

Far-right extremism thrives in rural NY

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North Country Public Radio

There's a little wine shop in downtown Ballston Spa with rainbow-colored bottles lining the shop's front window. The Saratoga County village is small, about 5,000 people, and attracts tourists from all around the world.

Last summer, the owner of the wine shop, Jes Rich, noticed a group of masked men in the street. "As soon as I saw them I ran out the door," said Rich, who is openly queer and sees her shop as a safe and welcoming space for other queer people.

The men in the street were wearing black and yellow face coverings and T-shirts identifying themselves as members of the Proud Boys, a violent, far-right extremist group. A yellow truck drove alongside the group, blasting the provocative country song "Try That in a Small Town."

"Get the f*** out of my town," Rich yelled to the group. "You are disgusting and should be ashamed of yourselves." The men responded with homophobic slurs.

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Extremism

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That weekend, the Proud Boys also marched through the nearby communities of Saratoga Springs and Waterford, handing out flyers.

Other far-right groups have recruited and posted fliers around Upstate New York in recent years, which is also happening in other rural communities across the country. Top security officials say far-right extremism poses a real and dangerous threat.

The landscape of extremism

The Proud Boys recorded a propaganda video from those marches and shared the video online. Some people on the street give the group the middle finger. Others look supportive, stopping to salute their American flags.

Over the last few decades, the North Country region of Upstate New York has gone from moderate to more conservative. Most local, state and federal officials are Republican.

The flags and stickers that people put on display reflect that shift. Many fly the yellow Gadsden flag bearing the message "Don't Tread On Me" – a historic symbol of defiance that has become associated with anti-government sentiment and racial hatred.

Some hang Confederate battle flags from their homes, and some have displayed right-wing militia symbols like the roman numeral III, associated with the Three Percenters ideology. Other people display Punisher stickers, signs that read "This is NRA country," and flags that say "FJB." Many people are deeply devoted to Donald Trump: There are flags and banners all over the region falsely claiming Trump won the 2020 election.

These symbols mean different things to different people, and these ideas exist on a spectrum. But ideas that were once considered extreme have become more mainstream. All around the country, many conservatives have shifted to the right – embracing lies about the election and other conspiracy theories.

People identify with provocative, sometimes violent movements and displaying symbols of those movements. And the symbols usually have one thing in common. They reflect anger or distrust towards the government or towards society as a whole.



Three Confederate flags on a home in Glens Falls. PROVIDED/NORTH COUNTRY PUBLIC RADIO

Pledging militia support

In 2018, a group of people gathered in Norwich, Chenango County, for an event called Freedom Fest. One of the event's speakers was Nathan Mizrahi, who identified himself as the commanding officer of the Liberty State Militia. "Get involved with your militias," said Mizrahi. "I assure you, they will be needed if this tyranny continues."

Mizrahi has a Three Percenter tattoo on his hand, a symbol representing part of the broader anti-government militia movement. He told the crowd at Freedom Fest that politicians are attacking their Second Amendment rights, which "were given to us by God," and said they need to do their part to defend their freedoms.

"Call your local sheriffs," Mizrahi said. "I walked right into the office of mine. [...] Said, 'How are you? I'm the commanding officer of Liberty State Militia and I'm in your backyard.'"

"I'm a staunch supporter of the Constitution and I will defend that Second Amendment with my life," recalled Mizrahi. "That's how I met Mike Carpinelli."

Lewis County Sheriff Mike Carpinelli was at Freedom Fest. He's part of a far-right movement known as the constitutional sheriffs, which teaches sheriffs they don't have to enforce laws they think are unconstitutional.

Carpinelli has also echoed some of

the rhetoric used in the militia movement, suggesting that he will be among those ready to defend the country against government tyranny. "If all else fails – if all else fails – then we know what we have to do. Then we know. But I don't believe yet that we're there yet," Carpinelli said in 2022.

Standing on the stage at Freedom Fest, Mizrahi looked Carpinelli in the eye and said he'd give the sheriff the shirt off his back. And then he did. He took off his Liberty State Militia hoodie and presented it to Carpinelli in a big gesture of loyalty.

"When you really, truly have the back of the people, the people will literally give the shirts off their backs for you. You need to know that. I pledge my militia," Mizrahi said as the crowd applauded. "We will forever stand by your side, for someone who stands by ours."

We reached out to Mizrahi to ask him about his militia. He told us he was no longer involved in it. Still, we were hoping he could shed light on the militia scene in general, and about how the groups work. When do they go from target practice and training in the woods to action? But on the day of our scheduled interview, Mizrahi declined to speak and wished us luck with our article.

The militia landscape

We were able to interview another

man involved in the militia movement, Josh Shoaff, who is a self-described Three Percenter and has traveled the country for major anti-government and far-right events in recent years. He was at the infamous Bundy standoff back in 2014 and led an armed, military-style group at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.

Shoaff is based in Tennessee but helps train militia members in New York, which he said are run on a military-style, rank structure. "These groups are organized to the point that they have message boards, they have meetings of their own. And those things are put out so that, you know, 'Hey, if you want to come to a training, we're having training on this and this date, this is the instructor or this is the location,'" said Shoaff.

It's unclear how many people in the North Country are part of militias or how many militias there are around the state, though according to Shoaff, there are more than 12 active militias in New York.

Experts say the militia landscape has changed over the last few years. Some of these groups have gone underground or disbanded.

Shoaff believes there are a lot of misconceptions about militias. He said they want to protect everyone, no matter their gender or political party or race and said "skin color means nothing" to him.

But in 2019, the late Donald McEachin, a Black congressman from Virginia, suggested using the National Guard to enforce new gun laws. Shoaff publicly called for McEachin to be lynched.

Shoaff said he didn't know at the time that McEachin was Black, but he still stands by his statement. "I said we should take him out in the middle of the street and hang him," Shoaff said. "I said what I said because he advocated for using force against citizens," he said. "Is that not treason?"

Concerns about militias

Security officials, extremism experts and some law enforcement say militia groups are particularly alarming because they're driven by their own ideologies. They often claim they're peaceful and say they would defend everyone, but in fact that may not be the case.

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