principal among these is the category of the right-wing social movement—defined as a movement organized around an identifiable set of right-wing beliefs.

While movement leaders typically present a united and coherent front, thanks these days in no small part to media liaisons like Shannon, the internal reality is much different. It is not just that rank-and-file members of the Minutemen believe different things, but that for many of them the project of group leaders and their political allies, which focuses on championing a set of policies about immigration and leveraging volunteering on the border into political office, is not necessarily their project. We further the problem when we confuse movement ideology, which is accessed through pamphlets, slogans, and speeches by spokespeople and leaders, with individual beliefs and attitudes. As Robert Stallings argues, such an assumption is a form of ecological fallacy,



where “a collective phenomenon (ideology) is used to predict responses (beliefs) of individuals.”<sup>7</sup>

Every social movement contains a wide range of participatory roles, and when we speak of participating in movements we need to be cautious not to reduce participation into a single homogenous category. While certain Minutemen, like Chris Simcox and other leaders, focus on giving speeches and articulating a movement ideology, the rank and file participate quite literally on the ground. Patrolling the border is where their work, and its attendant meanings, begin and end. And it is to these rank-and-file members that I believe we must turn to understand this movement.

Many of the sociological efforts that have been made to refine the category of the political Right have attempted to distinguish the Right from the “extreme Right,” the “radical Right,” the “fundamental Right,” and so forth.<sup>8</sup> But such accounts miss the fact that more categories only further the problem of simplification. Instead of accepting and contending with the complexity of political beliefs, the increased partitions deny them, seeking to fend off complexity by purging it. Like the terms “vigilante” or “hero,” “right-wing” replaces the complexity of the reality I witnessed with a misleading neatness. It is a neatness that suggests that the Minutemen’s beliefs are radically different from the beliefs of those who do not patrol the border; a neatness that suggests the Minutemen’s beliefs are coherent. But political ideology—whether right or left—has no coherency, and to search for it is to get the Minutemen fundamentally wrong. To understand these folks ideologically is to understand them poorly.

Instead of denying the lack of a clear border around the ideas that constitute the Minutemen, this complexity should be embraced as an object of study. And when it is, this complexity will reveal something that is unsettling: the Minutemen aren’t “right-wing.” In conversation the Minutemen talk about immigration in a multiplicity of different ways—ways that alternately channel a variety of ideologies from across America’s political spectrum.

The Minutemen, as we have seen, focus on how José is violating American law. But surprisingly, that concept exceeds the boundaries of so-called right-wing politics and includes a number of ideas that overlap with an anti-neoliberal discourse, the kind of discourse around which

so many so-called left-wing social movements have mobilized. The Minutemen's discourse of the law and illegality is firmly entrenched in a critique of market logic, where economic profit determines the calculus of human interactions. As with many socially progressive groups that critique the program of neoliberalism, they suggest that the government, by failing to police the border, is selling out to big business and no longer adequately taking care of its citizenry.

The Minutemen tend to vote Republican, but they do so begrudgingly. While they vilified Barack Obama during the 2008 election, they also circulated a petition to get then president George W. Bush impeached. And if there is a politician who is enemy number one, it is Republican Arizona senator John McCain. Quite simply, to the extent that these folks have an ideology, it doesn't fall along party lines; the Minutemen have no place in the system—neither in America's political institutions nor in its social institutions.

If sociologists are going to comprehend how the Minutemen think, we need to recognize how the Minutemen's diagnosis of what is happening to America—the loss of community, the forfeiture of deep relationships to today's temporary economic transactions—is not so different from the diagnoses of Robert Putnam or Richard Sennett, writers celebrated by liberal Democrats.<sup>9</sup> And we need to understand how, even with a diagnosis not so different from that of many of us, the Minutemen's solution is to get a gun and patrol the border.

In Seymour Martin Lipset's classic treatise on politics, members of the right wing are described as “radicals” characterized by the lack of a democratic ethos. They are depicted as “isolated from the activities, controversies, and organizations of democratic society, an isolation which prevents them from securing that sophisticated and complex view of the social structure which makes understandable and necessary the norms of tolerance.”<sup>10</sup> But the Minutemen are not Lipset's radicals; they are closer to Robert Putnam's ideal democratic actors.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam's diagnosis of America's decline is rooted in the loss of civic engagement and the decline in associational life. What America has lost, Putnam argues, are institutions—ranging from churches to book clubs—in which people can come together and do things as part of a collective, as members of a shared community; what America has lost are Americans who seek out these institutions; what

America has lost is the spirit that is at the heart of our democracy. It is the spirit that Alexis de Tocqueville noticed in the eighteenth century and claimed as the source of America's strength.<sup>11</sup> The Minutemen agree. And the Minutemen have that spirit. What they lack is not a democratic ethos. They are what people like Putnam and de Tocqueville and our whole liberal democratic political tradition want out of citizens: engaged, active, concerned.

Within their narrative of America's decline, it is not just the "illegal" whom the Minutemen criticize, but also the legal American citizen. They criticize not just what is outside America's borders but what is inside. Not just those trying to get in, but those already inside.

The Minutemen say that Americans are not what they used to be. They say that people today are lazy, and this laziness is reflected in terms of their lack of sense of duty and obligation, which for the Minutemen stands as the central aspect of citizenship. Take Frank, an eighty-three-year-old Korean War veteran who was in the Marine Corps for ten years. "Being a citizen" he tells me, "means not accepting things as they are." For him, "Being a citizen does not mean sitting on the sofa with a can of beer and bag of potato chips while watching football—the sad thing is that for many Americans today that is what it has come to mean."

In Frank's account, the government used to be more "responsible": "It wasn't like this. The government was for the people. These days it's all about big business. That's what this whole immigration thing boils down to. Big business. They've got the people up in D.C. in their pockets. You think they're working for me and you? You better wake up and take a better look."

But why is it that when Frank takes a look he does so through a pair of night-vision goggles? How is it that the Minutemen, with a political ethos that shares much with that of the college students who helped elect President Obama in 2008, get to the border? It is much more difficult, but also much more realistic, to start not with a homogeneous set of right-wing beliefs as an explanation for why the Minutemen patrol the border, but rather conflicting and contradictory beliefs, beliefs that, while they include elements of them, are not simply racist and anti-immigrant. There are strong right-wing components to the Minutemen's politics, and there are expressions of xenophobia, but while their

actions and politics contain these, they also exceed them. The Minutemen think sociologically and empathically about illegal immigrants, and they simultaneously construct them through distorted stereotypes. Understanding the Minutemen is not, in other words, a matter of choosing one or the other of these beliefs. That is a false choice, one not born out of the reality I witnessed. The question sociologists need to ask is not how it is that these people believe things so different, so alien, but how it is that even though their beliefs resonate with a liberal democratic politics, they come to such a different answer about the solution.

Such is the question I will ask again and again. The answer, we will see, cannot be found inside their heads, neither in the form of ideology or a damaged psyche. Nor can the answer rely on the tired accounts of racism. These will only get us so far. They won't get us down to the patrol line, but that is where we need to go.

## Practicing Politics

Just what is it that the Minutemen actually *do*?

In large part, my initial hesitations about going on patrol with them were about the prospect of participating—and perhaps, I dared to wonder, assisting—in apprehending people coming across the border. I have carefully trained myself to be a participant observer, but in this instance observation was in fact participation. In that first experience with Earl on the line, however, I discovered something that would guide much of my research: illegal immigrants are very rarely encountered.

Having come down to the border with knowledge of the group solely from media reports, my image was a standard one: citizens with guns, self-made police, arresting and detaining illegal immigrants. The image is mesmerizing—alternately noble or nauseating, depending on your political persuasions, but fascinating regardless. The media has done well to sustain this particular image and manner of understanding this group, focusing its coverage on moments of patrol when the Minutemen encounter illegal immigrants and Border Patrol helicopters swoop down into the desert. Repeatedly, we are told, and shown, that this is

where the action is; that from here, we can best glean what this group is about.

The flashes of activity the media and public are so enamored with are, however, misleading if we want to understand what the Minutemen do and what motivates and sustains them. First, such moments are a rarity, occurring perhaps once in every fifty hours of patrol. And, when you do see an illegal immigrant, it usually involves seeing him race past you while you pick up the phone and call the Border Patrol. Quite simply, the Minutemen do not catch illegal immigrants, and their impact on stopping illegal immigration, at least through enforcement, is negligible. Second, our collective focus on such moments obscures the fact that the meaning of the Minutemen emerges elsewhere; it obscures the fact, as this book will show, that the most meaningful aspects of the Minutemen's patrols are not to be found in those rare moments of encounter.

Patrolling the border, I came to understand, is like fishing: the catch is a rare occurrence and a small part of what it's all about. Certainly, when such moments do happen, and they certainly do, they are exhilarating, and the potential that they will happen is crucial. But these adrenaline-pulsing moments are almost beside the point. Instead the Minutemen spend the majority of their time waiting and wandering in the desert, preparing for an encounter that probably will not happen. To understand the Minutemen, we must make sense of why they make a month-long pilgrimage to the border and return, time after time, even when the practical efficacy of such a patrol, as a way to enforce an international boundary, is negligible. This leads to a simple truth: the Minutemen are not on the border to enforce immigration policy.

It is in the process by which the Minutemen undertake their patrols and imbue their experiences with meaning that we can understand the group and what it is that it does. Think back to Blowfish and Earl. Blowfish gets respect from Earl, and it's not because he uses his Gen-3 night-vision binoculars to catch José, it's because he uses them to navigate in the dark, and through that, his status, his skills as a soldier, and his identity as a patriot are validated. And the same goes for Earl: he doesn't catch anyone, but Blowfish recognizes his work.

What men like Earl and Blowfish and Robert and Frank miss, and what the Minutemen camp offers them, is not a place to be a racist—they

can do that in many places in America—but a place to undertake a set of practices: practices connected as much to beliefs about immigration as to civic ideals; practices that allow them to reclaim a sense of purpose built into an earlier life of soldiering. What brings them to the border is less a set of beliefs about Mexicans than a sense of nostalgia for days long past when their lives had purpose and meaning and when they felt like they were participating in making this country. This is one of the great ironies of the Minutemen: they come to the border and sit for hours looking through a pair of binoculars, while the underpinning motivation for this is a feeling that in today's America they have been rendered observers, not participants. As Robert explains, "I'm too old to go to Iraq. Maybe that's a personal reason of why I love being a Minuteman, protecting the U.S. here at home. It's my small part. . . . As veterans, we know that serving our nation does not stop when we take off our uniforms for the last time. . . . I resolve to remain a Patriot." But these men have taken off their uniforms; they are no longer soldiers. And in the outside world they are reminded of this every day. What the Minutemen camp offers them is a chance to put those uniforms back on.

The camp is not about expressing attitudes or formulating beliefs; it is about creating worlds. Beliefs and attitudes matter, and they are mobilized, not as ends in themselves, but to constitute a social world. When we look into this world, we will understand that what the Minutemen are searching for in the desert is not, ultimately, an illegal immigrant but a lost feeling of respect and self-worth. Reclaiming those lost feelings is inextricably linked to reclaiming a lost life, and a sense of meaning through the practice of soldiering.

We will see that the Minutemen's ultimate project is not in support of a government policy but is a project of the self—a project whose politics cannot be understood by simply documenting a set of beliefs about immigration or figuring out voting patterns, but rather by understanding how people seek to live their lives in ways that are meaningful to them.

In this sense, to go back to Putnam, it is not just that Americans are looking for civic associations. They are looking for particular types of civic associations, and part of what we need to consider is the way these associations are organized: not the beliefs or interests they are organized around, but the practices. America is composed of civic associations, but they are not all the same, and what the Minutemen are looking for

is a civic association of a particular kind, organized around masculinity and militarism, where their ideas, not about Mexicans but about themselves, make sense.

While ideology is not a good guide for understanding the Minutemen, other things can help. One of them is biography. Recall who the Minutemen are: they are mostly old, working-class, white men who used to be in the military. In their patrols they are reclaiming a lost masculinity, reliving the camaraderie and bravado from their service in the military. What the Minutemen camp offers these volunteers is the chance to partake in a specific type of activity that is meaningful to them, an activity organized as a military endeavor, taking place in a predominantly male space, where they can be the type of men they want to be, the type of men they have been trained to be. From such practices they gain something important. Here is Robert talking about being a line leader, the person in charge of a specific patrol shift: “When I’m line leader I’m not really focused on catching anyone. I’ve got to make sure the thing runs smoothly, and that means concentrating on the volunteers on the line. . . . It’s kind of like you’re in charge and when it’s done with and it was a good shift, and everyone gets back safe, you feel good about yourself, and you feel like you’ve earned the confidence of the people on the line.” Robert doesn’t catch any Mexicans, but he gets to have a sense of self-respect and worth. In their camp the Minutemen can enact a solution to their grievances; neither the grievances nor the solution, however, are organized around an ideology but rather around a way of living. And making sense of this way of living lies at the heart of understanding them.

Earl, Robert, Frank, and Mussels came to the Valley answering a call to arms. It was a call that President George W. Bush made on October 29, 2001, just after the terrorist attacks of September 11. “Every American,” Bush declared in a nationally televised address, “is a soldier, and every citizen is in this fight.”<sup>12</sup> It was a call that Chris Simcox echoed a year later, on October 24, 2002. “Enough is Enough!” Simcox wrote in the pages of a small-town newspaper he had recently purchased in Tombstone, Arizona. “Turn off the T.V. and join together to protect your country in a time of war.”<sup>13</sup> Simcox was starting a group called the Tombstone Militia, and he was looking for soldiers.

Simcox began his pronouncement with an epigram from Thomas Paine: “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it.” The theme of men suffering for the sake of freedom was a recurring one in the mobilization effort, an effort that framed patrolling the U.S.-Mexico border as a rekindling of an American tradition in which everyday citizens take up arms to defend liberty. Eventually adopting the symbolic name Minutemen, Simcox’s militia enrolled some of the most revered symbols and ideas of American patriotism in their cause, seeking to establish a link between what they were doing on the border and what soldiers in the Revolutionary War had done centuries ago. Simcox sought to define the group’s form of soldiering, like that of the Minutemen of the past, as one that takes place outside the formal arena of the military, connected to defending the nation, not a particular state policy: the Minuteman is a soldier of the nation, not of the state; his regiment is a militia mandated by the people, not a platoon sanctioned by the government.

Framed in the post-9/11 discourse of America being under attack from terrorists, a discourse the state had itself promoted to further militarize the border, the mobilization effort was filled with indictments of the government for failing to protect America by failing to “secure the border.”<sup>14</sup> Simcox turned the state’s own language against it. “The bottom line,” he wrote, is that “The government is not doing their job to protect our borders. I call on American citizens to do the job for them. . . . It is time we the citizens band together to show our inept Homeland Security Department a thing or two about how to protect National security and the sovereignty of our Democratic Republic.” Patrolling the border was a right granted to all citizens, Simcox argued, and was about taking the initiative to do what the state had failed to do. “It is time to help out our constitution by acting on the liberties and powers it gives us, the citizens, to come to the aid of our republic in times of duress.”

While the Minutemen used the rhetoric of the nation, they were actually embarking on an intensely personal project. For the Minutemen September 11 was a moment of reflection. Reflection not simply about America and where it was heading, but about themselves, and where they were heading. In coming down to the southern Arizona desert and establishing their camp, as we’ll see, the Minutemen were not simply responding to the orders of George W. Bush, not simply defending a



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government policy. What the militarization of the border and September 11 gave Minutemen was a chance—a chance to mobilize and be the soldiers they used to be, to be men they wanted to be. And while they often cast themselves through the language of nativism, as the embodiment of the real American, the truth is that they are outsiders in contemporary America; social misfits seeking a place to belong. What the war on terror opened up was not just a discursive space, but also a physical space, a militarized space that these former soldiers mobilized around. The Valley gave these men a place to renew their sense of purpose and meaning; it gave these veterans a chance to extend their tour of duty.