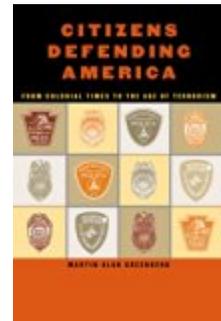


# H-Net Reviews

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Martin Alan Greenberg. *Citizens Defending America: From Colonial Times to the Age of Terrorism*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005. xx + 277 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4264-1.

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## Citizen on the Watch: Better Look Out

Martin Alan Greenberg's account of the use of volunteers to assist in law enforcement and other kinds of security activities is at its best in describing the evolution of the police in the United States from informal groups of volunteer watchmen to professionalized officers. As an historian, I was interested in the ways in which the professionalization of the police intersected with other trends in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history: the growth of urban America, the creation of powerful urban political machines, and the stratification of class structure. There is still more we can learn about these topics, including how becoming a police officer or a firefighter served as a stepping-stone toward middle-class status for many immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. After significant legal battles over diversifying urban police and firefighters' organizations, this is increasingly true today for African Americans, Hispanics, and women. In 2006 the city of San Francisco has women at the head of both its firefighting and police services. At the same time, of course, New York City still struggles with the issue of allowing a gay officers' organization to march in the annual St. Patrick's Day parade.

But these issues are not at the center of Professor Greenberg's book. He is a strong advocate of the use of volunteers in conjunction with police and other municipal organizations in crime-fighting, rescue, surveillance, and other activities. The book traces the history of the use of "citizens defending America" and in its last chapter provides suggestions for ways in which Amer-

icans today can get involved with current programs to combat terrorism. He writes, "It is now critically important for the survival of our democratic system that citizens seek membership in such authorized organizations, which have long-standing records of honorable service in defense of America's freedom" (p. 228). Among the activities he suggests are participation in the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the Civil Air Patrol, and even proposed auxiliaries to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In these organizations, citizens could constrain terrorist mobility, check identification documents, and defend potential terrorist targets (p. 229). From Greenberg's perspective, the best and safest of all possible worlds would one in which Americans resembled the employees at Disneyworld. There, he says, quoting C.D. Shearing and P.C. Stenning, "every Disney Productions employee, while visibly and primarily engaged in other functions, is also engaged in the maintenance of order" (p. 226).

As much as some of us may have wanted to grow up to play Mickey Mouse or Belle and sign autographs at a character breakfast, the real world of citizen volunteers "engaged in the maintenance of order" is quite a bit more troubling. In fact, far too often those who claim the mantle of protecting freedom have done exactly the opposite. To an extent, Greenberg is aware of this contradiction, at least in specific examples from the past. He provides information about the organization and practices of slave patrols, for example, which maintained the order of their day in the pre-war South by finding, and often torturing or killing, runaway slaves. Likewise, he details some of

the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and less formal groups of vigilantes and lynch mobs which operated widely in both the west and the South in the nineteenth century and in the Middle West in the 1920s. He mentions the volunteer “spies” who worked with the federal government to root out communists and anarchists during the first Red Scare. But he is careful to distinguish between legal and extralegal volunteer groups. Despite the fact that slave patrols were condoned by state governments, and state-sponsored adjudication of lynch mobs was nearly nonexistent, he contends that “the evolving role of volunteer policing appears to be deeply rooted in the democratic spirit of America, which is best characterized by its concern for free speech, religious tolerance, universal suffrages, and other egalitarian concepts, such as hiring and promotion based on merit” (p. 6).

Greenberg further obfuscates the problems with undemocratic popular civic organizations by the creation of a typology for categorizing them. Each major group he examines falls into one of four categories: General purpose/reactive; general purpose/active; special purpose/reactive; special purpose/active. By using this typology, Greenberg contends, “one can readily discern the extent to which volunteer police units have either contributed to or detracted from the rule of law and other democratic values (e.g., interpersonal trust, concern for human rights)” (p. 13). Type Four organizations (special purpose/reactive) included, among others, “slave patrols [and] special agents for the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice” and could “serve as a reminder of the inherent dangers of overzealous police and civic conduct” (p. 14). Even in Type IV organizations, however, Greenberg finds evidence of the democratic spirit. An early company of slave patrollers, for example, “learned how to effectively lobby in a representative democracy” when they “demanded the right to elect their officers” (p. 14). That slave patrollers learned about freedom while they were paid to deny it to others exemplifies what Edmund

Morgan famously called the “great American paradox” over thirty-five years ago.

Greenberg is unable to deal effectively with these paradoxes in part due to his reliance on Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam argues that voluntary civic engagement is essential for the maintenance of American exceptionalism, provided their members actually spend time working together face-to-face. For Putnam, membership in the Sierra Club or the National Organization for Women does not help to maintain civic engagement, if it solely requires writing a check and receiving a newsletter. But activities that bring people together, be they bowling leagues, PTAs, or presumably, neo-Nazi organizations, the posse comitatus, or the Montana militia, are “one of the hallmarks of a stable democracy” (p. 19). Moreover, “citizens who become involved in public affairs often gain a better purpose in life, as well as the opportunity to develop new competencies” (p. 19). While we should all be thankful for the work of some volunteers—my list would include neighborhood watches, Riverkeeper groups, and volunteers who work with juvenile offenders—it is essential for us also to reject the notion that all civic groups are healthy for democracy. I am sure that many people in Oklahoma City would have preferred for Tim McVeigh to have bowled alone, night after night, than to have gotten together with friends to agitate against the federal government. Similarly in the post-September 11 era, Americans do not need to worry that their friends and neighbors are spying or listening to their phone conversations. The government is doing that for them.

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