

Minutemen founder besieged from within: Critics call him soft on illegal migration; Simcox acknowledges changed approach

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Five years ago, Chris Simcox began his rise from an obscure newspaper publisher in Tombstone to a national figure in the debate over how to control the U.S.-Mexican border.

His call for citizens to bear arms and patrol the border in the face of what he considered federal negligence was called courageous by his followers and racist by his foes, and eventually it led to the creation of the nationally recognized Minuteman Civil Defense Corps.

But today, the movement he helped energize is by no measure homogeneous.

A series of public fights with former supporters has caused some of the very followers Simcox once inspired to now turn their backs on him, saying he's become too soft in his views on benefits for illegal entrants and is no longer a relevant force in the movement he helped spawn.

A protest standoff at a Phoenix furniture store that has hired off-duty sheriff's deputies to round up day laborers has exposed that those who call themselves Minutemen are not necessarily associated with Simcox's organization. Simcox, president of the Minutemen, has denounced the demonstrations by what he calls "splinter groups."

Meanwhile, co-founder Jim Gilchrist, who also has bumped heads with Simcox, incensed activists this month by endorsing former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee for president — a candidate who supported in-state tuition for children of illegal entrants.

And Simcox, too, is criticized for comments he made to a group of prominent policymakers in Phoenix, where he now lives, saying he supports public education and health care for the children of illegal entrants— a stance that many hard-liners won't tolerate.

"This is the worst betrayal of what we as Minutemen stand for," said Bob Wright, chairman of Patriots Border Alliance, a group that broke off from the Minutemen a year and a half ago over concerns about Simcox's management of finances. "While we all honor the part that these two figures have played in this movement, we cannot accept or excuse these ill-advised and destructive stands."

Simcox, not new to controversy, calls the latest criticisms "knee-jerk reactions" by people who are "looking for any way to move me to the position of being insignificant as a leader and a voice."

But even Simcox admits his approach toward immigration has changed since he started his crusade. Reflecting on the past five years, he says he bears partial responsibility for the outrage about immigration, some of which he calls "extremism."

Still, the fury symbolizes a changed role for Simcox, his critics say. As evidence of what they say is an inability to lead, they also point to an audit in 2006, which showed that while the organization took in about \$418,000, it spent \$449,493, leaving it in the red.

For some, the differences are even greater, as Simcox faces a lawsuit alleging fraud from a man who mortgaged his home to help fund an Israeli-style border fence on private land in Cochise County that was never built.

Michelle Dallacroce, founder of a group called Mothers Against Illegal Aliens, says Simcox inspired her to join the anti-illegal entrant movement. But she called recent events "a one-two punch."

"I don't know if he and Jim Gilchrist drank the same drink last night," she said, adding, "Their time has come, and their time has gone."

Dallacroce said Simcox's remarks about benefits for illegal entrants were not a surprise to her. She has bumped heads with him before on that issue.

"Chris wants to start compromising now, and he wasn't compromising when he started," she said. "He's giving in."

Simcox, a former teacher who moved to Arizona to focus on border security after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, says his critics are outraged by a few comments. He says those comments should not detract from the view he still holds that the border must be secured first.

"The children of illegal immigrants who are born in this country are citizens. Period," Simcox said. "It's crazy to think we shouldn't educate them. They want to go door-to-door and remove every person in this country that's here illegally. And I just think that's not a logical plan in how to address the situation."

Asked if he bears any responsibility for the tone of the dialogue, which he now criticizes, Simcox says, "Certainly I accept the responsibility that for stepping forward and addressing this issue that, yes, we have played a major part in that."

"It's exposed the extremist voices on both sides of the issue," he said.

Contradictory views

Critics say Simcox has a history of contradicting himself and making statements based on the group he's talking to — a criticism he's faced since his days in Tombstone.

For example, he told *The Arizona Republic* in 2005: "I'd hate to see a fence built across our borders. I still would rather see the National Guard and U.S. military augment Border Patrol." Yet a year later he endorsed Republican Don Goldwater for governor, saying, "As governor, Don will build a fence along the border with Mexico and use National Guard troops to patrol the border."

He decries the criticism of him as extremism and champions civilized discussion, but he signed a statement saying that Huckabee and Gilchrist are "perpetrating" a "deceptive amnesty plan on American voters."

"I think the overall feeling among Minutemen right now is shear confusion," said Wright, the Patriots Border Alliance chairman. "Chris is very, very non-confrontational. Whatever groups he's amongst, he wants to be liked."

Simcox says that's not true but adds he's learned a lot since 2002.

"I've learned a great deal about the comprehensive issue, in the sense that it moved way beyond just border-control issues," he said, stressing the importance of mediating groups and looking at the social and economic impacts.

"There are those who feel that it's maybe too soft, maybe too politically correct, but those are people who don't really understand the complexity of the issue and the fact that change is slow in our country," he said.

And maybe they don't fully understand Simcox either, someone who incites protests when he visits college campuses but has tempered his public remarks.

Still, those who thought they had Simcox figured out aren't so sure anymore.

Dawn McLaren, an immigration economist at Arizona State University, participated in a recent forum where Simcox spoke. McLaren gave a presentation on economic contributions of illegal entrants. She clashed with state Rep. John Kavanagh, a Phoenix Republican, but had a different experience with Simcox.

"He said he agreed with us," McLaren said. "So I was like, 'OK, then why are you doing what you're doing?'"

His political views, even in the full context of securing the border first, have also caught his political allies off-guard.

"I am surprised that he would say that," said state Sen. Karen Johnson, a Mesa Republican. Asked about the benefits issues, she said, "What is it about 'illegal' that people don't understand? These people are not qualified to partake in these kind of amenities that we have in our system."

And then there are the candidates Simcox and his political action committee have supported — Republicans Goldwater, Randy Graf and Russell Pearce — while his talk about "sitting down and talking about real solutions" seems more in keeping with Sens. Jon Kyl and John McCain.

"I've always said the same thing. Let's have all those discussions after we stop illegal immigration," Graf said, defending Simcox.

Impact is unclear

Though Simcox and Gilchrist, who lives in California, now focus on politics and speaking, Simcox stresses the fact the Minutemen are still involved in fence-building and assisting the Border Patrol with apprehensions.

The overall impact he and the group have had on the political front and on controlling the border remains an open debate.

Many candidates the organization has endorsed have lost elections. Though they've been critical of President Bush and Congress, federal immigration reform has yet to be enacted.

Border apprehensions have been down in the past four years, yet the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector remains the busiest along the southern border.

"I think if you put them all together, I think in general, obviously they have influence, but I'm not sure that that influence lands with any person or any group," says Republican

state Rep. Jonathan Paton. "I don't think that there's an Oprah out there that can deliver voters for a candidate or cause."

McLaren, the ASU researcher, doubts the Minutemen have had a political impact.

"I think we have enough politicians who are willing to pick on this issue," McLaren said. "It has been a lightning-rod issue for many, many decades, even dating back to Benjamin Franklin."

Still, leaders of breakaway groups in the anti-illegal-immigration movement say they will remain critical of Simcox's political statements and financial management of the Minutemen.

As for Simcox, he says the organization will press on.

"I created a situation where we would be the lightning rod that would draw the nation's attention," he said. "It's a sacrifice I made at the risk of being called names and being vilified."