

US government tries to distance itself from border militia

By Trévon Austin
30 April 2019

Last week, in response to public outrage over right-wing militias illegally detaining immigrants at the US-Mexico border, the FBI arrested Larry Mitchell Hopkins, leader of the United Constitutional Patriots (UCP). The arrest is a purely diversionary move on the part of the federal government to put fascistic elements “patrolling” the border at arms length.

After a Facebook video showing members of the UCP, garbed in military-style clothing and armed with semi-automatic rifles, detaining dozens of migrants went viral, US Customs and Border Protection resorted to damage control by stating it “does not endorse or condone private groups or organizations taking enforcement matters into their own hands.” The video, in which CBP agents are seen shepherding the migrants, implies a direct cooperation between Border Patrol and paramilitary groups on the border.

A 2016 investigative report by *Mother Jones* cited a CBP agent thanking a militia member and saying, “It impresses me that you guys come out and do my job for me for no pay at all,” and offering tips on where the group should patrol. A Freedom of Information Act request filed by Protect Democracy uncovered footage of another agent thanking a militia group for their efforts and asking others to do the same.

Although the Trump administration has emboldened right-wing militia groups to operate openly, federal agencies have long known of the organizations and done little to discourage them. Any concern over the legality of militia activity at the border is feigned. The vigilante groups have long been supplementing the anti-immigrant work of the US ruling class.

Armed militias acting as or in cooperation with law enforcement on the US-Mexico border go back as far as the 19th century. From the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, in 1848, militias formed by

slave owners patrolled the border to capture slaves attempting to flee to Mexico, where slavery was outlawed in 1829.

After the US passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which outlawed the immigration of Chinese laborers, armed “watchmen” on horseback patrolled, from El Paso to California, to stop Chinese immigrants from entering the US via Mexico. The CBP is descended from these watchmen.

In 1977, the Ku Klux Klan created its own vigilante groups in California and Texas. David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the KKK, said at the time that the group’s aim was to do something about the “illegal alien problem.” The KKK was only present on the border for a few days, but the resulting news coverage inspired subsequent militia groups.

According to Katherine Belew, a historian at the University of Chicago, a vigilante group formed in the 1980s called Civilian Military Assistance was one of the first contemporary instances of a militia detaining undocumented immigrants at gunpoint. According to Belew, the CMA, which announced itself as anti-communist, set booby traps, fired live ammunition, and detained undocumented immigrants on the Arizona border.

Despite the widespread outrage over the CMA’s practices, local authorities decided not to prosecute the militants for criminal activity. Belew stated that local sheriffs had been tacitly accepting of paramilitary actions and sometimes participated in them. Legal action against the CMA was not taken until 1986 when the CMA’s leader was arrested on a felony firearms charge, similar to what occurred to Hopkins.

The most prominent anti-immigrant militia group prior to the UCP was the “Minutemen,” a group of vigilantes that formed in 2004 to stop and detain

undocumented immigrants. The paramilitary group originally earned praise from then California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, but quickly came under scrutiny after many of its prominent leaders and founders were arrested on charges ranging from murder to child sexual abuse.

One incident involved Shawna Forde, a former member of the border vigilante group Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, who murdered a man and his 9-year-old daughter in 2009. Many Minutemen were also discovered to have neo-Nazi ties.

Federal officials have made clear that Hopkins was not arrested due to his association with the border militia. His arrest was in connection to an incident in 2017 in which a criminal complaint filed by the FBI states that he was a felon in possession of nine firearms, including a 12-gauge shotgun, long rifles and handguns.

According to the US Attorney's office, Hopkins has three felony convictions dating back to 1996, including possessing a loaded firearm in the state of Michigan in 1996, being a felon in possession of a firearm in the state of Oregon and impersonating a police officer in 2006.

The FBI initially began investigating Hopkins after reports suggested the UCP was training to assassinate Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and George Soros. The federal agency has not commented on why so much time elapsed before Hopkins was charged for offenses committed in 2017.

Hopkins' arrest only came after the American Civil Liberties Union publicly condemned the UCP's illegal activities and urged New Mexico's new Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham to order an investigation.

Emboldened by the Trump administration's racist rhetoric toward immigrants and claims that the US is experiencing an "invasion" by foreign enemies, illegal paramilitary groups patrolling the border are growing. The Democrats, who echo Trump in acknowledging the supposed border "crisis," are complicit in the increased danger migrants face while attempting to flee violence and poverty.