

Virtual Debate: Jim Gilchrist Vs. Kat Rodriguez

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Beginning of a Migrant Trail, U.S.-Mexico Border. ©Michael Hyatt

For Part Three of the immigration series, “Immigration across various U.S. states,” we’re staying in Arizona for now so that we can analyze two interviews of people from opposite sides of the political spectrum. Jim Gilchrist was the co-organizer of the Minute Man Project,¹ and still operates it as a 501c(4) non-profit organization. Kat Rodriguez is the director for the Coalition of Human Rights² in Tucson, Arizona, a non-profit that “fights militarization of the southern border region.” I interviewed both of them in March of 2004 over the phone before the launch of the Minute Man Project.

The immigration debate centers around people coming to this country to have a better life. The photograph, provided to Kena Cubed, Inc., by professional photographer Michael Hyatt,³ clearly illustrates this concept. Two men in Mexico stare at the Arizona side of the border as they dream and

imagine what the future could hold if they cross the line.

“Cross the line” has a triple-meaning: 1) immigrants who cross the imaginary and literal border line; 2) immigrants who cross the line by “breaking the law;” and, 3) regarding the Minute Man Project’s tactics, a question. Is the project “crossing the line?” I have placed the interviews side-by-side, although the reader should note that the interviews took place separately within a few days of each other. My questions are in blue to separate them from the interviewees’ responses.

Jim Gilchrist Side

RB – Can you briefly explain why you organized the Minute man Project and what you hope to accomplish?

Jim – “It was started primarily to bring national awareness to the illegal alien invasion crisis

Kat Rodriguez Side

RB – Please tell us how you feel about the MMP.

Kat – “Slightly concerned about the message about what it’s saying about Arizona, about immigration and how to address it. A lot of

that has taken place over the last forty years and getting more rampant over time. The second reason: since the Border Patrol is so under-funded and under-manned, we thought we would support them by doing neighborhood watch. We would observe and report for them. Let *them* carry out law enforcement.”

RB – Can you briefly describe some of the spotting activities that people will be doing?

Jim – “They will be on horseback, they will be on SUV, on roads, on motorcycles, and airplanes. We have about 2 dozen aircraft, 4 at a time will be airborne during the day. They will be on stationary outposts and foot patrols. And their purpose is to observe the entry and the movement of illegal aliens coming across the border, and to constantly update the Border Patrol on their position. Let the BP come in w/ their units, their helicopters, etc. to make the interception. We're not going to confront the illegals, or detain them in any manner, or threaten them. We don't look at them as criminals. We look at them as economic refugees...not that they're being oppressed. It's just that they're being ignored and neglected by their homelands, predominantly Mexico. That's where 98% of the refugees are coming from.”

RB – [Question about what Jim thinks about what critics say. I give Kat as an example.] The human rights organizer Kat Rodriguez is concerned about potential for interaction between MMP participants and immigrants, and the potential for violence [I was trying to imply that critics say MMP participants could enact violence].

Jim – [Tension in voice] “Illegal aliens are coming over here armed to kill American citizens in the Minute Man Project? [Not

them come from outside Arizona. That's slightly worrisome as well because we don't know who they are. They're planning on coming into our community, many of them armed.”

RB – Do you think the event will result with people taking the law into their own hands?

Kat – “They're claiming that they're not planning on confronting migrants. I don't believe that for a second, I don't believe that they don't plan on in some way confronting migrants. I'm not going to say that they're planning to beat people up or abuse them. What I'm saying is that I do believe they plan to on some level interact even though they're claiming they're not. Because we don't know who they are, because they haven't released a list of the participants or any of that. We don't know who these people are, who they're connected with, what their histories are. And all that he'll tell us in a vague general sense is that 300 of them have a military or law enforcement background. That they're all heroes, which is a generalization in any sense.”

RB – What concerns do you have about the MMP specifically in regards to human rights?

Kat – “Vigilantes in Southern Arizona have always been around. They were here in the seventies. Before The MMP and people like Chris Simcox, we had and still have Glen Spencer, Jack foot and his Ranch Rescue. Roger Barnet has been here all this time. So, the history of this kind of reaction is not new. What is new is who these groups are linked to, and that's where our concern comes in.

“More and more the anti-immigrant movement has joined forces with the white supremacist movement. So, now we're not

letting me answer.] Well of course we have a right to defend ourselves. If they're coming over here to kill us...Is that what she's saying? And to teach us a lesson? That's the message we're getting. Either that or she's engaging in McCarthyism and saying that just because we exist and we are opposed to her line of thinking, therefore we are racist and violent ogres. That is so bogus! That is McCarthyism."



looking at an issue of individuals who don't particularly like Mexicans. We're looking at white supremacist rhetoric and propaganda that has gone out."

RB – "They claim to be law-abiding citizens who are organizing this event as a way to advocate the enforcement of the law. So, what problem is there in advocating for the enforcement of the law in the way they are doing it?"

Kat – "There's nothing wrong with people advocating following the law, period. No one's going to argue against that. No one's even going to argue against the fact that immigration right now is a problem in this country. But as far as how you address that, the tactics that you take, that's an issue. If they're wanting to do that, then they should join the border patrol. They should join lobbying groups that are working to change policies. Because the truth of it is that it's the border policies that have caused the situation that we're now seeing. The only ones that have the power to enforce immigration law is the Border Patrol."

It is when Jim mentions McCarthyism that his argument weakens. And Kat admits that immigration is a problem. Kat has since changed her opinion; when I talked to her in November of 2009, she said that she doesn't see it as a problem, but as "an issue to be addressed." She discussed the bad border policy, such as the backlog of VISA and citizenship applications at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) department. According to Kat, people have to wait about fifteen years to get a VISA. As she points out, the wait for a VISA weakens the MMP argument that people should go "through the system," since "the system" is inherently flawed.

Let's get back to the interviews.

RB – [Interrupting] "That is an argument people use. MMP participants are racist. I, however, don't necessarily believe that.

Jim – "Well, our opponents are going to say

Kat – "Is this situation overwhelming and resulting in death and problems, yes absolutely. But we need solutions, meaningful solutions. We don't need to have a bunch of folks, coming into our communities from out

that. I would have to put Kat Rodriguez's group, and Border Action Network, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Anti-Defamation League in the same category as white supremacists, Black Panthers and Muslim extremists. These groups are very extreme. Anything they can conjure up with no proof whatsoever, they accuse us of. Let them try to convince anybody that I am a racist. My son-in-law of eight years is Mexican. So is my grandson. Of course, just because my next of kin are Mexican, that doesn't really mean that I couldn't be a racist. But I know in my heart I'm not.

"I feel in my heart that people who are opposed to the rule of law are anarchists. Their accusations don't hold together anymore. It's like that guy McCarthy back in the early fifties who was accusing everyone of being a communist, and he had a lot of Americans believing it. All he had to do was mention their names and everybody went after that person. They can go so far as, if they get carried away with McCarthyism, they can get themselves declared a hate group. They can get themselves sued. Wait until we have done something horrible and [until] you have proof that we are horrible people."

Somehow, Jim digresses again by making very extreme statements. He puts human rights groups in the same category as white supremacists and other extremist groups. Kat does the same thing to the MMP early in her interview. They're both trying to paint the other as faceless and merciless. The fact is that Kat is not a merciless extremist. She cares about immigrants and their rights under the U.S. Constitution. She abhors violence and extremist activities. I do not know where Jim got the idea that Kat is some kind of hateful extremist. Maybe he hates her, but that doesn't make her an extremist.

Kat mentions white supremacist activity because she has observed similar attitudes from MMP rhetoric. For example, the fact that the MMP leadership would not prevent someone from bringing a firearm was quite worrisome to her. Indeed, I interviewed an MMP participant who had what looked to be a .45 caliber pistol, and found it odd that he was going out to the desert with it. Even Jim Gilchrist admitted that guns are very intimidating. One big difference between

side of Arizona, *armed*, with the intention of enforcing the law, which they're not trained in. That makes me nervous. And I know that environmental groups have talked about how the month of April is the high season for bird watchers. What happens if MMP participants comes upon a group of innocent bird watchers? Nobody wants to be sprung upon by armed men who are *not* law enforcement officials. They have not been deputized, they're not law enforcement, and they're not wanted by the community. Border Patrol does not encourage this type of activity.

"The agenda that they've put forth for all that Chris Simcox says that, he's for this and for that. We've heard what he's said in the past. We've heard the rhetoric he has come out with. And so do we trust them? No! I absolutely don't trust him."

Jim and Kat, however, is that Kat would not allow anyone with a firearm near any activities conducted by the Coalition for Human Rights. For conscientious liberal social activists, bringing a gun to an event is like a country's leader bringing a nuclear bomb with him to a diplomatic negotiation. It's provocative, unnecessary and causes suspicion. So, I too was concerned about the potential for MMP participants to conduct violent acts. I would have been right in the middle of it!

As you'll see on the left, I continued to press Jim about MMP activities along the border. And on the right, I asked Kat Rodriguez about other events she was planning during the MMP operations in Arizona. She said that the events didn't directly confront or counter the MMP. See the photograph taken at one of these events.

RB – “Border Patrol leadership, including José Garza, has also expressed concern, saying that MMP participants could add more stress to the Border Patrol.

Jim – “We have written our congressmen. We have supported the Border Patrol. We want their budgets tripled. We want U.S. immigration laws enforced. We are about the rule of law, because without the rule of law you have mayhem, you have dictatorships, and you have mob rule. I think that the Border Patrol officers, the supervisors, are merely puppeting what Washington tells them to say. The support we're getting from Border Patrol has only been from ground troops. We want to operate within the laws of the State of Arizona to support enforcement of U.S. immigration laws. You can't call us racists and fascists just because of that. Anyone who calls us that is engaging in McCarthyism.”

“This is an assembly under the first amendment, a political protest, trying to send a message to Washington, and it's also a humongous neighborhood watch, assisting law enforcement, not taking the law into our own hands.”

RB – “For the events you're planning, are they designed to counter the MMP?”

Kat – “More so to get the message to folks that this is not how the majority of Arizona feels. The majority of Arizona is not supportive of this sort of activity. We do not condone this sort of war mentality that they're sort of promoting with Mexico, with our neighbors to the south.”



To Jim's credit, he's right that if everyone knew the laws weren't enforced, mayhem would

exist. Also, I believed him that Border Patrol supervisors were merely paying lip service to liberal groups. The fact is that I remember seeing the website of a Border Patrol union in Arizona that openly supported the MMP. It was difficult for me to imagine that agents in the field did not appreciate MMP efforts, as it logically made their jobs somewhat easier.

If we look at Kat's statement above, it is obvious she would say that the majority of Arizonans don't agree with the MMP. I think Kat is correct, but I don't know of any polls or surveys that can prove it. I can only safely say that I didn't agree with the MMP and that I know a lot of people who didn't agree. But I also think that there is a large percentage of Arizonans who did and still do agree with the MMP.

Jim – “We've got the white supremacists – the only solution to them is going into battle. They're prodding us to have a violent confrontation with illegals. We have the Mexican supremacists, who are probably even more racist than our KKK, Nazis and Muslims. They are violent! You ought to see the emails I've gotten from them. The La Raza, Mecha, Aztlán types, whose only resolution to this problem is to kill off as many Americans as they can and conquer the southwest of the United States. That's as ridiculous as the KKK or the Nazis. They're all a bunch of idiots. They're right up there with the Black Panthers and the Muslim extremists. And the final ones are the other extremists who want to see violence. That's the open-border lobbyists. All of these groups want to see violence down there so that they can say, 'See, I told you so!' And these are the groups, from all different races, colors and creeds, that need to be *watched* . NOT the Minute Man volunteers.

RB – “There are other groups, like the Coalition for Human rights in Tucson, Arizona. I don't interpret them as extremist. They're just concerned about what *may* happen. How would you respond to those groups that aren't necessarily as extreme?”

Jim – “We are concerned about what may

RB – Do you have anything to add to this discussion?

Kat – “The majority of Arizonans do not feel this way. Most of the Minute Men who are coming to our communities are outsiders. And they are not wanted. They're not appreciated in any sense, especially because some of the things that we have seen put out there by hate groups – by neo-Nazis, white nationalist groups. They claim that that's not them. They claim to be screening. I don't believe it.

“The Cochise County Board of Supervisors is requesting...you know, they haven't even applied for their permits! As of this press conference I went to on Friday, they hadn't even applied for the permits to have these events! So, how law-abiding is that if they're not even legally applying for permits to have these events that they've been promoting? I think that they're very remiss in their claims that they are law-abiding. Well, follow the rules! Get a permit! What are they hiding, if they don't want to let people know who's participating?

“And at this press conference, the Vice Chairman of the Cochise County Board of Supervisors said that he would help expedite the petition process. But it was contingent upon them providing a list of these

happen if our laws continue to be ignored and neglected. They have their arguments. They want no rule of law, no enforcement of immigration laws. They have something politically to gain, economically to gain, socially to gain, etc. They're not concerned at all with enforcement of the law...We're just opposite that. We want those laws...to actually be enforced. We want people coming into the country to enjoy this great society and this freedom in this country, to be screened according to laws that were set up just for that reason...[Shifting to talking about Kat Rodriguez]...I don't think we'll ever convince her that we're good people. She probably wishes evil things on us. I've never known the extremist groups to be anything other than opposed to anything that a conservative or a law-and-order person is for. So, I give them little credence.”

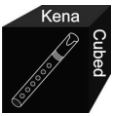
participants who they claim have all had background checks. I don't believe that, because they've already told reporters that they wouldn't have time to do these background checks – that they weren't doing them.”

Before I met Jim, I had never heard of the concept of “Mexican supremacists.” I agree that the idea of conquering the southwest is ridiculous, but again, I've never heard Chicano or Mexicano activists in groups such as Mecha and La Raza make those fanciful claims. In fact, the persons whom I know want to work together and collaborate with Americans. After all, many of them were born here and are just as American as Jim Gilchrist. In his interview, Jim referred to letters he received threatening his physical well-being. I saw many of those letters, and I agree that they were written by violent people. But to associate an entire group with a few people (Jim actually received *many* “hate” letters) is not only theoretically unsound but also unsubstantiated and based on his own stereotypes. This is the reason many human rights organizers mistrust the MMP.

And a side note: not all Black Panthers were extremists. In fact, they were fighting severe oppression against the “American” way of life that included racist ideology. I'm not an expert in this area, however, and will leave this discussion to someone more knowledgeable.

To give little credence to someone just because he or she does not agree with you is curiously contradictory to engaging in a productive dialogue that leads to change for the common good. I'm not sure from where Jim got the idea that Kat “wishes evil things” on him. In fact, Kat made clear in her interview that she did not want any violence to take place against *anyone* .

Kat mentions extremist groups for a second time as well, implying a loose connection with the MMP. But according to Jim Gilchrist, the MMP stays away from those groups. In fact, he



relayed a story to me that two people dropped out of the MMP launch because of pressure from organizers. They were going to bring rifles. As Jim made clear, the MMP is a meeting under the first amendment, not a war. And Jim doesn't like guns either. He told me he would duck and call 911 if he heard gun shots, because he doesn't carry guns. But as Kat said, if they were so "law-abiding," why did they not get permits to hold the events? Why did they not release a list of registered participants? What were they trying to hide?

And the debate continues. Here in Massachusetts there are reports in the media that our legislature will decide whether to allow undocumented immigrants to enter college and only pay the in-state resident fees. In one report, the journalist said that in terms of immigrants' rights, even Texas is more liberal than Massachusetts. It will be interesting to follow the results.

¹ <http://www.minutemanproject.com/>

² http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26

³ <http://www.michael-hyatt.com/>