



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest

\$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

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An Illusion of Freedom vs. Real Public Safety

With an estimated 400 million or more privately owned guns in our country - more than 120 guns for every 100 people – U.S. civilians own nearly half of all the guns in the world. Despite this oversaturation of firearms supposedly meant to ensure our security, we're not safer. Instead, although U.S. residents aren't more violent in general than residents of other high income democratic countries, our homicide rate is more than seven times higher than the average rate in those other countries, driven by a gun-related homicide rate that is 25 times higher. But instead of confronting this crisis, we continue to cling to a warped interpretation of the Second Amendment, one shaped not by the Constitution's original intent, but by the influence of powerful interest groups.

From a young age, we are taught to memorize that the Second Amendment guarantees "...the right of the people to keep and bear arms," with this phrase being drilled into our memory. Rarely do we focus on the first part of the sentence: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State...." That prefatory clause is essential. For most of our history, the Second Amendment was understood to be intended to preserve a militia for the common defense.

Beginning in the 1970s, this interpretation began to shift when gun lobbying groups like the National Rifle Association and the Second Amendment Foundation launched aggressive campaigns to redefine the Second Amendment. They worked to sever the connection between the right to gun ownership and military service, instead arguing that the Second Amendment conferred an individual right to possess firearms unrelated to the "well regulated Militia" described in the first half of the Amendment. And their disinformation campaign worked.

The transformation became legally entrenched with *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), when a narrow 5-4 majority of Supreme Court justices broke from over two centuries of precedent and declared for the first time that the Second Amendment

protects the general right of private individuals to own firearms unrelated to militia service. This ruling effectively allowed the gun lobby to rewrite the Second Amendment, unmooring it from its original purpose.

And what has this legal shift cost us? More than 1,200 school shootings in the last five years. Nearly 47,000 gun-related deaths in 2024 alone. Gunshot wounds becoming the leading cause of death for U.S. children and youth. Teenagers like me grow up with the uncertainty of whether or not the next tragedy will be at their school. If this is the price of freedom, whose freedom are we really protecting – the freedom of gun enthusiasts to buy virtually as many guns and as many different kinds of guns as they like, or the freedom of the rest of us to go about our daily lives without the threat of becoming the victims of wanton gun violence?

Back in 1972, long before mass shootings became routine, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas warned in *Adams v. Williams*, that, “A powerful lobby dins into the ears of our citizenry that these gun purchases are constitutional rights protected by the Second Amendment.” He noted that at that time, there was nothing in prior Supreme Court decisions that prevented the adoption of stringent gun control laws, including complete bans on civilian ownership of large classes of weapons.

Unfortunately, Justice Douglas’s warning has been largely ignored over the past half century, but it resonates now more than ever. What kind of country do we want to be? Do we truly believe that a right to own a gun should outweigh a child’s right to feel safe in a classroom? It’s time for lawmakers to listen to the warning Douglas issued more than 50 years ago: reject the gun lobby’s propaganda; stringently regulate civilian firearm possession; and, if necessary, ban private gun ownership entirely.

The Second Amendment, as it is currently interpreted, prioritizes an illusion of freedom over real public safety. If we continue to allow this misinterpretation to prevail, tens of thousands of innocent civilians, including thousands of children and youth, will continue to die every year in our country of senseless, preventable gunshot wounds.