

Perpetuating Misperceptions

Marc Brenman, Executive Director
Washington State Human Rights Commission

Dear Mr. Brenman:

I was pleased to see the Bellingham Herald announcement of the commission's planned April 27 follow-up to the December national human rights conference on Minuteman militias, also held in Bellingham. I have followed developments there since participating with you and Commissioner Hebert in that conference on what was then the impending Congressional campaign against immigrants, and congratulate both your staff and the local community organizers in preventing to date the malicious harassment, assault, and murders we've seen committed by Minuteman vigilantes on the Mexican border. As I am unable to attend the upcoming hearing, I hope this correspondence can be made available in the public record.

The quotations attributed to you in the Herald regarding anti-immigrant rhetoric by Minutemen creating misperceptions that lead to discrimination raise three points which I will briefly discuss: 1.the role of social movement entrepreneurs in generating misperceptions, 2.the role of paramilitaries in transmitting misperceptions, 3.the role of media in perpetuating misperceptions.

As documented in my online memoir <http://skookumgeoduck.blogspot.com/2005/05/reign-of-terror.html> about the anti-Indian/property-rights militias of the mid 1990s, (organized in opposition to the Growth Management Act and federal implementation of obligations to treaty tribes in Washington state), misperceptions generated by such organizations as the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, (located in Bellevue), are fed into the anti-human rights paramilitaries via entrepreneurial intellectuals like CDFE's Ron Arnold and field agents such as Chuck Cushman. In the case of the Wise Use Movement, these anti-democratic activities were supported financially and organizationally by trade and industry groups, most notably the Building Industry Association.

The property-rights/county secession groups that served as intermediate cutouts between Building Industry agents like former Whatcom BIA director Art Castle, and militia recruiters such as Citizens for Liberty leader Ben Hinckle, are the vector by which these misperceptions are conveyed to those who ultimately use rhetoric and other forms of threat to intimidate the political opponents of those who hire the social movement entrepreneurs to generate them. In both the Wise Use Movement and the anti-immigrant campaign, which is a subset of the White Supremacy Movement, the entrepreneurs function as part of the network of American conservatism most visible in the agenda of the Republican Party. Even the Minuteman leaders have publicly remarked that they synchronized their anti-immigrant events with the introduction of GOP bills in Congress and state legislatures.

What is astounding, given this level of coordination between the Republican Party and militias over the past two decades, is how effectively the media--the Bellingham Herald being a prime example--has managed to perpetuate misperceptions about the social issues, about the targets of the hate campaigns, and about the advocates for discriminatory public policy. As I wrote in my expose of this phenomenon as exemplified by the property-rights rebellion in Puget Sound ten years ago, this perpetuation of misperceptions by the Herald was no accident.

Which suggests another role in this potentially lethal social drama--that of the public institution charged with providing protection to minorities targeted with violence for political purposes, namely, your agency. Part of this role, which I am relieved to see in action, is to address the misperceptions in a way that both curtails threatening behavior by bigots, and educates the public about how these deliberately manufactured misperceptions can affect their opinions and civic involvement in ways that do harm to their communities.

While I realize your agency is rightly non-partisan, I would encourage your staff to explore and publish in regional and statewide media your findings and conclusions about how misperceptions are generated, transmitted, and perpetuated. A thorough and honest treatment of this vital problem must include the role of trade and industry, movement entrepreneurs, media, and political parties. Anything less is just eyewash.

I hope you find my comments helpful, and welcome questions by commissioners, you or your staff. For your convenience, I include a biographical note <http://archipelagonetwork.blogspot.com/2006/03/recognized-expertise.html> of my expertise in this field of social studies. I would also mention that my book on this topic, *Blind Spots*, is available in the Bellingham Public Library as well as at the Washington State Library in Olympia.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely, Jay Taber

Jay Taber is the recipient of the Public Good Project Defender of Democracy award, and is an associate scholar of the Center for World Indigenous Studies. The author of five books, and associate editor of *Fourth World Journal* <http://www.cwis.org/fwj/index.htm> Jay spends considerable time mentoring writers and activists throughout the English-speaking world. He can be reached by e-mail at tbarj@yahoo.com or through his website <http://skookumgeoduck.blogspot.com>