

A Comment on the Minutemen Militia of the U.S. and Neoliberal State Activity

Devin T. Molina
American University

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the emergence of the minutemen and other private border patrol organizations as both a response to and outgrowth of neoliberalism. The minutemen oppose many of the effects of neoliberal economic policies such as permeable borders, but support many of its ideological underpinnings and outcomes such as ideologies of personal responsibility and opposition to “Big Government.” While the minutemen and the state engage in collaborative efforts to interdict and apprehend undocumented immigrants at the border, the minutemen do not effectively broaden the state’s ability to successfully stem illicit flows across its borders. Instead, minuteman activities provide valuable ideological and discursive support to the state that further legitimates failed border security efforts. Thus, the minutemen often work in ways that diminish their ability to achieve their organization’s political aims. On the other hand, because the minutemen rely exclusively on Border Patrol agents to apprehend and deport undocumented immigrants, the state empowers minuteman action. Understanding how the minutemen operate and their relationship to the state can thus provide insight into the relationships between civil society and the state under neoliberalism. Doing so can highlight the ways that neoliberalism remains a dominant yet incomplete process rife with contradictory pressures.

KEYWORDS: neoliberalism, border security, immigration, minutemen, the state.

Introduction

The year 2005 marked a turning point in the immigration debate in the United States. In that year, the Minuteman Project and Civil Homeland Defense joined forces to conduct a month-long border watch near Tombstone Arizona. Since then, minutemen organizations throughout the United States have continued to participate in border security operations, surveillance efforts at day labour hiring centers, and political protest and advocacy at the municipal, state, and national levels. The minutemen share their ideological positions on immigration and border security with other anti-immigrant groups. Like other groups, the minutemen blame immi-

grants for a variety of social ills, including welfare dependency, deterioration of schools and hospitals, and increased crime. They also fault unprecedented levels of immigration with dramatically altering the political and cultural makeup of the United States. Moreover, they argue that the government is willfully disregarding its duties to protect national sovereignty, secure the borders, and defend U.S. citizens from what they believe is a foreign invasion. They point to neoliberal free trade agreements such as NAFTA and GATT, corporate outsourcing, and corporate demand for cheap and disposable foreign labor as indications of a government that puts foreign and corporate interests before those of its citizens.

At the same time, immigration opponents, as with other members of the Right, have lobbied hard for neoliberal legislation that supports welfare state retrenchment and the end to “Big Government.” Promoting neoliberal moralities of personal responsibility, immigration opponents demand punitive solutions to the complex social problems that neoliberalism often fosters, such as permeable borders, social dislocation, heightened social and economic stratification, and the deconstruction of homogenous national groups (Wacquant 2001).

Accordingly, the minutemen focus their efforts almost exclusively on conducting border security activities. As they observe and report illicit border crossings, the minutemen are engaged in a dual project. On one hand, the minutemen seek to exert political pressure on the state to enact harsher border security efforts; on the other, they potentially extend the reach and gaze of the state, thus expanding its ability to exert coercive force on migrants as they cross into the United States (Chavez 2008; Walsh 2008). However, as scholars have noted, the contemporary border security effort is not only largely ineffective, but may be a primarily symbolic effort aimed partly at protecting neoliberal economic aims (Andreas 2001; Cornelius 2001; Massey 2005; Massey and Singer 1995; Purcell and Nevins 2005). In this sense, the minutemen’s insistence on securing the border may in fact only increase the neoliberal effects that they oppose.

In this paper, I analyze minuteman activity along the U.S.-Mexico border in eastern San Diego County, California. I argue that the minutemen combine anti-immigrant ideology with border security tactics in ways that challenge *and* support state action. While the minutemen and the state engage in collaborative efforts, the minutemen do not effectively broaden the state’s ability to successfully stem illicit flows across its borders. Instead, minuteman activities provide valuable ideological and discursive support to the state that further legitimates failed border security efforts. In addition, because the minutemen rely exclusively on Border Patrol agents to apprehend and deport undocumented immigrants, the state in turn empowers minuteman action. Understanding how the minutemen operate and their relationship

to the state can thus provide insight into the relationships between civil society and the state under neoliberalism. Doing so can highlight the ways that neoliberalism remains a dominant yet incomplete process rife with contradictory pressures.

I begin with a brief description of minuteman ideology and activity, paying close attention to the way that it is both a response to and an outgrowth of neoliberalism. Then I describe two Minuteman “operations” that took place on consecutive weekends in April 2008, arguing that minuteman and state activity mutually constitute each other in ways that highlight the contradictions inherent in neoliberalism.

The Minutemen as Response to and Outgrowth of Neoliberalism

The emergence of the minuteman movement can be understood in part as both a product of neoliberalism and a response to the myriad economic, social, and political dislocations that neoliberalism produces. Neoliberalism is a totalizing, though never completed, logic – a political, economic, and ideological process that fuels globalization (Kingfisher 2002; Morgen and Gonzales 2008). Under neoliberal regimes, markets are freed from government regulation and interference, including reduced or eliminated corporate taxation, the protection and expansion of private property rights, and the elimination of barriers to trade. Markets rather than states are believed to best organize economic, political, and social life.

The transformation of the market is thus accompanied by the transformation of the state and society. Welfare spending is reduced while the state trains its focus on securing the rights of capital. The state increasingly relies on the private sector to provide public services such as education, health care, welfare, and policing. Keynesian logics of state activity that once promoted state intervention aimed at protecting citizens from the negative effects of unregulated capitalism are replaced by ideologies of personal responsibility that force the public to absorb the economic and social costs of neoliberalism (Duggan 2003; Giroux 2008).

Between 1986 and 2003 cross border flows between Mexico and the United States increased dramatically with the largest growth occurring after

the passage of NAFTA in 1994 (Massey 2005). By 2003 trade between the two countries totalled over \$235 billion. Individuals crossing into the United States for work and vacation numbered in the hundreds of thousands and millions respectively. Total border crossings increased from 114 million in 1986 to over 290 million in 2000 (4-5). At the same time, both documented and undocumented migration steadily continued to rise. Whereas legal immigration averaged 330,000 per year in the 1960s, by the 1990s that number had climbed to over 1 million per year (Massey 1999:316). Similarly, for the period of 1965-1989 undocumented migration grew from only 87,000 per year to between 1.2 and 1.5 million entries per year (Massey and Singer 1995). Today undocumented immigration averages 500,000 entries per year (Passel and Cohn 2008).

According to the minutemen, when Mexican and Latin American immigrants cross into the United States, they bring with them poverty, crime, a different language, and cultural norms that are fundamentally and drastically different from our own. The introduction of Third World poverty that Mexican and Latin American migrants represent threatens to dramatically alter the cultural, political, and economic fabric of American life. That many Latin American migrants apparently flaunt the rule of law by crossing into the United States without authorization provides the minutemen further proof of the threat that unchecked immigration poses: the breakdown of the “rule of law.” The minutemen thus participate in a discursive project that not only positions immigrants outside the bounds of the nation, but also positions them outside the bounds of proper personhood (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). The minutemen thus lay claim to a neoliberal morality that valorizes their “service” as a volunteer force in defense of the nation against an exterior threat.

Immigrants are not the minutemen’s only or perhaps even the primary target of their vitriolic attacks. By tying undocumented immigration to a neoliberal morality, the minutemen further demonize those who fail to or refuse to participate in the defense of the homeland. According to the minutemen, immigrants, their supporters, and an apathetic government are equally to blame for the current immigration “crisis.”

The minutemen view U.S. participation in neoliberal free trade economic agreements such as NAFTA and their participation in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization as an abdication of the state’s sovereign duty to protect its citizens’ interests and its own national and territorial integrity. At best, the state has failed to secure the border; at worst it is deliberately trying to weaken national security in the interests of global capital. The failure of the U.S. government to secure the border thus represents the primary impetus behind minuteman activity. Filling the gaps left by the state is therefore the primary tactical logic employed by the minutemen to put pressure on the state to enforce the “rule of law” and to stop the foreign “invasion.” In some ways the minutemen’s opposition to the government is a product of neoliberal ideologies, namely that the government is incapable of effectively governing. In other ways the minutemen oppose what they view as government policies that limit the state’s ability to secure the nation from outside threats.

The minutemen thus argue that unchecked mass migration from Mexico and Latin America poses a serious threat to national security. Whereas typical anti-immigrant calls for the exclusion of Latin American immigrants are based on the perceived economic and cultural impacts that immigration poses, the minutemen differ by emphasizing border security as the primary method of controlling immigration. For them, terrorism and “illegal” immigration are two sides to the same coin. An insecure border allows terrorist and immigrant alike to challenge the state’s ability to protect its borders and thus diminish state sovereignty. Merging conspiracy theories such as the Mexican *reconquista* with nationalistic paranoia, economic alarmism, and white supremacist constructions of the nation, the minutemen believe that mass migration is therefore not only a drain on the economy and a challenge to the American nation as a white Protestant nation; is also a direct and immediate threat to national security and national sovereignty. Thus, the minutemen call for the expansion of state policing activities on the border and an expansion of the punitive capacities of the state vis-à-vis immigrants.

To better illustrate these points, I now turn to a

brief description of a series of events that took place over the course of two subsequent weekends at Camp Vigilance, the Minuteman Corps of California's (MCC) headquarters, in April 2008. I focus on how minuteman definitions of success highlight the way that minuteman and state activity mutually constitute and legitimate each other in service to the broadening of an already repressive border security regime.

Camp Vigilance

Camp Vigilance is an 8 acre private site located approximately 50 miles east of San Diego and two miles north of the border. Since 2006, members of the Minuteman Corps of California have been “mustered” at Camp Vigilance for one weekend each month and for the entire months of April and October. Camp Vigilance functions as a headquarters for minuteman border patrol operations. During these operations, armed members, utilizing a variety of surveillance technologies such as binoculars, night vision scopes, and thermal imaging cameras, observe, track, and report unauthorized border crossers to the Border Patrol. Camp Vigilance consists of an office trailer that serves as the communications center (Comm. Center) where a volunteer operates a two-way radio and coordinates each operation relaying observed border incursions to the Border Patrol, and a bunkhouse. There is also a number of RV hookups and ample space for tent camping.

I woke at approximately 4 a.m. to the sound of a minuteman outside my tent urging me to wake up. A team up at the “Eye in the Sky” – a makeshift Mobile Surveillance Unit (MSU) consisting of a thermal camera mounted atop an SUV and operated via remote from within – had spotted a group of twenty migrants heading towards camp. As they tracked the group through the camera their quarry had disappeared from view as they neared Camp Vigilance. The team at the Eye requested aid in finding the group. I, along with everyone else who was not currently out on ops, was mobilized to go out and find the “illegals.”

Upon waking, I headed to the Comm. Center where Carl Braun, head of the MCC at the time, asked if I wanted to join him in the search. I agreed as did a long-time and highly active female volunteer,

Tara. Carl drove us south past the Camp Vigilance entrance. The truck shook violently as we traversed the unpaved and poorly maintained local roads. Carl proceeded with caution, slowly inching his way towards the site where the group of migrants was first spotted. Carl told me that he wanted to head back south of the property so that we could prevent the “illegals” from “TBSing” or turning back south. As we drove, Carl and Tara searched the desert scrub to either side of the road for signs of people hiding. They also looked for trail sign, footprints that they could later use to track their quarry. Tara was using a new night vision scope that she had recently bought for over a thousand dollars. The moonless night and the bouncing truck made it difficult for Tara to see so she periodically told Carl to slow down. Other than that Tara did not say much, preferring instead to let Carl do most of the talking.

When Carl is not busy running the largest minuteman organization in California, or hunting “bad guys,” he is an executive recruiter who specializes in minority hiring. A prolific writer, Carl has self-published two techno-thriller novels about international terrorism and military special operations, a non-fictional account of his experience at the border that chronicles the first two years of the California Minutemen, and a huge body of news reports for Examiner.com. As head of the MCC he has also spent a great deal of time speaking to the media and the public on immigration and border issues. As a result, Carl speaks with an easy, if slightly rehearsed, demeanor. The strength of his convictions comes through not as a passionate appeal to one's emotions, but as a carefully considered and rational appeal to “common sense.” Even when Carl would delve into the realm of conspiracy theories about a New World Order that is designing to overthrow U.S. sovereignty in favour of a global state, the cadence of his delivery and the timbre of his voice never changed.

As we drove in search of the group of “illegals,” Carl told me that the minutemen are simply a neighbourhood watch organization. As with any other neighbourhood watch, they are on the lookout for criminals and trespassers. Carl admitted that given the size of the “illegal immigration” problem, looking for twenty illegals would not seem to be worth

the trouble. But, he told me, we're not looking for a bunch of "strawberry pickers." According to Carl, twenty percent of "illegals" are deported criminals and statistically speaking, four to five people in this group were probably criminals. To prove his point, Carl told me about a woman who lived in Northern California. Married to a minuteman who was the head of a Northern California chapter, she was the victim of a hit and run committed by an "illegal" who was driving drunk. The driver smashed into her, pinning her between two cars that severed her legs. This, he said, was indicative of the problem we had: criminal aliens with no respect for the rule of law.

But illegal immigration was just a symptom of a larger problem, he said. Banks and corporations, he said, are in a conspiracy to destroy our economy and move us into a depression so that they can form a North American Union. They are manufacturing a money crisis that will usher in the end of America as a sovereign nation as Mexico, Canada, and the United States become part of one borderless nation. This story was one that many minuteman members told me. One member insisted to me that the Amero, the North American Union currency, was already being minted. Another told me that there were FEMA refugee camps already being assembled in Texas to deal with the victims of the coming economic crisis.

These two narratives, though less than mainstream, are remarkable not because of their resemblance to fact, but because they reveal how the minutemen conceptualize the problem of immigration. According to Carl, immigration and criminality are necessarily linked. Images of the hardworking, poorly paid, and highly exploited immigrant labourer merely mask the true dangers of immigration. Moreover, immigration is just part of a broader pattern which includes corporate desires to conduct business freely across international boundaries and free from governmental influence, a sentiment that is shared by individuals across the political spectrum. According to Carl, the failure of the government to secure its borders is a sign that the government has become beholden to corporate interests at the expense of its citizens and its own sovereignty. This, he told me was why we were out at four o'clock in

the morning searching the high desert of eastern San Diego County.

As time passed and it became increasingly clear that we would not catch our quarry, Carl and Tara began to lose hope. Carl's mood vacillated between optimism and frustration. He joked, "at least we ruined their day a little." But then his voice took on a hard edge as he defiantly spoke to the night: "You don't belong in my country buddy."

A Border Patrol jeep approached us and stopped next to us. The agent, a young male in his twenties, told us that they had been busy all night. They had already caught three groups of "illegals" in the surrounding area, but were still searching the ones that had passed through Camp Vigilance. He did not seem optimistic that they would be found.

We headed back to Camp. As he drove, Carl began to strategize out loud and came up with a plan for the next time groups of immigrants try to cross the border through Camp Vigilance. The plan consisted of trapping the "illegals" on the property by closing off all exits and surrounding them on the property. Without a way to get to their destination or TBS, they would voluntarily sit down when confronted by the minutemen and wait patiently for the Border Patrol to come and pick them up.

A week later Carl and the rest of the Minutemen got a chance to put their plan into action. A team at the Eye in the Sky spotted two groups of about twenty migrants marching down the same road as the previous weekend's group. This time they tracked the migrants until they reached the MSU at which time they "lit up" the group with their headlights. Startled, the groups scattered in every direction. At this point the entire camp was alerted. Someone rang the dinner bell. Bedlam erupted as individuals sought their firearms, protective clothing, and their vehicles. As they waited at their assigned locations, Carl's voice came through on the radio informing the Camp that they had caught twenty-eight individuals. Within minutes a single Border Patrol agent escorted a man, his hands tied with a plastic zip tie past our position. Less than a minute later, out of the darkness followed a group of fourteen men tied to each other and walking in a line. All told, Border Patrol confirmed that forty-four migrants had been

apprehended on or near the Camp Vigilance property. Back at Camp what began as a chaotic morning settled into a calm yet euphoric mood that infected everyone. Each individual told and retold their part in the successful capture of such a large group. Carl and the Eye in the Sky team returned with a video taken from the thermal camera.

According to Carl and the other minutemen, this operation, unlike the previous weekend, had been a complete success. It remains unknown how many individuals attempted to cross through the property. What the Minutemen did know was that by adopting new tactics they turned what had been an abject failure the week before into a successful effort. They had thus played a primary role in the “capture” of more than forty individuals.

To demonstrate their success to others, the minutemen posted the video onto YouTube and posted details of the night’s events on the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps website. The purpose of taking the video and posting the report was to highlight the severity of the “illegal immigration problem,” to highlight the minutemen’s apparent success, and to request assistance from other minuteman volunteers.

The preceding examples suggest that the Minutemen do not determine organizational success solely by their ability to stop “illegal immigration.” As with state border surveillance efforts, minuteman activity is a largely theatrical endeavour that projects an image of both an out of control and a secure border (Andreas 2001). Lacking any institutional structure designed to maintain comprehensive statistics about their impact and recognizing their own tactical limitations, minuteman activity represents a collection of snapshots that create a collage of collective memories tied to the *legitimacy of border security strategies*. These momentary victories give truth to the lie that “securing the border” is the most effective way to stem “illegal immigration.”

The minutemen further claim success despite having relied on state agents to ultimately carry out the apprehensions. What would have happened if the Border Patrol refused to answer the minutemen’s call? What if, as is often the case, the Border Patrol was not able to apprehend the groups of immigrants that the minutemen observed? As the above example

shows, the minutemen depend on a responsive state in order to achieve their organizational and political goals. Ultimately, the efficacy of their activity depends in large part on the Border Patrol’s willingness and ability to translate observed activity into apprehensions.

Not only could the minutemen not function without the state, but the minutemen derive much of their legitimacy from state institutions. State activity provides both the template upon which minuteman activity is based and the logic which informs its tactics. Minutemen are limited in their capabilities because they lack the authority of the state to apprehend and deport undocumented immigrants. This dependence also creates tensions. Driven by neoliberal logics that value their ability to be “self governing” people “who operate independently of formal state structures” (Hyatt 2001:206), the Minutemen nonetheless require the formal state apparatus designed to apprehend, process, incarcerate, and deport unauthorized border crossers to achieve their organizational and political ends. To do this, the Minutemen take steps to act *like* the state, even if they cannot ever act *as* the state. One way they do this is by adopting tactics that will position themselves in situations that will guarantee apprehensions while avoiding actually arresting individuals (an act that is illegal). It was for this reason that Carl insisted on trapping the groups of migrants on the Camp Vigilance property.

Due to their participation at both organizational and individual levels in broader Right and anti-immigrant networks, the minutemen can more effectively articulate the dangers of an insecure border to the public in ways that the Border Patrol cannot. The minutemen, rather than operating as the state’s “eyes and ears” (Walsh 2008), instead act as its voice. In order to act as the state’s voice, the minutemen must insert themselves into classificatory processes that take place at the border. According to Josiah Heyman (1999), border security agents participate in innumerable classificatory interactions daily. Agents enact legal classifications as they make snap decisions about who can and cannot legally enter the United States. These judgments are based in part on covert classificatory systems that judge the “moral worth” of a subject. Knowledge production about the

good/bad immigrant takes place through the actions of border security agents and their interactions with border crossers.

In the example I provide, the Minutemen were able to successfully insert themselves into this classificatory process. That the Minutemen limit their action exclusively to border security efforts means that they primarily encounter immigrants that are in the process of or have already broken the law. By focusing on border security – instead of for example worksite enforcement or other forms of surveillance activities – they take much of the guesswork out of classification. *Immigrants are always already criminals.* As part of a broad network of anti-immigrant and conservative organizations, the Minutemen are much better suited than the government to translate those classifications to a broader audience as part of a comprehensive statement about the perils of immigration and the merits of border security efforts.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not the minutemen are able to stop the flow of people across the border – they are not – or substantially increase the ability of the Border patrol to do its job – they do not – is irrelevant when we consider how dominant modes of border security impact their activities. Like the Border Patrol, the Minutemen are engaged in symbolic border policing activities that are nevertheless articulated through the use of force and the threat of force. This complex of interaction legitimates the participation of the Minutemen in border security activities. Interestingly, the closer they come to acting *like* the state the more legitimate and accepted their actions become by the Border Patrol. As their actions become more routine, as they successfully insert themselves into the classificatory system at the border, and as they carry out border security operations that parallel in substance, and on occasion by result, those enacted by official representatives, the Minutemen are able to routinely

call on the state agents to enact their anti-immigrant aims. What is more, by participating in similar border security activities to those of state institutions, the minutemen further legitimize an increasingly powerful security apparatus designed to exert coercive force on marginal populations. Acting as engaged witnesses of daily border crossings, the minutemen articulate both the immigration problem as well as the need for more security resources at the border. Detailing the interactions between the Minutemen and the Border Patrol reveals the way that already powerful forces of border securitization combine with anti-immigrant ideologies to set the parameters within which the Minutemen operate and how they determine their efficacy. A significant result of this process is the routinization of minuteman behaviour as an extension of border security operations that further articulates the supremacy of border security as immigration control.

When situated within a political economic analysis, this interaction between state and non-state actors reveals the complex ways that illiberal anti-immigrant ideologies collide and combine with the expansion of the state's policing capabilities to promote and protect neoliberal formations such as permeable borders, the production of proper personhood and state activity, and the production of new markets and the deregulation of old ones (most notably the labour market). This research thus suggests that understanding the minutemen's dependence on the state might explain how a social movement that at first glance appears to be opposed to (at least some aspects of) neoliberalism and that seeks to mitigate its effects might ostensibly act in ways that actually augment the ability of neoliberalism to further penetrate into the fabric of American life. Understanding how the minutemen and other reactionary groups like them are engaged in activities that both support and undermine their own political aims highlights some of the contradictions inherent in the neoliberal project.

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