

Minutemen Are People, Too

Arizona rednecks win a round against the ACLU.

BY LEO W. BANKS

Thursday, May 19, 2005 12:01 a.m.

TUCSON, Ariz.--Anybody who appreciates a good yuck was sad to see the Minutemen pack up their pickups and go home. After all, it wasn't every day that we got to enjoy the spectacle of sunscreen-lathered ACLU observers chasing volunteer border-watchers through the desert. But in the media bonfire accompanying Arizona's Redneck Revolt, we saw the cultural divide separating media elites from ordinary people--those with BlackBerries and \$150 hairdos versus folks with tobacco ! bulges in their cheeks.

In the view of most of the reporters who parachuted into Arizona for this story and, disturbingly, local ones as well, you'd get the distinct impression that the *Minutemen* are the problem along the border. That's right. America needn't worry about the thousands who bust into the country every night. No, the real danger are those yahoos who think calling the cops when they see somebody breaking the law is a good idea.

Never mind that it worked, more or less. In April, the number of illegals coming across along the Naco corridor, where the Minutemen were stationed, fell, even if the balloon effect pushed them to other places along Arizona's 350-mile-long border with Mexico. But that's not the story most editors and producers wanted. They wanted to stand up the angle that went something like--no, exactly like--this: *Gun-toting vigilantes run amok in the desert, hunting harmless illegals who are only looking for work.* So, you show up in gritty Tombstone, grab somebody wearing a straw hat and a sidearm and work him for the quotes you want. Then you shoot film of the guy wearing his gun, because that's what the producer said in the story meeting, and if you're lucky you get a big grin on the subject's face showing gaps where teeth should be.

I've been a reporter in Arizona for 30 years. As the border story has heated up, I get calls from out-of-town reporters wanting me to hook them up with angry border residents. If I mentioned in a story that a particular rancher carries a gun, that's the rancher the reporters want to see. They're less interested in understanding his problems than getting film of him and his six-shooter.

These border residents are routinely snickered at and called racist vigilantes. But most are decent folks caught up in the daily invasion of illegals who tramp across their land. Ranchers in hard-hit areas spend the first hours of every day repairing damage done the night before. They find fences knocked down and water spigots left on, draining thousands of precious gallons. And then there's the trash: pill bottles, syringes, used needles, and pile after pile of human feces.

Sometimes illegals hammer on residents' windows in the middle of the night, demanding to use the phone. Some even walk right into the ranch house and refuse to leave until the rancher pulls a gun and forces the issue. One rancher told me about illegals who rustled one of her newborn calves. The intruders beat the 12-hour-old animal to death with a fence post, then barbecued it on the spot. How bad is it? In the Tucson Sector alone in January 2005, the Border Patrol arrested 35,704 people, seized 34,864 pounds of marijuana, and impounded 557 smuggling vehicles. In one month. High-speed chases and accidents on our back-roads are now common. Residents know to stay off certain roads at night because the smugglers--of people and drugs--own them, and if you're not careful they'll come around a bend at 100 mph and run you into a ditch or worse.

In some hilltop spots near Douglas, you can unfold a lawn chair, crack open a Schlitz and watch the invasion happen. As dusk falls, they come, hundreds of headlights from Mexican cabs streaming north, each filled to the windows with soon-to-be illegals. Are they good folks? Are they carrying biological agents? We have no idea. They could be the worst terrorists and thugs. If that sounds alarmist, consider that some ranchers have found Muslim prayer rugs and Arabic dictionaries on their property. And the feds confirm that the ultraviolent Mara Salvatrucha street gang is using Arizona as a gateway into this country.

But you haven't heard much about these problems nationally, because the media soft-pedal them. Why? It's politically incorrect. We've built a new third rail in American life. Leave the harmless illegals alone and go after their victims instead.

I've interviewed a fellow named Bud Strom, a retired Marine and a pretty fair cowboy poet who has a

ranch south of Sierra Vista. He tells about a reporter for the New York Times coming out to his place and doing a story on what it's like to live on the border. "The story made it sound like I was out there helping them, giving them water and such," says Bud laughing. In fact, when he sees a group, he wheels his horse and gets out of there fast, then calls the Border Patrol.

Bud knows what he's dealing with. He has had a truck stolen, found bales of drugs on his land, and routinely has illegals approach him demanding beer. It used to be that one or two would ask a local resident for water and a sandwich, and, once fed, be on their way with a polite "Gracias, Se??ta." The new breed now comes in groups of 50. They demand to be driven to their pickup spot, and if you refuse they flip you off. Sometimes they poison barking ranch dogs or cut their throats to quiet them. How long do you suppose such outrages would go on in Fairfield, Conn.? Or Greenwich? It'd be a day and a half before some kumbaya-liberal flipped sides and founded the Merritt Parkway Minutemen. Or the BlackBerry Brigade.

The best part of this story is that while the elite media's agenda on the Minutemen played well on the coasts, Arizonans weren't buying it. A poll found that 57% of the state's residents supported the border-watch project, which sent the editorial page of Tucson's Arizona Daily Star into a stammering fit, calling the number alarming. Of course, this is a paper so politically correct it can't even bring itself to call illegals illegals. Its writers refer to them as migrants or, my favorite, border crossers. But as the Minutemen plan to expand operations to five more states--and a new citizen group, the Yuma Patriots, begins patrolling--that 57% heartens me. It looks to me like the rednecks won.

Mr. Banks is a writer in Tucson.

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