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Libertarians seek a place in the New Hampshire sun

By ADAM GELLER
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LANCASTER, N.H. -- He fled the "People's Republic of Massachusetts" to escape tyranny. Now he strides the campground in a plaid kilt and mirror shades, an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle across his torso, an immense Scottish sword sheathed between his shoulders.

Out here, though, the only signs of danger are the ones warning drivers to watch out for moose. Could it be he senses a threat we're not seeing?

"Not expecting," says the swordsman, who calls himself Doobie, grinning broadly. "Just ready."

There's no escaping the long arm of big government - even here at the far edge of a state whose license plate decrees that without freedom from oppressive authority you might as well choose death. But for Doobie and 500 others, this tent colony on this particular weekend is about as close to Libertarian Nirvana as they're likely to get.

They've come for the Porcupine Freedom Festival, four days of beer, burgers and bonfires. But more importantly, they are here to carve out an enclave of less government and more liberty to do as they wish.

They are here to show a lost nation the way back to its political roots.

It hasn't been an easy message to sell these past few years. Their group, the Free State Project, has struggled to attract followers. But now, with Americans thinking anew about the reach and role of government, Free Staters see at least the hint of an opening.

So this weekend, they drink to the future. Between swigs of a custom brew called Overregulated Ale, they ridicule the Federal Reserve, applaud the defeat of a bill that would have required the wearing of seat belts, bemoan higher taxes and restrictions on gun rights.

"We said bad things are going to happen and they happen," Jason Sorens, a political science professor, preaching to the crowd clustered around picnic tables. "We say, we told you so."

Flapping overhead, on lines between spruce trees where others might dry bathing suits, Free Staters fly the Gadsden flag, with its serpent and warning to government: "Don't Tread on Me."

They circle around one activist's PT Cruiser to test tactics for dealing with government's front-line

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troops. "How will you perform when confronted by the police?" the schedule of events for the session asks. "You'll know once you practice."

Dozens walk through Porc Fest with handguns hanging from their waists, an unexpected sight on the way to mini-golf.

"I want to excite you to take hold of your liberty," Dan Itse, a New Hampshire legislator, tells more than 70 who fill the campground's TV room for a Friday afternoon declaration of state's rights to freedom from federal control. "You're the only one who can defend your liberty in the end."

The threat of overreaching government is not new, Free Staters say, but it is rising. They wonder if more Americans aren't starting to realize that, too - before it's too late.

Last fall's protests against the economic bailout has been followed by public disapproval of the Obama's administration takeover of General Motors. In 36 states, legislators have introduced resolutions modeled on Itse's declaring their sovereignty over matters including the right to bear arms, citing the Constitution's 10th Amendment, which delineates the federal government's powers. Free Staters approve - though they are distrustful of most politicians.

Still, they are convinced the country will eventually recognize the truth. Just have a look, says Free Stater William Domenico, pointing to 18 fresh recruits from Florida, North Carolina and beyond, piling off a bus after a day's tour.

"Why?" asks Domenico, himself a refugee from an over-licensed life in Colorado. "Because they want government off their backs."

Americans' faith in government ebbs and flows, with voters giving Washington more rope during times of crisis. Even then, though, uncertainty lingers.

"Underneath it all, there is a suspicion of government doing too much," says Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll, which has long tracked public opinion on the matter. "That's a general strain of American culture."

Dislike of big government goes all the way back to colonists fed up with an English king, and a Constitution written to keep power in check.

The Civil War and the Great Depression shifted the balance, asserting the expanded power of federal government.

"None of these powers were ever formally given to these people (government officials) and so occasionally, whenever people notice that the federal government is behaving this way, they get really outraged by it," said Kevin R.C. Gutzman, a constitutional scholar at Western Connecticut State University.

After World War II, broad political consensus saw most Americans willing to follow Washington's lead, says Marc Hetherington, a Vanderbilt University professor and expert on public trust in government. But wariness soon returned, though not nearly to the extent hoped for by some advocates of less government.

"If we do not carve out a sphere of freedom now, freedom will be lost for a long time to come," Sorens, then a Yale University doctoral student, wrote in July of 2001.

He and a few like-minded thinkers met over bagels in Asheville, N.C., and devised a plan. They called upon hardcore activists to move to a small state and do everything possible to take over and scale back government.

The timing of their pitch couldn't have been much worse.

Weeks after the Free State Project started, al-Qaida terrorists flew jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The attacks, two wars and two recessions over the past eight years unsettled U.S. voters' attitudes toward government.

In the fall of 2001, for the first and only time since Gallup began asking the question, the number of Americans who said they wanted government to do more reached 50 percent.

"After 9/11 we had a hard time," says Sorens, now a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "We had some people quit because they said they didn't want to become part of a secession movement, even though we weren't."

Free Staters pushed ahead, choosing as their destination New Hampshire, whose voters have a hard-earned reputation for political independence. They set out to recruit 20,000 activists by 2006 to sign a pledge to move within five years.

Some of the most spirited moved immediately, but recruitment lagged. The group now has 9,400 participants. About 450 have moved to New Hampshire, joining 250 already there.

The small band of Free Staters in New Hampshire has been trying both conventional and more novel strategies to curtail it government's role.

A number have run for office. Four have won seats in the 400-member state House of Representatives, the largest in the country. Free State activists have campaigned furiously against measures perceived as emblematic of excessive government, like a mandatory seatbelt bill and budget hikes.

Meanwhile, a group of mostly younger Free Staters have decided the best way to keep government in its place is to needle it.

One Free Stater spent 58 days in jail after filming in a courthouse lobby and refusing to give police his name. Behind bars, he preached the message of less government to fellow inmates.

Others have organized a crew to pick up garbage around a Manchester playground with handguns strapped to their hips, to test the right to bear arms. They've filmed police officers on patrol and judges on the bench.

They've even filed each other's nails on a public sidewalk, defying state requirements that manicurists be licensed, their cuticles defying the heavy hand of government.

At June's end, they pack Roger's Campground to breathe deeply of mountain air, camaraderie and a life

away from government.

The weekend is a big party. But it is also a statement, based on sober thinking and often rooted in personal experience.

Carla Gericke's view on government were jolted in 2003. She was a New Yorker then, living in a city two years removed from 9/11 but still deeply unsettled.

She and her husband were out for walk near their apartment when they rounded a corner and ran into a SWAT officer shouldering a submachine gun, a police dog at his side. Gericke's mind immediately flashed back to her native South Africa and the apartheid-era government troops who used fear to keep the peace.

"There are a lot of people (in the Free State Project) who have come from what I'd call police states," says Gericke, who relocated to New Hampshire in 2006. "Now we've moved to America because it was land of the free. And it's like, Ha Ha. Suckers!"

Pamela Ean's misgivings about government were confirmed at work. A high school teacher, Ean was frustrated trying to meet the testing standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind law. She calls it an illegal power grab by the federal government, and doesn't see it ending there.

"When you think about it, the federal government is taking over the banking institutions. They're taking over industry. It's scary. I mean, what's next?" asks Ean, who last year ran together with her 19-year-old son for a state legislative seat. They both lost in the primary, but helped unseat the 13-term Republican incumbent.

People have arrived at this ideological destination by different routes. There's the substantial right-to-bear-arms crowd. Some want drug laws loosened. Others are focused on the economy and see government's hand as the source of the problems.

Still others get their hackles up over high taxes.

"Once upon a time America was unquestionably the freest nation in the world by a huge margin. That's not the case anymore and people are starting to realize that," says Varrin Swearingen, an airline pilot who is president of the group. "The further we go down the path to destruction, particularly economically lately, the more interesting this becomes to more people."

While more Free Staters lean Republican, there's little enthusiasm here for George W. Bush, whose administration is viewed as having broken promises to make government smaller. His Democratic replacement, meanwhile, draws backhanded applause.

"I'm glad Obama's president," says Lydia Harman, an activist who brings her 6-month-old son to an afternoon talk on state sovereignty. She makes it clear that she and the Democrat don't agree on a single issue, but that's not the point: "He wants to centralize everything. ... Because of what he's doing, at the pace that he's doing it, people are waking up."

With the early morning sun climbing fast, a handful of Free Staters crouch low in a gravel lot to test their resolve on distant targets. Shoulders tense, eyes focused down the length of .22-caliber rifles,

they're trying to take out the "redcoats" with 13 bullets - one for each of the original colonies.

"This is what America is all about - individual freedom, less intrusive government, self-reliance," says gunsmith Tony Stelik, a political refugee from 1980s' Communist Poland. "Now it's rulers are trying to change it."

Down to her last target, shooter Alicia Lekas nails it, although she seems an unlikely citizen soldier. Lekas makes a living teaching Scottish folk dancing. Her America is embodied in a story of the time a tree fell on a friend's house near Concord and, instead of waiting for government, neighbors responded with their own chain saws.

She says she can't imagine shooting a living creature, but she'll do it if the need arises.

"A bad guy might be the individual crook," the new rifleman says, "Or it might be somebody who's taken over government."

Either way, she's ready.

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