

## Mother Jones

# Homeland Security on the Range

*In the woods with the gang that's learning to shoot straight.*

By JoAnn Wypijewski | [March/April 2006 Issue](#)

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GUILFORD, VERMONT. There are worse things, amid chirp of bird and scuffle of chipmunk, as a bright morning graces a greening field and this solitary patch of the "Don't Tread on Me" state shows itself off as a surviving cousin of that original Eden—there are worse things, in such a setting, than the report of rifle fire. Nothing enhances beauty so much as a scar, or defines silence so well as its opposite; and for 30 years or so, the refugees from city life, straight life, or the New Left who made this place their home didn't bother themselves much about the rifle range just beyond the far fringe of trees where Vermont gives way to Massachusetts. The hippies could plant their gardens, or anything else, in the nude away from prying eyes, and on fine Sundays from May to September, gun enthusiasts or farmers could gather at the Leyden Rifle Club for morning shootfests. It was all part of a country rhythm, and if the distant gunfire annoyed some of the free Vermonters, it was not alarming, not like shrieks from the chicken coop once fox or fisher cat has crept in for a midnight snack.

But then, as people looking for excuses like to say, "everything changed after 9/11." The rifle range—a couple of target bunkers in an open field, some 200 yards long, bounded only by forest, laced with a brook and wetland rivulets, and dedicated since 1935 to "promoting the shooting sports"—was enlisted in the Global War on Terror. The Leyden Rifle Club's eminence, Elwin Barton, told the press that his members answered the call of the bugles and offered the range for the cause of national security. Now there's shooting on any day, sometimes every day, in snow, during flooding rains, at night, sometimes hundreds of rounds a minute. Small-time shooters still bring their paper plates with a Magic Marker scrawl of a bull's-eye, but the range has become the real province of private security guards and law enforcement, occasionally a SWAT team, who aim at higher-tech targets or at human silhouettes. Last summer, a Guilford farmer trailing a lost sheep through the forest approached a clearing and found herself in line with one of those target terrorists.

Leyden, Massachusetts, a town of 808 people, and Franklin County, one of the poorest and most rural in the commonwealth, are unlikely entries on a terrorist hit list, and the county Sheriff's Department wouldn't say if its activity at the Rifle Club is paid for with Homeland Security dollars. But last October alone its officers spent four hours a day for 15 days, plus one night, practicing at the pistol range, a lot of man-hours and lead for a strapped county. And in other respects Franklin County resembles many out-of-the-way places in America where Homeland Security money has filled gaps in state and local budgets or given local agencies new toys, fresh opportunities.

Pork, some call that, and the Department of Homeland Security began 2006 an-nouncing

new rules to limit it. Last April, 60 Minutes reported that most of the \$10 billion spent since 9/11 went toward unnecessary purchases by police and fire departments, like the traffic cones Des Moines, Iowa, spent thousands on. As they closed up shop at the 9/11 Commission in December, chairmen Tom Kean and Lee Hamilton cried out, "These are not the priorities of a nation under threat," citing the \$250,000 that Newark, New Jersey, spent on air-conditioned garbage trucks; the \$100,000 that Washington, D.C., spent on sending sanitation workers to a Dale Carnegie self-improvement course; and the \$7,000 that Columbus, Ohio, spent on bulletproof vests for its four-footed K9 corps.

They might have added the \$70,200 that Greenfield, the Franklin County seat, spent on a system to clean the air in the firehouse, but this is a perfectly unobjectionable draw on the public purse, as are the aforementioned expenditures, which harm no one, contribute to the all-important circulation of capital, add to the well-being of workers, and, especially in the case of Kevlar surpluses for Bowser or King, answer the call to unselfish purposes. Critics of pork-barrel spending presume that government money lavished on frivolous projects might have gone to something better, like ending poverty or making us all safe. When that's the case, the revolution will already have arrived; in the meantime, the real choice is usually between something palpably bad (surveillance systems that shred privacy) and merely silly (the emergency disaster trailer that Converse, Texas, uses to transport ride-around lawn mowers to annual races). Since the basic source of our insecurity—U.S. theft, murder, and meddling across the globe—is unaddressed, thumping on about appropriate safety measures is fairly absurd.

Which brings me back to the Leyden rifle range, whose transformation reflects another mass illusion about security in our time. As it happens, this obscure patch of ground is situated near a bona fide high-risk installation, Entergy's Vermont Yankee, a nuclear power plant seven miles away in Vernon, Vermont. It was the plant's security contractor, Wackenhut, that decided in early 2002 that the modest, totally unsecured Leyden Rifle Club was the ideal setting for its thick-necked men to improve their skills at picking off terrorists who might come calling at the plant's gates.

Entergy and Wackenhut are loath to discuss their deal with the Rifle Club, as is the club, whose interest appears to be a timeless matter of self-enrichment. The concrete platforms Wackenhut sunk into the earth, the wooden canopies it erected so shooting can take place in every season, the county access road it paid to improve, all done in such haste to safeguard the homeland that permits or environmental soundings were never acquired, have brought more club members, more customers, more cash, more lead burrowing into ground and trees and water. Neighbors of the range have challenged the change of use in court and at various public boards, but that's another story.

It seems prudent to defend nuclear power plants. Certainly Wackenhut, which provides security for 31 of America's 65 nuclear sites, could learn to shoot straight. Last December, a worker heading home from a reactor in Illinois was hit in the leg by a bullet fired by Wackenhut guards training nearby. But on a 1 to 10 scale of logical safety measures, where 10 is the phased shutdown of nuclear plants, improved marksmanship is about a 1 1/2, just ahead of locks on the gates. Yet that has been the main concern of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) in establishing post-9/11 safety standards. Private guards who formerly had to be able to defend a plant against three attackers on land are now

required to handle five.

Any child sufficiently aware of the world as it is knows that fiends with an interest in efficient destruction would more likely send a small bomb-laden plane crashing into the spent-fuel cooling pools, where an explosion would create an immense radioactive cloud. In 22 nuclear facilities, from Vermont Yankee to WNP-2 in Richland, Washington, these irradiated pools are elevated high off the ground, covered only by a lightweight roof and vulnerable from above, below, beside. The NRC makes no provision for air attack, because, it says, air security is the job of airlines and other government agencies. So the best we can hope for is good aim by mercenaries, "Hessians," as a retired English teacher and musician in Guilford calls them. This year the NRC is conducting "force-on-force tests" across the country to determine whether the Hessians can indeed take out a five-person commando unit; Wackenhut has been hired to play the commandos.

Meanwhile, in Guilford everyone's home features a little box that pings to warn of fierce weather and, in the event, nuclear catastrophe. With money from Homeland Security, a southern Vermont emergency planning committee launched a "1, 2, Know What to Do" website urging people to develop crisis plans and, at a siren's blare, to turn on their radios. The kids' section features the Know What to Do Kangaroo and his sidekick, Joey, along with "Games & Stuff" to test children's hazard emergency IQ. If Vermont Yankee blows up or melts down while the kids are in school, they are to await buses that will take them to shelters. A good friend here who drives a school bus and carries a beeper expressly for receiving hazard alerts tells me drivers joke that in a true emergency, when signaled that the fallout cloud is coming, they're likely to hightail it themselves out of the wind's path.

Down the dirt road from where the bus driver lives, Eleanor Adams, who used to raise sheep and now, at 89, confines herself to producing an organic fertilizer she's named Cosmic Dust, has been vocal about how the shooting disturbs the patterns of animals, but she takes a droll view of the regimen of preparedness as officially conceived. "I wouldn't get on the school bus," she says. "What you want to look for is a bike path or a hiking trail. If you know geography and geology, if you know where hot springs are, go there. It's a good place to build a cave. If you know a few practical things, like where nonpolluted water is, that's what you need to know. I think you might want to know how to build a Boy Scout shelter." Security, she observes, simply comes down to "intelligent design," and that appears to be in short supply.

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