

UNDER TRUMP, US MILITIAS NOT READY TO LAY DOWN ARMS

JACKSON, Georgia: In the woods south of Atlanta, John and Yvette DeMaria are with about a dozen camouflage-wearing, heavily armed Americans huffing and puffing as they scramble to navigate the sprawling piece of property where they train, one weekend a month, to ward off enemies - foreign or domestic. The DeMarias are with the Georgia Security Force militia, whose members are relieved that Donald Trump won the presidency but believe it would be a mistake to lay down their arms just because he is in the White House. So they continue to take to the woods to be ready for whatever may come, whether it's an economic crisis that spawns unrest or Islamist extremists carrying out attacks on American soil.

"I started to realize that I got very angry because the system has been so abused over and over and over again, making rights out of thin air for people who don't deserve to get anything," said John DeMaria, who goes by the nickname Rooster J. While it is impossible to track all the groups that often are no more than a handful of men gathering in woods, experts say that militia activity tends to fall off under Republican presidents and ramp up under Democrats. But just as last year's election upended conventional models, those who watch militias say life in the Trump era may not follow the same patterns.

If anything, it could be a potential powder keg, if those feelings of having a kindred spirit in Trump erupt into a sense of betrayal if he fails to deliver on his promises. "What would

concern me is that nobody gets more angry than a fan spurned," said James Corcoran, a professor at Simmons College in Boston who has watched militias closely for decades and has written extensively about the movement.

The leader of the Georgia Security Force, Chris Hill, remains deeply skeptical of Congress and worries the lawmakers will undermine Trump's agenda: preventing him from building a wall on the Mexico border, repealing "Obamacare" and fulfilling his promise to "Make American Great Again." "Even if President Trump is able to do the things that he wants to do, he's still got Congress to contend with. Congress is the same old dog-and-pony show. All they do is fight. They're never going to grant us more freedom," said Hill, who goes by the nickname General BloodAgent. "A lot of people have let their guard down because he was elected, and I would wholeheartedly say that is a big mistake. ... If anything we should use this time wisely. Like the Good Book says, a wise man prepares, a fool takes his chances."

Modern-day militias began to surge in the 1990s during the Clinton administration, then ebbed during the Bush years. Following a dramatic spike after the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, there are now an estimated 165 militias in the US, according to Ryan Lenz, a senior investigative reporter with the Southern Poverty Law Center. For Hill and his group, the 2008 election was their defining moment, the one that signaled the US was on the wrong track. They believed

Obama wanted to restrict gun rights and forever alter their way of life.

Political correctness blamed

Yvette DeMaria said she and her husband were looking for "like minds" and found the Georgia Security Force through Facebook and a pastor friend who had traveled to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, with the militia to help out after fires in the Smoky Mountains devastated the region. That act of charity had moved her. Even before Obama was elected, the DeMarias felt the country was heading down the wrong path, with the military and law enforcement no longer cherished or revered. Yvette DeMaria said she believes protesters have been allowed to get out of control after police shootings.

Political correctness has run amok, she said, with politicians and the courts carving out constitutional protections that strayed far from the intent of the nation's forefathers. She laments, for example, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the transgender bathroom issue, believing they amount to a war on her Christian faith. "We cannot be silent anymore. We have voices. We need to rise up. We need to speak up. We need to find like minds," Yvette DeMaria said. "We're going to church every Sunday - but Monday through Saturday, what are we doing?"

She and her husband found their mission and some like-minded people in the militia, which is part of the Three Percenters movement. It derives its name from the belief that

just 3 percent of the colonists rose up to fight the British. They have vowed to resist any government that infringes on the US Constitution. While focused on training, the militia is also social. In the woods, they use hand signals and walkie-talkies to alert the others to where and how many enemies are lurking. They then navigate obstacles made of firehoses, logs and scraps of wood, metal and string to eliminate the threats.

The first two runs are "dry fire" exercises;

the guns aren't loaded. The last exercise of the day involves live rounds in their weapons - from AR-15s to handguns. After the targets are riddled with holes, the militia members gather around a fire at a campsite a short walk away to enjoy music and a barbecue. For Hill, a parallel by day, the Trump election was a defining moment to be celebrated. "We're being called Trump militia. It's something I'm probably going to wear as a badge now," Hill said. "I feel a connection to President Trump." —AP



JACKSON, Georgia: Chris Hill stands in the woods during training exercises in the woods on April 1, 2017, with the Georgia Security Force militia. —AP



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, and their son Barron Trump walk from Marine One across the South Lawn to the White House on Sunday. —AP

MELANIA TRUMP, SON BARRON MOVE INTO THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON: The first family is together again under the same roof: The White House. After nearly five months of living apart, President Donald Trump's wife, Melania, announced Sunday that she and the couple's young son have finally moved into the executive mansion at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Mother and son broke with tradition by living at Trump Tower in New York since the inauguration so that Barron, now 11, could finish the school year uninterrupted; the president lived and worked at the White House.

"Looking forward to the memories we'll make in our new home! #Movingday," the first lady tweeted Sunday evening after she and Barron arrived at the White House with Trump. The tweet accompanied a photo of the Washington Monument as seen from the White House Red Room. The president spent the weekend at his private golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, and had said on several occasions that his wife and son would move to the White House after the school year. Trump celebrates his 71st birthday on Wednesday and got his gift a few days early.

Mrs. Trump said last month that Barron will attend a private school in Maryland in the fall, an announcement that answered one of the lingering questions surrounding the Trump family's unusual living arrangement. It also pointed toward a coming move to the White House. One remaining question had to do with a move-in date, and Mrs. Trump answered it Sunday. Her spokeswoman, Stephanie Grisham, confirmed the move by email and on Twitter. "It's official! @FLOTUS & Barron have made the move to DC! #WelcomeHome," Grisham tweeted.

Barron will enter the sixth grade at St Andrew's Episcopal School in Potomac, Maryland, in the fall. Trump has four other children - Don Jr, Ivanka, Eric and Tiffany -

among his two ex-wives. Ivanka Trump has taken a White House job as an adviser to her father. Melania Trump stayed largely out of sight during her husband's presidential campaign and was an absent first lady at the outset of the administration, staying in New York and focusing on Barron. But she has slowly been raising her profile at the White House, including joining the president when foreign leaders and their spouses visit, co-hosting the annual Easter Egg Roll and holding some solo events.

She recently accompanied the president on his first foreign trip, a nine-day journey through Saudi Arabia, Israel, Italy and Belgium that marked her first extended turn as first lady in the public spotlight. Now that she's at the White House full time, pressure will build for her to be seen more and to do more. She said during the campaign that she would work on the issue of cyberbullying as first lady, but she has made no further announcements about the subject.

She also has shown an interest in military veterans and empowering women and girls. "I do think once she's in DC there'll be more pressure for her to be working on something that's her own, that's helping some segment of the population because that's what first ladies are supposed to do," said Jean Harris, professor of political science and women's studies at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. First ladies are also seen as calming influences on presidents. In the case of President Trump, many will be anxious to see whether Mrs. Trump's daily presence will have a positive influence on Trump's behavior and mood, including his often angry tweet storms. The first lady has said she wishes he would give up tweeting. —AP

PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL SPATS MAY INFLUENCE COMEY FUTURE

WASHINGTON: So what's next for James Comey? The former FBI director boldly challenged the president who fired him, accused the Trump administration of lying and supplied material that could be used to build a case against President Donald Trump. But after stepping away from the Capitol Hill spotlight, where he's always seemed comfortable, the 56-year-old veteran lawmaker now confronts the same question long faced by Washington officials after their government service. His dry quip at a riveting Senate hearing that he was "between opportunities" vastly understates the career prospects now available to him - not to mention potential benefits from the public's fascination with a man who has commanded respect while drawing outrage from both political parties.

Comey was pilloried for his handling of

the Hillary Clinton email investigation, yet is now seen as a critical cog in the inquiry into possible connections between Russia and the Trump campaign. He may be called upon to provide more detail about his interactions with Trump, which he documented in a series of memos, even as he turns attention to potential opportunities in law, corporate work or perhaps even politics.

"There's some jobs where the controversy would not be a benefit, but that's why I see him ending up in a place where he can be himself," said Evan Barr, a former federal prosecutor in New York City who worked under Comey in the US attorney's office. "If he were the president of a college or an important think tank, he could pursue the issues that mean the most to him and not be worried about trying to make anyone happy." —AFP

PUERTO RICO BACKS STATEHOOD DEMAND IN CONTENTIOUS VOTE

VOTE MARRED BY LOW TURNOUT

SAN JUAN: Puerto Ricans voted overwhelmingly Sunday to become a US state in a non-binding referendum - but the result was marred by an extremely low turnout after opposition parties called for a boycott of the poll. With virtually all results in, 97.2 percent backed statehood, 1.5 percent supported independence and 1.3 percent opted for no change, but just 23 percent of the 2.2 million-strong electorate cast a ballot. Despite the low turnout, Governor Ricardo Rossello vowed to push for the territory to become the 51st US state after casting his vote for statehood.

"We will go before international forums to defend the argument of the importance of Puerto Rico being the first Hispanic state in the United States," Rossello said. An unincorporated US territory under American control since 1898, Puerto Rico lacks sovereign powers - an urgent problem as it grapples with public debt of \$73 billion and its economy stumbles. Rossello, who heads the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, said his government would fight "in Washington and throughout the world" for the Caribbean island territory to be accepted as the 51st US state, and for Puerto Ricans to gain "all the same opportunities" as other American citizens. The US Congress would need to approve any upgrade to statehood.

'Send a message to Congress'

The opposition Popular Democratic Party had said "statehood will win by a landslide" because of the boycott by opposition parties, which supported the status quo as a US territory. The Puerto Rican Independence Party had called the vote a "farce". But the Rossello government insists statehood is the answer to the financial crisis hanging over the island of 3.4 million, where some 45 percent of the popula-

tion live in poverty. After the votes were tallied, the Popular Democratic Party called the vote a waste of public money and a stinging humiliation for the government. The ruling party "is a victim of its arrogance, abuse of power and ideological narcissism," said one of its senators, Anibal Jose Torres. But voters backed statehood. "I hope after 100 years of being a territory of the United States, we can send a message to Congress in the US that Puerto Rico is ready to do something with its future," said Marco Rodriguez in Guaynabo.

Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917. But they are not allowed

to vote in presidential or congressional elections unless they reside in the mainland United States. Sunday's referendum was the fifth on the territory's status - dating back to 1967. The Rossello government has been criticized for spending \$7.5 million on the referendum at a time when financial difficulties have forced it to close 163 public schools and cut back in other areas. The question of status is "fundamental" to breaking free from economic turmoil, said Christian Sobrino, chief economic advisor to the government. "It is because Puerto Rico is in an unequal relationship" with the US government that the bankrupt island's

finances are now under a largely US-appointed control board, he told AFP.

US firms left as tax breaks ended

A former Spanish colony taken over by the US at the end of the 19th century, Puerto Rico has enjoyed broad political autonomy since 1952 as a commonwealth or "free associated state". As American citizens, often proudly so, Puerto Ricans can freely enter the US, live and work. For decades the territory enjoyed a US federal tax exemption that attracted many American companies to set up shop - but those breaks were ended in 2006, prompting firms to leave the island en masse. —AFP



SAN JUAN: Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rossello celebrates the results of a referendum on the status of the island, next to Congresswoman representing Puerto Rico Jennifer Gonzalez (left) at the New Progressive Party headquarters on Sunday. —AP

VICTIMS OF ORLANDO SHOOTING HONORED AT PREDAWN CEREMONY

ORLANDO, Florida: The names of the 49 people killed in a Florida nightclub last June were read aloud early on Monday in a pre-dawn remembrance marking the exact moment a year earlier when a gunman transformed a dance party into a massacre. The private gathering at Orlando's Pulse

nightclub at 2:02 am (0602 GMT) was the first in a series of events at which victims' names will be memorialized with performances, prayers and candlelight vigils across the country on "Orlando United Day."

On the first anniversary of the worst mass

shooting in modern US history, officials asked Americans to join in acts of "love and kindness" to honor victims of the three-hour June 12 rampage at the now-shuttered gay club, including survivors still reeling from emotional and physical wounds. "Following the Pulse tragedy, we showed the world that Orlando would not be defined by the act of a hate-filled killer, but instead defined by our response of love, compassion and unity," Mayor Buddy Dyer wrote in a blog post.

Hundreds gathered outside the club late Sunday and early Monday, including scores of people dressed in white with angels wings and carrying lanterns. The "angels" first appeared in the wake of the tragedy to protect and support family and friends of the victims. "We will make sure the world is a better place because of our 49 angels," WKMG-TV quoted Orange County Mayor Teresa Jacobs as saying at the service before a performer sang "Over the Rainbow" to close the service as many on hand sobbed. "Everybody's really come together," Matt Heavey, of Orlando, told WKMG. "We kind of embraced differences," he said. "We've embraced diversity that makes this city really go forward."

Many who came to pay respects said they were there for the first time since the shooting, with the tragedy still too raw. The gunman, Omar Mateen, 29, opened fire shortly after the last call for drinks on the club's popular Latin night. He gunned down patrons on the dance floor and sprayed bullets at others covering in bathroom stalls. Holding hostages during his standoff with police, Mateen claimed allegiance to a leader of the Islamic State militant group before he was killed in an exchange of gunfire with authorities. —Reuters



ORLANDO, Florida: John Hough visits the memorial setup outside the Pulse gay nightclub yesterday as he remembers the victims of a mass shooting at the club one year ago. —AFP