

DePugh and the Minutemen: Wonderland of the Mind



ROBERT BOLIVAR DE PUGH apparently possesses that special staying power of a man obsessed, in his case with the omnipresences of Communism and Socialism. DePugh is the national coordinator and founding father of the Minutemen, paramilitary organization of the ultra-right. But over the past three years, the title seems to have become more titular than real. Not that the Minutemen are withering away; if anything they have become stronger. But an internal power struggle—the opposition consisting of those who consider him too tame—evidently has robbed DePugh of much of his authority.

I first met DePugh in 1966 while researching an article on the Minutemen (RAMPARTS, January 1967). We had conversed in the cluttered office of Biolabs Inc., his family-run veterinary medicine firm located in Norborne, a dot on the rich and rolling farmland of northwest Missouri. DePugh, a ruggedly handsome man in his mid-forties with intent dark eyes and receding black hair, was calm and businesslike as he talked about the Minutemen and their manifesto. He observed that the country had, for all practical purposes, gone Communist during Franklin Roosevelt's second term, and that only revolutionary, not political means, could reclaim it.

NOW, THREE YEARS LATER, he looked much as he had before, although his changed circumstances showed how much water had passed under the bridge. This time I interviewed DePugh in a holding cell in the U.S. Marshal's office in Kansas City, where he had been brought from Leavenworth Penitentiary to stand trial for having jumped bail. The charge stemmed from his having gone underground for a year and a half, during which time he roamed the western United States disguised in the improbable garb of a hippie and sent off "Underground News Bulletins" to the media. I was in Kansas City, having been subpoenaed as a defense witness in the case. Also in the cell were his two attorneys, one from Legal Aid—DePugh had claimed indigent defendant status—and the other a volunteer with a professional interest in the legal issues raised.

For all his wild rhetoric, DePugh rarely has been known to lose his cool, and he hadn't lost it now. He outlined for me the technical defense he and his attorneys were considering for the trial, due to get under way the next morning. Very simply, he said, he had skipped bail because of fear for his life. There were indications, he explained, that an opposing element of the radical right had marked him for death, and there had been no point in going to the FBI

for protection because the FBI was in cahoots with this very element. It was clear that DePugh was alluding to a Minutemen splinter group that he had earlier described as a "Nazi clique."

DePugh had first brought up the existence of this clique when I telephoned him in October of 1967, a call which had been prompted by his public statement that "When fascism comes to the United States it will come in the guise of anti-Communism." The full statement seemed not only to confirm DePugh's known antipathy toward the American Nazi Party of George Lincoln Rockwell, but to bolster suspicions of a deep rift between DePugh and factions of his own organization. On the urging of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, I made the call and posed the possibility that renegade Minutemen had been involved in the Kennedy assassination. DePugh readily agreed, saying that he had some evidence that might explain unanswered questions about events at Dealey Plaza in Dallas. It was only a few months after this exploratory contact on the topic of the assassination that the chief Minuteman had gone underground.

Pacing back and forth in the cell, DePugh said that Garrison had also been subpoenaed but had balked at appearing, on the grounds of a recent back operation. DePugh explained Garrison's role in his case: "When I talked with Jim on the phone [in October 1967], he told me about the mysterious deaths of a number of figures in his investigation." Among those whose deaths had been listed by Garrison were three men who by DePugh's admission were members of the Minutemen.

It was hoped that I would testify to the brief telephone discussion on the assassination in 1967 as well as enumerate the strange deaths. In addition, DePugh was a bit paranoid on the subject of FBI harassment and surveillance, and was convinced that agents had burglarized records in his Richmond, Missouri, facility. Could I attest, on the basis of my own experience, that such tactics were in fact regularly employed by the Bureau? During the discussion, one of the attorneys was summoned outside to answer a telephone call. "I ran into an FBI agent in the corridor," he mentioned later. "He said he'd give anything to hear what was going on in here."

If DePugh's fears about the FBI were slightly overwrought, his concern about Minutemen spin-off factions was not. One bit of extraneous matter which had been dredged up by the Garrison probe was the existence of a paramilitary cell in New Orleans whose leader, a retired Army officer, claimed to be "national commander" of the Minutemen. And in Los Angeles and Orange County, California, there is a clique that privately calls itself the "Real Minutemen." Some of DePugh's former members are literally Nazis, having gone over to the American Nazi Party (ANP). Wasn't the ANP a gross burlesque, I asked him? "Not at all," he replied, naming a prominent Texas oil millionaire as its chief financier. "It has the best underground in the right wing."

THE SCHISM BETWEEN Nazis and Minutemen is based at least in part on ideological differences. To DePugh and his loyalists, the primary enemy is Washington, the seat of power of an increasingly large central bureaucracy. DePugh once stated on a radio

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program, for example, that "the Liberal-Communist-Socialist conspiracy that now effectively controls our federal government will pass any laws that they have to, to effectively silence opposition to the present bureaucracy, regardless of what form it will take." The Nazis, on the other hand, see Moscow, rather than Washington, as the devil incarnate.

The practical effect of this clash in ideologies is illustrated in the relationships which several right-wing factions have with government agencies. For example, DePugh and his partisans are bitterly hostile toward the FBI and CIA—one follower flatly declared that J. Edgar Hoover is a figurehead for "the real head of the FBI, who is a Jew." By the same token, evidence exists that their opposition readily cooperates with the FBI and other government intelligence agencies. A "Real Minuteman" who served in an intelligence arm during World War II remarked not long ago that he was in the employ of the FBI and (improbably) had its protection. Guy Banister, the putative Minuteman who worked closely with American Nazi Party members in New Orleans, was a former FBI official who sent a steady stream of material on "subversives" to the local Bureau office. Banister's associate in a cover organization, the Anti-Communism League of the Caribbean, was Maurice Gatlin, who also was Nazi chief George Lincoln Rockwell's attorney in the Louisiana area. Rockwell himself made no secret of his good relations with the FBI. "J. Edgar Hoover is our kind of people," he once asserted. "He talks like a pink, but when he acts, he acts like a white man."

As a result of the antipathy between the two right-wing groups, DePugh and Rockwell were constantly infiltrating and counter-infiltrating one another's organization. In the course of the jail interview DePugh disclosed with an ironic sigh that Pratler, the ANP lieutenant who has been charged with assassinating Rockwell, had also belonged to the Minutemen.

THERE IS ADEQUATE EVIDENCE TO support DePugh's contention that he did not go underground with the specific intent of jumping bail. The substantive charge on which he had been convicted (in November 1966) was conspiracy to violate the National Firearms Act, to wit, the possession of a somewhat battered machine gun. His attorney for that case would testify that he had counseled DePugh to keep in touch because the conviction would not stand—and indeed it was toppled on appeal.

There remain two principal theories as to why he fled. One is the fear of assassination from the right—a possibility that should not be overlooked. Garrison's inquiry into the past of alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, for example, led investigators to pro-Nazi Party right-wingers in New Orleans—among them Guy Banister. Another piquant ingredient has been added to the mystery by a sometime employee of Guy Banister's New Orleans detective agency. While DePugh was in a fugitive status, this man approached a highly reliable reporter and played a tape purporting to be a telephone conversation between himself and a right-winger in Denver. "We don't want DePugh and Peyson [a DePugh sidekick] to come back," the Denver party had said, offering \$7500 each to make sure they didn't. When

the New Orleans man balked at murder, the proposal switched to fingering the pair for \$1500.

The second theory is that DePugh fled to avoid being arrested on a bank robbery conspiracy charge. In January 1968 an informer revealed to police that seven Seattle men were plotting to rob three banks to help finance their Minutemen operations. The group was nabbed supposedly just before they were to carry out the robberies, and five of the seven were subsequently indicted. Also plugged into the crime were DePugh and his companion, Walter Peyson, who were in Missouri at the time. Only days before the indictments were returned, the pair had dropped from sight, and it took the FBI a year and a half to find them. On a tip from a local sheriff, agents closed in on a desert hideout near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, bagging not only DePugh and Peyson but a large cache of weapons.

In our conversation in jail, DePugh insisted that none of the named "co-conspirators" was a member of *his* Minutemen, and that none had ever been.

DE PUGH HAD BROUGHT QUITE A contingent of witnesses to Kansas City to testify in his behalf. Among them was Rev. Kenneth Goff, an ex-Communist who switched to Gerald L. K. Smith and now runs a Bible-thumping paramilitary band in Colorado, the Soldiers of the Cross ("We only teach self defense," the fragile-looking Goff insisted). Another was Glenn Jackson of Southern California, national co-chairman of DePugh's Patriotic Party. (The party is a contradiction, since DePugh has held that political means at this point are futile.) Still another was Ralph DePugh, his father, who had been gassed in World War I ("Forty thousand boys killed in Vietnam. We ought to bring them all home—the Communists have been running wild in this country since the Kennedy administration"). And there was the toothpick-chewing sheriff of DePugh's home county.

But in the end, DePugh's lawyers decided not to use the defense of fear of bodily harm. The judge wrapped it up for the prosecution during his instructions, offering his opinion that DePugh was guilty as charged. DePugh wrote "sunk" on a slip of paper and handed it to his attorneys. When the judge had finished, the defense put into the record a protest against his "prejudicial remarks." The jury wasn't out long, and the chief Minuteman was handcuffed and led away for the trip to Leavenworth.

One additional item that DePugh told me in the jail seems to symbolize the current turmoil in the paramilitary far right. In May 1967, after being convicted of the firearms violation in Kansas City along with DePugh, the dashing San Diego leader of the Minutemen, Troy Houghton, was freed on appeal bond. He left in his own car and has not been seen since. Some think he went underground. Others are sure he is dead. And a few proto-Minutemen, DePugh complained, were trying to frame him for the "murder" of the missing man.

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