

Militias prepare for battle in America's South

Chris Hill, founder of the Georgia Security Force III% militia, loading a rifle during a field training exercise in Jackson, Georgia



Chris Hill (R), founder of the Georgia Security Force III% militia, waiting with members to practice sparring during a field training exercise in Jackson

Each month, Chris Hill gets together with friends to spend a few days in a remote forest in Georgia, deep in the heart of the American South.

They trade stories over a campfire, feast on barbecue food -- and practice raids with semi-automatic rifles in case the government decides to come for their weapons.

Dressed in combat fatigues and armed with military-grade weapons, the twenty or so members of the "Georgia Security Force" have gathered on a scorching hot weekend to conduct patrols, fire live rounds and carry out an assault on a mock-up house.

"I'm prepared for civil war, civil unrest, EMP (electromagnetic pulse) attack from North Korea, Russia, invasion from a foreign government, my own government turning its guns against the people in an effort to disarm," says Hill, a 42-year-old paralegal who prefers the moniker "General Bloodagent" when leading the group he founded in 2008.

His is one of an estimated 165 armed anti-government

militias currently operating in the United States. Their exact goals vary, but they are largely united by a distrust of government, a strong belief in individual liberties such as the right to bear arms, and, since last year's presidential campaign, an affinity with Donald Trump.

A 'family'

Members come from near and far, though few maintain the beefy physiques seen in the soldiers they admire.

Confederate flags -- controversial symbols associated with the racism of the Old South -- are draped around the camp, as are black flags bearing the Arabic for 'infidel.'

Rooster and Yvette DiMaria, a married couple who signed up recently, regularly journey from the neighboring state of South Carolina to be with what they refer to as their "family."

For Rooster, the attraction lies in "being around like minds who all believe in the same thing, in the Constitution, they believe in

Christianity and doing the right thing."

His wife, Yvette, is the only woman in the militia this weekend, and maintains a perfect manicure as she unloads rounds from her assault rifle.

Both were disillusioned by politics until Trump announced his candidacy last year, and Yvette says she often found herself derided by her peers who called her views racist and homophobic.

"Instead of being at my home and griping about it, not doing anything, I joined a movement where I'm now out in the open. I can voice my opinion," she explained.

"I have people that want to hear it and I have people that say I identify with her. I'm a wife, I'm a mother, I'm an American patriot, I'm a Christian, I'm a business woman, and I can identify with her."

Trump country

Militias frequently provided security during Trump's campaign rallies, to counter any possible protests by

"Antifa" (anti-fascist) groups.

Carol Gallagher, a professor at American University in Washington DC, explains that many ultra-conservatives who had given up on mainstream politicians were attracted to the New York billionaire's tough rhetoric on undocumented immigrants and US jobs going abroad.

"The typical person who's in the militia movement is white working class, they're not obviously poor but they have kind of a low paying job and for them Trump is attractive," she said.

Some are survivalists, preparing for a dystopian future bereft of modern amenities, while others believe in hard right politics, including at times white supremacism.

"If you go back at American history these armed militia groups have been with us since the very beginning, and part of it has to do with when people came here, there weren't established police forces, there weren't established military forces so people created their own militias to protect

themselves," said Gallagher.

Growing threat?

These days, however, they are seen as extremist movements and are on the radar of law enforcement agencies like the FBI.

According to research carried out in 2016 by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an anti-extremism non-profit group, 623 anti-government groups operate in the United States, including the 165 militias.

And the shocking killing of a protester in violence surrounding a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12 has brought renewed attention to ultra-conservative forces -- whether they identify as Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, the Alt-Right or simply call themselves a "Patriot militia" like the Georgia Security Force.

Asked whether any GSF members were at the event or provided security, Hill said, "No comment."

Famous alumni of the militia movement include

Timothy McVeigh, who was executed for killing 168 people when he blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, hoping to spark a revolution.

Hill insists that will never happen with his followers, and anyone showing even a hint of what he sees as radicalism will be kicked out.

Yet within his group, ideas that for many would constitute extremist thought are allowed to flourish -- and these days Muslims are the prime target. Chandler Wolf, a 22-year-old former soldier, describes Islam as a "sick, mental illness" that should not be permitted to take root in the United States.

For Ryan Lenz, a senior reporter for the SPLC, views like these come as no surprise.

"These groups are defined by ideologies that undermine the rule of law of the United States and furthermore are born from a garden of extreme conspiracy theories," he says. "It's not a matter of if they lead to violence, we know they do. It's a matter of when." (AFP)