

Militia Targets Local Government

When Judy Chall pulled a gun on Scott Neelis in Cheboygan County, Michigan, police and prosecutors treated the incident as a simple case of assault. But to those who track the doings of America's self-styled militias, the confrontation between the militiawoman and the zoning officer in rural northern Michigan was symptomatic of an ominous trend.

Far-Right Dissidents Go Local

When the nationwide patchwork of armed, self-appointed militias grabbed center stage following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, their enemy was the United Nations, supposedly scheming in cahoots with the federal government to impose a tyrannical "new world order" on free American patriots.

The supercharged rhetoric hasn't dimmed since then, but the tactics have shifted. To thwart "world government," the dissidents increasingly are targeting local government—low-level officials like Neelis, rather than "jackbooted" federal agents.

Not all of the incidents are violent, and some might seem insignificant. But they form a clear pattern, says Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, which monitors far-right groups. Local officials are "on the front lines. They are despised by the movement," Potok says. "They've been harassed, intimidated, and assaulted around the country."

Movement leaders say they don't condone violence but claim that when it happens, the government will have only itself to blame. "We've been trying to get the message across: . . . you violate the people's rights, you're going to meet the people's guns," says Ken Adams of Mancelona, in northern Michigan. Adams heads a group he calls the National Confederation of Citizen Militias.

Whether it's junk-car ordinances and zoning codes or the international global warming treaty, "they're all decisions that affect your and my daily life . . . taking away our rights," says Tom Wayne of the Michigan Militia Corps Wolverine, the state's largest militia group.

Several militia members in camouflage uniforms attended Judy Chall's trial in January [1998]. The Cheboygan County Circuit Court jury convicted her of felonious assault and three other charges. Militia-watchers say her run-in with Neelis, who was investigating a possible zoning violation on her land, was typical.

A Plague of Violence and Threats

Confrontations may begin with a dispute over a tax bill or an order to remove a derelict car, and then may escalate. Last year, for instance:

- Nine people were sentenced in Fresno, California, in the beating and stabbing of a county clerk who refused to remove a valid tax lien against a member of an antitax group.

- Militiamen from Mississippi and Arkansas rushed to help a family in Memphis, Tennessee, resisting an order to vacate their home to make way for a city park.
- A militiaman in Dexter, Michigan, was charged with assaulting a process server who delivered a subpoena to his home.
- Right-wing protesters supported a woman in Roby, Illinois, who held police at bay for 39 days in an effort to avoid a court-ordered psychiatric examination.
- A militia activist in Manteca, California, threatened to kill a member of the state's Franchise Tax Board over a \$30 tax bill.

An "Epidemic" of Private Courts

Some activists try to sidestep the governmental framework by creating their own. Their common-law courts are perhaps the fastest-growing segment of the protest movement, says Mark Pitcavage of Columbus, Ohio, a law enforcement consultant on domestic terrorism.

Some of these courts grant "sovereignty" to individuals, telling them they are exempt from the law. The separatist People's Republic of Texas, for instance, has a court that meets monthly at a motel.

Other courts harass local officials with false liens or nuisance lawsuits, Pitcavage says. "They're operating in every state. It's an epidemic," he says.

Leaders of a militia group in Tampa, Florida, were convicted last year of using

their court to intimidate local officials with charges of treason and other bogus offenses. A group called the Michigan Electors Association has disrupted town board meetings, claiming that state law gives ordinary citizens the same voting rights as elected board members. But the group ignores statutes that make it clear that "an elector cannot walk into a meeting and take over," says John LaRose, executive director of the Michigan Townships Association.

Some of the Michigan Electors are past or present members of the Michigan Militia, which drew national attention following reports that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols may have attended its meetings. Militia leaders denied any link with the convicted Oklahoma bombers, and none has been proven.

The Cheboygan Case

Judy Chall, 36, is married to Mark Price, a house-builder and former training officer for the Michigan Militia. They met at a pro-gun rally in Lansing and live in Port Orange, Florida, where both are militia members and participate in military-style training sessions, Chall said in an interview. She said they bought a wooded, 16-acre parcel in Cheboygan County's Nunda Township for a vacation retreat and posted no-trespassing signs that specifically ordered local officials to stay out. "We just wanted to be left alone," Chall said. "We have strong beliefs, and we act on those beliefs. We did not want people coming on our property."

Last September, zoning officer Neelis drove onto the couple's property and knocked on the door of their RV. He had a tip that they were putting up a building without a permit. Price wasn't home. Neelis testified that an irate Chall ordered him to leave, saying their activities were legal, and began photographing him. He said she called her mother and her 13-year-old daughter to come out of the RV and witness the confrontation.

Neelis said he returned to his car,

handed Chall a business card, and unzipped a camera case to take photographs of the unfinished structure. At that point, he said, Chall drew a semiautomatic pistol from the pocket of her camouflage trousers and cocked it. "Is a simple zoning violation something to shoot someone over?" Neelis says he asked her. "I was very scared."

He fled and called the police.

Chall testified that she had been afraid of Neelis. She said he ignored the no-trespassing signs, had neither uniform nor marked car, and didn't properly identify himself. "As far as I was concerned, he was an intruder on my property," she said.

The confrontation followed months of rising tensions between Nunda Township officials and what they describe as a noisy minority, including Chall and other militia members. The board of the rural township of 700 people had denied a tax exemption for the nondenominational Freedom Church, which worships in a former gun shop beside the home of militia member Dick Whitten. Its pastor is militia co-founder Norman Olson.

Nunda officials say that, to be excused from paying taxes, a church must register with the state as a nonprofit institution. Whitten and Olson say that doing so would violate their beliefs. "It means the state becomes the head of our church instead of Jesus," Whitten says. **PM**

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More Information Needed

Managers from communities that have strategies for dealing with militia threats against local government activities, including development, are invited to submit them to *Public Management* magazine at ICMA for possible publication in a future issue.