

Statement of the Society for Immigrant and Refugee Rights on the October 4, 2006 Minuteman Project Event and the Columbia University Response

The Society for Immigrant and Refugee Rights is deeply concerned about recent events on campus and their effects on the immigration debate both within the University community and nationally. While we denounce violence and unequivocally support free speech, we are troubled that this undisputed right became the sole focus of the University's reaction to the events of October 4. President Bollinger's Statement on Free Speech set the tone and parameters of the University's response and subsequent dialogue on the matter. While the Statement rightly supported free speech, it sidelined important issues of 1) the true nature of the Minuteman Project, 2) the dehumanization of migrating persons, and 3) the effects of the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, the University's response evidenced a disappointing disregard for the principles of honest discourse and human dignity, values manifested in Columbia's mandate as an institution of higher learning and in its non-discrimination policy.

The Minuteman Project

The Minuteman Project is spearheading a wider movement of vigilante violence along the U.S.-Mexico border that has led to "migrants being shot, bitten by dogs, hit with flashlights, kicked, taunted, and unlawfully imprisoned."¹ The founder of the Minuteman Project promotes fear of and violence towards migrating persons and declares them to be enemy combatants.² Leaders of the Minuteman Project brandish illegal weapons and lie to border enforcement authorities.³ Members of the Minuteman Project illegally detain immigrants⁴ and commit abuses against them, such as forcing victims to pose for humiliating photographs.⁵ Minuteman Project participants have been involved in incidents in which day laborers were harassed, immigrant rights activists threatened, and border-crossers fired upon.⁶

The Minuteman Project is widely recognized as having ties to hate-groups.⁷ It is a product of hate and racism, and we are gravely concerned about how this organization feeds the production of more violence and racism. The Minuteman Project, sadly, has effects far beyond the border. Images of armed vigilantes are broadcast across the country. Every time a vigilante points a gun at an immigrant, the respect for the human rights of immigrants and refugees everywhere grows dimmer. It is the responsibility of individuals and institutions committed to the value of human dignity to stand in its defense.

The Dehumanization of Migrating Persons

The Minuteman Project uses inaccurate and hateful language such as "illegals," "aliens," "wetbacks," and "savages," to describe the men, women, and children crossing the desert. They use these words in conjunction with dangerous propaganda to incite fear in the general population. The most frightening demonstration by the Minuteman Project of its intent to dehumanize is the use of weapons and the threat of violence against the families and individuals who cross in search of a better life. The imagery of the Minuteman Project brandishing weapons

¹ <http://www.vigilantewatch.org/docs/CreatingtheMinutemen.pdf>

² <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?pid=972> (Gilchrist stating "Illegal immigrants will destroy this country. . . every time a Mexican flag is planted on American soil, it is a declaration of war.")

³ <http://www.vigilantewatch.org/docs/CreatingtheMinutemen.pdf> (noting that Chris Simcox, co-founder of the Minuteman Project, was found guilty of illegally carrying arms and lying about it)

⁴ <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/gen/21241prs20051024.html>

⁵ <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/gen/11734prs20050407.html>

⁶ <http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/LocalLaw/locallaw001.htm>

⁷ <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/news/item.jsp?aid=54> (noting that Neo-Nazis have worked for Gilchrist's campaigns, and remain members of the Minuteman Project)

in its illegal patrol of the border is leading to an acceptance of violence against anyone who is thought to be “illegal.”

Many try to rationalize this violence at the border by distinguishing between “legal” and “illegal” immigrants. To have legal status in the U.S. means to have been inspected and officially allowed into the country. Some persons enter the country without inspection. This does not equate with being “illegal.” The Immigration and Nationality Act provides avenues for many people who have not been inspected and admitted to change their status to lawful resident. This process of gaining lawful status embodies some of our country’s most cherished values, such as providing asylum for those fleeing religious and political persecution. By allowing the image of an “illegal immigrant” to hinder serious discussion of how best to address the situation, we commit ourselves to an ideological construct that allows us to ignore the human suffering at the border.

The Militarization of the U.S.- Mexico Border

The militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border has resulted in the deaths of thousands of human beings. In August 2006, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report finding that “since 1995 the number of border-crossing deaths increased and by 2005 had more than doubled . . . [and] [t]his increase in deaths occurred despite the fact that . . . there was not a corresponding increase in the number of illegal entries.”⁸ The GAO attributes this radical increase in deaths to border enforcement strategies that shunt migrants into treacherous desert and remote mountain areas. The illegal enforcement activities of the Minuteman Project contribute to this militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The national debate about U.S. immigration policy is an important one. We support the free exchange of ideas regarding how the United States should rationalize domestic policy regarding the migration of men, women, and children across the Western Hemisphere. We strongly believe, however, that this exchange should be anchored by acknowledgement of and concern about the ongoing humanitarian tragedy at the U.S.-Mexico border. Such acknowledgement and concern requires efforts to dispel myths about migrating persons, to educate people living in the U.S. about why migrants are motivated to gamble with their lives, and to remember those who have died in their attempts to reach the United States.

The Columbia University Response

In responding to the events of October 4, Columbia University had an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to honest dialogue and human dignity, values manifested in its non-discrimination policy⁹ and mission statement.¹⁰ The issue is not whether the University should uphold the Minuteman Project’s right to free speech; we concede their right. Further, we do not seek redress from the message of racism and violence that the Minuteman Project brought to our campus. We are concerned with how the University contributed to this message. By ignoring the true nature of the Minuteman Project, the University hid behind free speech, shirked its responsibility to uphold human dignity, and effectively supported the cyclical production of hate and racism.

—The Society for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, 2006-2007 Executive Board

⁸ <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06770.pdf>

⁹ http://www.columbia.edu/cu/administration/policylibrary/policies/eoaa/eoaa_002.html

¹⁰ http://www.columbia.edu/about_columbia/mission.html