



Americans Against Gun Violence
P.O. Box 661252
Sacramento, CA 95866
(916) 668-4160 / (888) 286-8122
www.aagunv.org / info@aagunv.org

**A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence
Concerning our 2019 High School Essay Contest**

January 17, 2019

“The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have ‘some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.’”

I’m pleased to announce that the 2019 Americans Against Gun Violence High School Essay Contest is now open for submissions from high school students in the United States and its territories. The prompt for this year’s contest is the quotation above, which is an excerpt from the majority opinion written by the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*.¹

Most people I talk with outside of our Americans Against Gun Violence membership concerning the Second Amendment are not only unaware of the 1980 *Lewis* decision, they’re unaware of the fact that the Second Amendment begins with the phrase, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state....” They’re also unaware that the Supreme Court ruled on three other occasions (*United States v. Cruikshank* in 1876,² *Presser v. Illinois* in 1886,³ and *United States v. Miller* in 1939⁴) that the Second Amendment did not confer an individual right to own a gun. Similarly, very few people I talk with other than Americans Against Gun Violence members are aware of the fact that the 2008 *Heller* decision,⁵ in which a narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court ruled that Washington DC’s partial handgun ban violated the Second Amendment, was the first time in U.S. history that any gun control law had ever been struck down on a Second Amendment basis.

The *Heller* decision effectively deletes the phrase, “A well regulated militia,” from the U.S. Constitution. *Heller* is a major obstacle to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in all other high income democratic countries of the world – countries in which mass shootings are rare or non-existent⁶ and in which the overall rate of gun homicide is 25 times lower than in our own country.⁷ But even before *Heller*, the

misrepresentation of the Second Amendment by the gun lobby and the lack of understanding of the Second Amendment by the American public and our elected officials were major obstacles to the adoption of definitive gun control measures in our country. In choosing the excerpt from the *Lewis* decision as the prompt for our 2019 Americans Against Gun Violence High School Essay Contest, we hope to not only stimulate high school students to learn more about the true history and meaning of the Second Amendment, but also to educate anyone else who hears about the contest and becomes aware of the prompt.

This will be the second consecutive year that we've offered the Americans Against Gun Violence High School Essay Contest. Last year, we chose the following statement, issued in June of 1968 by the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, as the prompt for the contest:

The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world.⁸

We awarded a total of \$15,000 to the 12 winners in last year's contest. Their essays are posted on the Americans Against Gun Violence website. The essays provide a compelling insight into the mindset of today's youth concerning the gun violence problem in our country. The most poignant aspect of these essays, though, may be the fact that six of the 12 contest winners declined to have their names and high school affiliations published in association with their essays. Some colleagues and I in the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility have been running a similar high school essay contest at the local level on other topics for fourteen years. Out of more than 140 winners in that contest, only one student has ever declined to have his name published in association with his essay.

Research shows that a majority of high school students fear that a mass shooting might occur at their school.⁹ Our 2018 high school essay contest showed that a significant proportion of students also fear openly expressing their views about gun violence prevention. And for good reason. I recently met and talked with David Hogg, one of the most publicly outspoken survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, in February of last year. David has received multiple credible threats on his life, and at the event at which I met him, he was accompanied by body guards; security officers were stationed at all the entrances; and all attendees had to pass through metal detectors.

One of the first steps in stopping the shameful epidemic of gun violence in our country is to change the toxic culture that has not only allowed the gun lobby to effectively rewrite the Second Amendment to suit its own liking, but that also makes U.S. high school aged youth, who are killed by guns at a rate that is 82 times higher than their counterparts in other high income democratic countries,¹⁰ fearful not only of becoming victims of a mass shooting, but of openly expressing their views on the topic of gun violence prevention.

I'm attaching a flyer describing our 2019 Americans Against Gun Violence High School Essay Contest. I'd appreciate your help in bringing the contest to the attention of any high school students and educators with whom you have contact. I'd also appreciate it, though, if you'd help "cover the students' backs" by openly and unapologetically discussing with friends, family members, neighbors, colleagues, and, most importantly, your elected officials, the need to overturn the rogue *Heller* decision and to adopt definitive gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries. Such laws include stringent restrictions, if not complete bans, on civilian ownership of handguns and all automatic and semi-automatic rifles.¹¹

Thanks to the generosity of supporters like you, we're able to offer \$15,000 in contest awards again this year. In addition to helping publicize this year's contest, I hope that you'll also consider making a tax deductible contribution to the Americans Against Gun Violence essay contest fund to help ensure that we'll be able to continue to sponsor the essay contest in future years. We run the essay contest entirely with volunteer labor, and all contributions to the essay contest fund go directly to student awards.

Finally, please reply to this message if you'd be willing to help choose the winners in this year's Americans Against Gun Violence High School Essay Contest by being an essay reader. The deadline for students to submit their essays is April 14. If you're willing to help read and rate essays, we'll send you the first batch of 20-30 essays to read around April 15 in the first phase of the finalist selection process and another batch of 20-30 essays in early May in the second phase. You'll also be invited to participate either in person or by remote electronic connection in a live discussion in the third and final phase of the winner selection process in mid-May.

Thanks for your support of Americans Against Gun Violence and our national high school essay contest. Working together, we can stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our entire country but that disproportionately threatens our children and our youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill".

Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician and a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, decorated for courage under fire during the Vietnam War.

References

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- ¹ Lewis v. United States, No. 55 (U.S. 1980).
- ² United States v. Cruikshank, 92 US (Supreme Court 1876).
- ³ Presser v. Illinois, 116 US (Supreme Court 1886).
- ⁴ U.S. v. Miller, 307 U.S. 174 (1939) (n.d.).
- ⁵ District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 US (Supreme Court 2008).
- ⁶ Max Fisher and Josh Keller, “What Explains U.S. Mass Shootings? International Comparisons Suggest an Answer,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017, sec. Americas, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/americas/mass-shootings-us-international.html>.
- ⁷ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, “Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-Income OECD Countries, 2010,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 129, no. 3 (March 1, 2016): 266–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2015.10.025>.
- ⁸ Thomas Dodd, “Text of Speech by Senator Thomas Dodd on Floor of U.S. Senate: The Sickness of Violence and the Need for Gun Control Legislation” (Office of Senator Thomas Dodd, June 11, 1968), http://thedoddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/research/gun_control.htm#; Thomas Dodd, “Press Release: Pious Condolences Will No Longer Suffice” (Office of Senator Thomas Dodd, June 10, 1968), http://thedoddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/research/gun_control.htm#.
- ⁹ Nikki Graf, “Majority of Teens Worry about School Shootings, and so Do Most Parents,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 18, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/18/a-majority-of-u-s-teens-fear-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-school-and-most-parents-share-their-concern/>.
- ¹⁰ Ashish P. Thakrar et al., “Child Mortality In The US And 19 OECD Comparator Nations: A 50-Year Time-Trend Analysis,” *Health Affairs* 37, no. 1 (January 2018): 140–49, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0767>.
- ¹¹ “Gun Law and Policy: Firearms and Armed Violence, Country by Country,” GunPolicy.org, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://www.gunpolicy.org/>.