

Responding to public outrage, FBI arrests leader of border militia which detained hundreds of migrants

By Norisa Diaz
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Responding to popular outrage over revelations that armed right-wing militias have been systematically detaining asylum-seekers at gunpoint along the US-Mexico border, the FBI arrested a leader of one of these groups, Larry Hopkins, 69, on Saturday.

Hopkins leads the United Constitutional Patriots (UCP) an armed militia which has been patrolling a portion of the southern border outside El Paso, Texas for the last several weeks. He was arrested by FBI agents in the New Mexico border city of Sunland Park on charges of being in possession of firearms as a felon.

The American Civil Liberties Union has described the UCP as a “fascist militia” and charge that members frequently illegally detain and kidnap migrants by impersonating law enforcement and many UCP members are veterans of the US special forces.

Saturday’s arrest followed an April 16 a video taken by another member of the militia, Debbie Collins Farnsworth, went viral on Facebook. It shows UCP vigilantes in military-style fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles detaining hundreds of migrants, including dozens of children, huddled together on the ground in the darkness.

Hopkins has long been known to the US government as a far-right militia member. In 2006 in Klamath County, Oregon, he was arrested and charged with impersonating a police officer and being a felon in possession of a firearm, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

According to court papers from a 2017 criminal complaint witnesses accused Hopkins of saying the UCP was training to assassinate Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Democratic Party financier and

philanthropist George Soros. The FBI said the accusations were made during an investigation into “militia extremist activity.”

While small numbers of right-wing nationalist groups have long patrolled the US-Mexico border, the video posted on social media by UCP members reveal the close connection between these groups and federal Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), who work with these illegal vigilante groups on a daily basis.

Emboldened by the Trump administration’s insistence that the US is experiencing an “invasion” by foreign enemies, the number and size of illegal militia groups are on the rise. Hailing Trump and calling for the building of the border wall, UCP states its objective is to “uphold the Constitution of The United States of America” and to protect citizens’ rights “against all enemies both foreign and domestic.”

The arrest of Hopkins on Saturday is a clear attempt by federal agents and CBP to publicly distance themselves from the right-wing militia groups they closely work with.

Mother Jones senior reporter, Shane Bauer went undercover in 2016 with a border militia group based in Arizona, Three Percent United Patriots. He described the close connection between the militias and CBP, “The border patrol would come to the base every day, they would sometimes bring us donuts... Border patrol would tell us where to set up and share intel with us.” Bauer shot undercover video footage of a CBP officer speaking to the militia, “Next time you guys come down...[I’ll] give you an unauthorized brief, but you didn’t hear any of that sh** from me.”

While Sunland Park Police Chief Javier Guerra told *BuzzFeed News* he had explicitly informed the group

that their activity is illegal the UCP continues to maintain that its actions are entirely legitimate as “citizen’s arrests.” While Guerra said that he had warned them against pointing their guns at civilians, the police chief has done nothing to stop the militia from detaining hundreds of people and handing them over to CBP.

In the wake of these latest revelations, a spokesperson for CBP has continued to parrot the official line that the agency “does not endorse private groups or organizations taking enforcement matters into their own hands,” and warning that “interference by civilians in law enforcement matters could have public safety and legal consequences for all parties involved.”

The pretense of the legality of the federal government’s crackdown on the border is wrought with hypocrisy. Every escalated measure towards immigrants taken by Trump administration has been based on illegal foundations. Trump has already deployed over 2,000 active duty troops to the border, in direct violation against the Posse Comitatus act, which bars the military from engaging in law enforcement activities within the United States.

Trump has declared a national emergency in order to use Pentagon funds to build a border wall, in violation of the US Constitution. Last month, the Supreme Court rubber stamped the unconstitutional and arbitrary detention of immigrants. Revelations that thousands of citizens have been caught up in sweeps by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), continue to be ignored by the media.

As the FBI’s arrest and trial of Hopkin’s unfolds, it is certain that every effort will be made to down play the actions of the UCP and other far-right militias and the fascist rhetoric spewed by Trump. The President has been actively stoking up fascist elements such as Hopkins by framing asylum seekers as gang members and invaders.

The Democratic Party and their pseudo-left boosters are complicit in these developments. While campaigning for president in Iowa earlier this month Senator Bernie Sanders pointedly opposed open borders because it would trigger a flood of poor migrants.

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