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Commentary: Minutemen have a right to be idiotic

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.
Special to CNN

SAN DIEGO, California (CNN) -- When Minutemen founder Jim Gilchrist sent me an angry e-mail calling me a racist a while back, I shrugged it off as a pot-kettle thing.

I'm not the one who formed a gang of misfits who have been labeled "vigilantes" by President Bush and which includes members of hate groups, according to the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center. It's not my posse who has been known to hurl accusations of racism at one another whenever they have a spat and who prowl the U.S.-Mexico border chasing Mexicans -- admittedly, not an easy thing to do when you're carrying a lawn-chair and a cooler of beer.

If that sounds harsh, blame my upbringing. As the son of a retired law enforcement officer, I have little tolerance for wannabes who play cop and even less for those who play with fire by taking up a cause that appeals to nativists and hooligans.

Here you have grown men and women dressing up in fatigues, filling up pick-up trucks and driving to the U.S.-Mexico border from their homes in Iowa, Indiana or Idaho to hunt for illegal immigrants. As if there weren't illegal immigrants in those places, waiting in front of the big-box hardware store for folks to pull up and hire them. These yahoos could save the gas, and just crack down on their friends and neighbors back home.

It's not tough to win an argument with someone like Gilchrist. You just let him talk, and, before long, he'll say something inaccurate, intolerant, or idiotic.

Which is why it's so disappointing to read where protesters at Columbia University last week stormed the stage during a speech that Gilchrist was slated to give at the behest of a group of campus Republicans.

The incident, which was captured on tape and widely viewed on television and the Internet, has sparked a debate over free speech on the Ivy League campus and just how "free" it is.

The protesters admit that they planned to take the stage in a peaceful protest. But, they claim, things got out of hand when they were attacked by a pro-Minutemen contingent.

That's a lame excuse. What these protesters did was wrong, foolish and self-defeating. They could have helped inform the immigration dialogue on campus, but they chose intimidation over information and resorted to a heckler's veto to shut out speech that they found offensive. They forgot the first rule of free expression: that the answer to offensive speech is more speech, not less.

It is the same lesson we all learned in 1977 when a group of Nazis wanted to march in Skokie, Illinois, a mostly Jewish suburb of Chicago. The question of whether they should be allowed to march split the Jewish community, pitting civil libertarians against community activists. The Nazis won the right to march when the courts held they had a First Amendment right to express their views even if their message was vile and deliberately provocative.

That's a good standard. Good enough for the Nazis, good enough for the Minutemen.

Ruben Navarrette Jr. is a member of the editorial board of the San Diego Union-Tribune and a nationally syndicated columnist. Read his column at <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/op-ed/navarrette/index.html> .

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