



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest First Place Winner

\$3,000 Scholarship Award

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The Cost of Misinterpretation

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote in the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*:

A powerful lobby dins into the ears of our citizenry that these gun purchases are constitutional rights protected by the Second Amendment, which reads, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

There is under our decisions no reason why stiff state laws governing the purchase and possession of pistols may not be enacted.... There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police

"A powerful lobby dins into the ears of our citizenry...." Justice William O. Douglas's words from *Adams v. Williams* echo like a warning unheeded. Over half a century later, the "dinning" has become deafening, and the consequences deadly. As we reckon with the legacy of *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) - the case that severed the Second Amendment from its historical roots - we must ask: what is the cost of constitutional distortion?

Before *Heller*, the Second Amendment was largely understood as a collective right, tied to the context of a "well regulated Militia." But in 2008, the Supreme Court transformed that understanding, ruling that individuals have a right to own handguns for personal self-defense. It was a decision hailed as a victory for liberty. But whose liberty, and at what price?

I do not believe Justice Douglas was simply advocating for authoritarianism when he suggested that "all pistols should be barred to everyone except the police." Rather, he was issuing a challenge: to rethink what kind of

society we want to live in - and what kinds of sacrifices we are willing to make to get there. Must liberty be so tightly bound to lethality? Must “freedom” be defined by the capacity to kill?

I grew up with the contradictions of American gun culture. I recited the Pledge of Allegiance in classrooms designed for learning but built for lockdowns. I celebrated Fourth of July fireworks under skies that, for some, echo the sounds of gunfire. I was told that school was a safe place - until drills reminded me that safety was fragile, and that fragility was normal.

Heller didn’t invent gun violence. But it solidified the myth that guns make us safer and that the Second Amendment is a sacred shield against regulation. In doing so, it undermined the possibility of meaningful reform. We are now trapped in a legal framework that prioritizes abstract “rights” over actual lives

Justice is not static. The Constitution is not a dead text but a living document, meant to serve the evolving needs of a nation. Just as the Court once upheld racial segregation and later reversed course, it is not unthinkable that *Heller* too could be revisited. But that will not happen without us.

As young people, we inherit not only the tragedies of the past but also the responsibility to shape the future. We can learn. We can question. We can vote. And most importantly, we can reject the fatalism that tells us this is simply how America is. Justice Douglas dared to imagine a country where guns were not omnipresent. Perhaps that vision, radical though it may seem today, is not a loss of freedom - but the beginning of its recovery.