

# **Armed and ready - Private militia units are springing up across Texas aroused by the - Davidian tragedy and united in a cause**

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RICHARDSON - Each Thursday evening, about 50 men, women and teen-agers drive up in a fleet of pickups to Suite 32, one of several units in a nondescript suburban commercial development.

It's the weekly gathering of the militias of Collin and Dallas counties. They are part of a small but growing 9-month-old Texas Constitutional Militia movement, which according to its state spokesman, Jon Roland of Arlington, has 20,000 members in 32 Texas counties.

There is no way to independently verify the size of the secretive, security-conscious group, whose meetings generally are not open to the media. It declined to have members other than two North Texas leaders photographed.

Militia members own assault-style weapons and many are mastering combat skills. Their leaders urge them to stockpile ammunition, rations and fuel, and to buy four-wheel-drive vehicles or to convert old Volkswagen Beetles into a rough-terrain dune buggies.

Similar private militias have sprung up in at least 13 states. Many, like the Texas Constitutional Militia, were launched in response to the 1993 Branch Davidian siege near Waco and the 1992 federal confrontation with Idaho white supremacist Randy Weaver, in which Weaver's wife and son were slain.

The Constitutional Militia, led in North Texas by John Turner of Plano, describes itself as a collection of law-abiding Texans united in their desire to bear arms and, if necessary, use force to resist an international conspiracy to whittle away the rights of Americans.

They are wary of big government and foreign influence, and are convinced that phony emergency evacuations are being staged to allow the government to quickly - and illegally - search homes for weapons.

Despite contentions from some that they are a magnet for hate groups, members insist that they are not racist. Turner and other leaders concede that the movement has attracted a disproportionately high number of white Christians.

"We didn't choose it that way; it's just that Christians know what's going on," Turner said.

He and his followers say they want to re-establish constitutional rights. They are convinced that foreign troops, thousands of them, are stationed on U.S. soil, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, is actually a national police force with airborne units, and that "one-worlders" among top elected leaders seek to hand over power to the United Nations.

"We prepare for the worst, hope for the best," said Turner, 48, a bearded, self-employed mechanic-welder.

The siege of the Branch Davidian compound by federal agents has become a rallying cry, with militia members warning that any such federal assaults will trigger a national mobilization of the private militias.

"We will react to another Waco," said Russell Smith, 40, who was co-chairman of the Richardson gathering in his capacity as acting commander of Dallas County's private militia.

He also recommended use of nonviolent tactics in any confrontation with federal agents.

"In the first line of assault, use video cameras," he suggested. "Catch those little monkeys on camera. They can't stand the truth."

Lowering his voice, Smith said that people such as he would end up victors in any lethal confrontation with federal agents.

"I've got something to fight for," said the tall, silver-haired glass sculptor. "Their paycheck isn't worth dying for."

"This is not a garden party," he continued. "It's a very dangerous situation. They do not like us, want us, and the government is trying to demonize us."

As the meeting progressed, there was a consensus among the militia members that authorities will soon launch house-to-house searches to seize personal weapons. Most likely, they speculated, a federal or state agency will fake a chemical spill or a drug raid to order a general evacuation, seal off areas and confiscate guns.

"I believe they've done that already," one member said after Smith led a session of what he called "rumor control."

"Plutonium scares," another suggested.

"There's been searches already in Shreveport. A 9-city-block area. With no warrants," a third voice adds.

The discussions also touched on highly practical matters such as rotating gasoline stockpiles and the names of gun dealers who give steep discounts to militia members. And a \$250 "combat course" at a North Texas gun club that would cost militia members just \$50.

The Texas movement suffered a blow Jan. 21 with the abrupt resignation of one of its three top state leaders, Bill Utterback of San Antonio. His reason heightened the jolt: Like India's Mahatma Gandhi, Utterback has embraced the philosophy of nonviolence.

"He's gone pacifist on us," Roland said.

Utterback, 49, who organized the militia's high-profile Alamo rally in November, said the movement is fostering fear. "And I cannot justify killing another person, even in self-defense." He added, however, that his wife will remain commander of Comal County's militia.

Organizations that monitor hate groups have expressed concern about the upsurge of militias around the country. Klanwatch Intelligence Report, a publication of the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, said it found no direct link between white supremacists and Turner's Texas group, but the B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League expressed concern with groups that target the government as an enemy.

"As part of their belief system, they view the U.S. government, whether it's the Internal Revenue Service or law enforcement agencies, as the enemy," said Mark Briskman, director of the Jewish group's North Texas and Oklahoma office. "We're very concerned."

Last month, Klanwatch issued a report that linked white supremacists to another militia-type group, the Texas Light Infantry.

"Our concern are racist leaders who have stepped into this movement and are exploiting it for their own ends," said Mike Reynolds, Klanwatch editor. "And their goals are recruitment and violence, which should make them a concern of citizens and law enforcement."

Through an intermediary, a Texas Light Infantry leader declined an interview, saying he will not to speak to any publication other than Soldier of Fortune magazine.

White supremacists are actually repelled by the Texas

Constitutional Militia because it champions racial equality, said Roland, 50, a computer programmer and former environmental activist who helped found the movement.

"What we have seen in the militias are `reformed racists' who were angry and frustrated and lashed out at the easiest targets, minority groups," he said. "They soon realize the real enemy are the power elites. So they've made a complete turnaround from being racists to being civil-rights advocates.

"This is good government with guns," Roland added.

Turner emphasized the interracial theme, citing cases of Jews joining the movement. He said an African-American, whom he would not identify, recently became head of one North Texas county militia.

Federal and state officials said militias are constitutionally protected and will not face problems unless they secure illegal weapons.

But militia leaders say they are convinced that the FBI and state authorities are actively trying to shut them down.

Ron Dusek, a spokesman for Texas Attorney General Dan Morales, said the militias are of no concern unless they use illegal weapons, such as hand grenades.

"You can't keep people from organizing, getting together, and we wouldn't want to," Dusek said. "It's not against the law to meet, whether it's under sheets or not."

Danny O. Coulson, chief agent of the FBI's Dallas office, who was disciplined for his involvement in the Weaver incident, said, "The only concern would be if they engaged in criminal conduct."

Militia leaders don't buy that hands-off sentiment - as much as Klanwatch and the Anti-Defamation League don't believe that the militia movement is a benign social phenomenon.

In a report released in November, the ADL cited a Virginia group's cache of illegal weapons that led to the arrest last year of four men. In the Northwest, it said, some militia leaders have backgrounds in the Aryan Nations movement; elsewhere some had been with neo-Nazi groups and the Ku Klan Klan. It made no mention of Texas.

"Why did they write about militias but they forgot to mention their own JDL?" responded Smith, referring to the Jewish Defense League, an extremist group founded by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane.

Indeed, Briskman said, the Anti-Defamation League has issued four major reports critical of the Jewish Defense League, which has been "ostracized and condemned by the organized Jewish community, including the Anti-Defamation League."