

After Minuteman Melee, Protesters Have New Beef

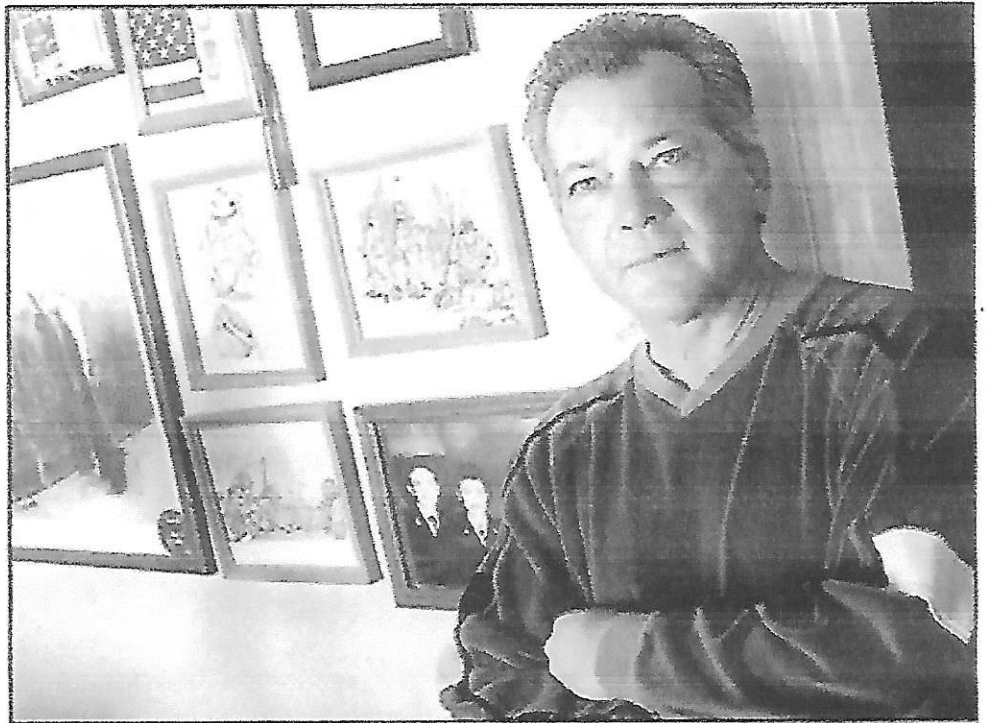
The man who drove his van into demonstrators outside an event in Garden Grove won't be charged. One activist says that's unfair.

By JENNIFER DELSON
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Times Staff Writers

An activist opposing illegal immigration who drove his van into a crowd of protesters in Garden Grove will not be charged, police said Thursday, prompting anger from detractors.

A van driven by Hal Netkin hit several people protesting an appearance Wednesday night by James Gilchrist, whose Minuteman citizen patrol last month monitored the Mexican border in Arizona for illegal crossers.

Netkin, 69, is a former secession candidate for City Council in the San Fernando Valley whose websites oppose illegal immigration and the proliferation of Mexican government-issued identification cards.



ROBERT LACHMAN *Los Angeles Times*

ON WATCH: Minuteman organizer James Gilchrist, a Vietnam veteran shown with war memorabilia, was the target of the protest. A supporter drove into the crowd surrounding his van.

"I'm glad there were people there saying something [Wednesday night]. We need to have this debate," said Lafferty, who said he was not injured. "We can't just stand and watch this."

Protesters said they arrived

much less serious matters were charged and there is no proof, as far as I can tell, that they did anything anyway," Lafferty said.

Hamid Kahn, executive director of the South Asian Network, a nonprofit advocacy organiza-

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Netkin was released after police watched a videotape that showed protesters surrounding the vehicle, banging on it and refusing to move, said Garden Grove Police Lt. Mike Handfield. About 300 protesters at the scene were "trying to intimidate him and refused to let him pass," Handfield said. By night's end, five demonstrators had been arrested.

Gilchrist, an Aliso Viejo resident, and his opponents agreed the melee could portend more confrontations between activists as the issue heats up, with the number of citizen groups and radio talk-show hosts opposing illegal immigration growing nationwide. Gilchrist, a hero among like-minded activists, plans several speaking engagements in the coming months, including an appearance at a Las Vegas conference this weekend.

That conference is expected to draw prominent opponents of illegal immigration, such as Rep. Thomas G. Tancredo (R-Colo.) and Barbara Coe, one of the authors of Proposition 187, a 1994 California ballot measure that denied many public benefits to illegal immigrants but was overturned by a federal court.

Gilchrist is recruiting for other citizen patrols, including one at the California-Mexico border, and for a campaign that he says will target tax evaders.

James Lafferty, director of the National Lawyers Guild in Los Angeles, said he was among those struck by Netkin's van. He said staging protests at Gilchrist's events was necessary, even if it increased his profile.

at the Garden Grove Women's Club about 6:30 p.m. after receiving an e-mail saying Gilchrist was to speak to the California Coalition for Immigration Reform, which presented him with a trophy for his border campaign.

Police said the sign-waving protest began calmly but grew agitated when Netkin tried to enter the parking lot. In addition to surrounding his vehicle, protesters broke the window of another vehicle, Handfield said.

The protesters blocked the entrance and tossed soda cans and cans packed with marbles at police and attendees, Handfield said. They kicked, banged and threw rocks at cars; some wore latex gloves and hoods so they wouldn't be identified by police, Handfield said. Some attendees decided not to enter the building because they feared violence.

Some of the protesters paid \$5 for admission to the event and alerted protesters outside when attendees were leaving the building.

Arrested were Fernando Chirino, 23, of Irvine; Kurt Isobe, 18, of Laguna Beach; Juan Obed Silva, 26, of Buena Park; Shane Sparks, 21, of Altadena; and Sarmiento Valid, 24, of Los Angeles. They face various charges, including assault with a deadly weapon and misdemeanor disorderly conduct, Handfield said.

Lafferty said the arrests were unfair.

"What's sticking in the craw of the protesters is that they would quickly let a man go without even charging him, whereas the students and protesters for

tion, brought half a dozen people to the protest.

He said his group would continue to monitor Gilchrist's public appearances.

Gilchrist and his followers "are mainstreaming hate," Kahn said. "They are creating and disseminating a message of hate. They put these messages into the public and harass and intimidate people.

"This movement is gaining national momentum, and we need to build solidarity," Kahn added.

Gilchrist said his opponents have the right to express opposition, but he said he was concerned that when tensions rise, he or they could be hurt.

The border event, which over the course of nearly a month attracted several hundred men carrying weapons and night-vision goggles and using private planes, prompted criticism from President Bush.

Gilchrist now says he has as many as eight armed men accompany him to events. One stands near him, he said, and others are dispersed in plain clothes. He said the men are former members of the military and carry weapons.

Protests lead to media attention, Gilchrist said, which in turn generates financial contributions and volunteers.

But he said the possibility of violence could hinder attendance at future events.

Gilchrist said nothing to protesters when he entered the building Wednesday, but he said he could hear them during his 90-minute talk.