



Looking Inward, Across the Border

Harel Shapira

In the constellation of anti-immigrant politics in the United States, groups like the Minutemen, civilians who patrol the border with military gear, stand out for taking matters into their own hands. Harel Shapira explains that these militiamen are motivated not just by reflexive right-wing anti-immigrant ideology, but also by a nostalgia for their own lost worlds of work and meaning forged in military careers.

Presidential candidate Donald Trump has made the construction of a high border wall between the United States and Mexico a key platform in his campaign. His supporters chant “Build the Wall!” and cheer when Trump claims that he will make Mexico pay for its construction. As extreme as this is, it reflects a far more pervasive view that well-guarded borders are critical to a nation’s security, keeping out undesirable foreigners who represent a variety of cultural and economic threats. Throughout Europe, currently facing a refugee crisis, talk of walls and fences and militarized borders has resurfaced with a vengeance.

While borders take the form of physical barriers impeding the entry of foreigners—and, sometimes, the exit of citizens—they also carry a great deal of symbolic weight. Indeed, they are often porous *in fact*, their symbolic and cultural importance is critical for those who would see them strengthened. Their *meanings* are as important for their maintenance as are their advocates’ opinions of the “others” who are to be kept out.

Robert, a 68-year-old veteran, makes pilgrimages to the United States–Mexico border. He travels to the border not to critique it, but to strengthen it. Along with hundreds of other people like him—older white men who used to be in the military—Robert travels from his home in the middle of the United States to the border several times a year in order to patrol the border with members of the militia group known as the Minutemen. Why do they do this? Moreover, what may we learn about the significance of the border in the contemporary world by focusing on people like Robert?

Meeting the Minutemen

I first met Robert in 2005 at a ranch located in the middle of the Sonoran Desert of Southern Arizona. The ranch serves as the campground and operations base for the Arizona chapter of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps. The Minutemen undertake a wide range of activities, all of which have to do with immigration. They protest legislation, write letters to elected officials, and go to day-labor sites where migrants line up to find work and videotape those who hire them. But the most meaningful activity the group does—the one that has garnered them the most attention and that brings Minutemen from Middle America to the country’s edges—is patrolling the border.

When I originally traveled to Southern Arizona, I thought that the Minutemen’s politics was best captured through their beliefs about immigration. I saw the Minutemen as an expression of the kind of right-wing and racist political views that have reentered the political mainstream since the 1970s backlash against the civil-rights movement.

And to a large extent, my assumptions were correct: the Minutemen refer to their enemy with the generic name “José Sanchez.” They talk about immigrants as criminals; say that Mexican culture is backwards; and, more often than not, speak of immigration as an “invasion.”

But at the same time, the Minutemen’s attitudes about immigration exceed simple hatred and xenophobia. When I tell Robert I feel bad for the people coming across the border, this is what he tells 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 what 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.”

Robert’s **identification** with the plight of immigrants suggests that act of hunting for immigrants is sustained by much more than racism. Robert is aware of structural forces and of immigrants’ economic hardships. He even constructs the people coming across as emblematic of the American ideal. It is not that the Minutemen don’t understand what is driving immigration, or that they lack sympathy. They do, and they **still** go to the border.

A politics of nostalgia

As I got to spend time with Robert and the other volunteers, I came to understand that the casual arrow did not clearly point from the Minutemen’s thoughts about immigrants to hunting them on the border.

Rather, the Minutemen appear to be motivated equally by their own communitarian nostalgia, one quite consistent with Robert Putnam’s famous critique of the breakdown of American civic life in **Bowling Alone**: Putnam writes, “Let us act to ensure that we spend less time traveling and more time connecting with our neighbors than we do today...and that the design of our communities and the availability of public spaces will encourage more casual socializing with friends and neighbors” (2001, p. 407).

Robert, the Minuteman, expressed his criticism of the breakdown of civic life in strikingly similar terms:

“Back then it wasn’t, ‘Oh he went with her, and she did this to him,’ and so on. You had meaningful conversations. You talked about real life. That is what is missing in this country, that is what we have lost. People today drive in their cars, work in their cubicles, get on their computers, and never interact with one another.”

He further ventured into a kind of populist discussion—one consistent with a larger anti-establishment mood evident among the primary electorates this year.

“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... 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 DC in their pockets. You think they’re working for me and you? You better wake up and take a better look.”

Reconstituting a military **habitus**

But why is it that when Robert takes a better look, he does so through a pair of binoculars?

Why, even though he thinks about the decline of American community in ways consistent with mainstream thinking, does Robert end up in a radically different place, hunting immigrants on the border?

We may think that the Minutemen are on the border to be racist, but they can be racist in many places; and what the border offers the Minutemen is much more than a chance to express some racist attitudes.

Nearly all the older, retired, working-class white men who make up the Minutemen's ranks had extensive military careers, well beyond their initial tours of duty. After retiring, they went on to work in law-enforcement jobs such as private investigators, police officers, or parole officers.

Figure 1. A Minuteman keeping watch at the border



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People like Robert are on the border not only for immigrants, but also for the lost sense of meaning and purpose connected to their previous lives as soldiers and current lives as aging veterans. What emerges from these men's biographies is not just a narrative of decline but a particular set of needs and desires, a particular way of responding to the experience of change and alienation—one that is rooted in the practice of soldiering. To invoke Bourdieu (1990) here, the Minutemen have a kind of militaristic *habitus*, which structures both how they feel loss and also how they feel at home again.

Here is Robert again:

"I'm too old to go to Iraq. Maybe that's a personal reason on why I love being a Minuteman, protecting the US 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."

Trained to be soldiers, the Minutemen have mobilized around the border militarization campaigns and the discourse of terror to recreate their old lives. The Minutemen camp is organized as a military outpost, and everything in the camp, from meetings which are called "strategy briefings," to calling toilets "latrines," to the naming of their patrol operations as "musters," to the organizational hierarchy known as a "chain of command," to naming patrol lines using military code, reproduces the life of soldiering. And on their patrols they put on camouflage, work in the

“comms room,” do “recon work,” and call each other by their old “handles” from their days in the military.

“It only takes one...”

But this life in the military is not about actually engaging in a battle with the enemy. In fact, once they get to the patrol line, something funny happens: nothing.

And when they do see an immigrant, it usually involves seeing him race past while they pick up the phone and call the border patrol. Quite simply, the Minutemen do not catch immigrants, and their impact on stopping immigration, at least through enforcement, is negligible.

This leads to a simple truth: patrolling the border is not about enforcing immigration policy. And the project the Minutemen are engaged in is, first and foremost, a project of the self, not a project in support of a government policy. Theirs is a project whose meaning comes from the practices it is organized around.

This is a volunteer talking about being a “line leader”:

“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.”

This volunteer doesn’t catch any immigrants, but he does get to have a sense of self-respect and worth. And, through this, he gets to extend his former life: on one arm this volunteer has an old Marine Corps tattoo, and now, on the other arm, he has added a new Minuteman tattoo.

As the Minutemen interpret the situation, if they see migrants crossing, they say it is evidence that they are needed. If they do not see anyone crossing, they say it is evidence that they have done their job effectively. No matter what the “data,” as it were, the Minutemen render the practice of patrolling important and meaningful.

It was in fact the moments when the Minutemen did encounter migrants face to face that their patrols were in a sense most greatly threatened.

One day, as I was sitting around having coffee, one of the volunteers said that he hasn’t seen any terrorists come across the border, that the only people he has seen are hardworking people looking for a better life. Another volunteer jumps in and says, “Yes, but it only takes one.”

What is the significance of such a statement, “it only takes one?”

In saying “it takes only one,” the Minuteman is not simply rescuing the belief that immigrants are terrorists but, rather, he is rescuing the sets of practices and social worlds connected to those beliefs. That is, the beliefs matter but only insofar as they support a social world—in this case, a militarized social world with an incidental, but consequential, connection to the border itself.

Figure 2. The US–Mexico border



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Militarized borders

In the past 30 years or so, along with the internationalization of the economy and increased migration, we have seen the militarization of borders. The American case is a particularly telling example. First through legislation in the 1990s such as “Operation Gatekeeper” in California, then “Operation Hold the Line” in Texas, and more recent legislation such as the “Secure Borders Initiative” in Arizona, the US–Mexico border has become a militarized space. During this period, approximately 700 miles of new fencing has been built; and, simultaneously, the number of Border Patrol agents has increased nearly fivefold.

There is a politics behind all this. It is a politics that is expressed through people’s attitudes and beliefs about immigrants. It is a politics of racism and xenophobia—a politics expressed in laws seeking to ban Latino studies from university curricula, laws seeking to cut social services for undocumented immigrants, and so on. But there is another dimension to this politics, connected to these attitudes and beliefs but not entirely reducible to them.

It is a politics where the significance of the border and its role in American identity is constitutive of, and at the same time constituted by, a set of practices and experiences by which white, working-class men have found community and purpose—and an otherwise elusive sense of entitlement—through military service. Through this lens of soldiering and of protecting the “homeland,” the border is invested with meaning that goes beyond the racist tropes that also inform its militarization. Ironically, the lesson the Minutemen teach us is, perhaps, more introspective. Instead of focusing on “them,” on the communities of those who seek to traverse our borders, we would do well to focus on ourselves and our communities. What does the border say about *us*? The Minutemen’s efforts to recreate a meaningful life of community and work leads them to the border. But their anxieties and interpretations look inward, even as they train their binoculars on the other side.

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