



Americans Against Gun Violence  
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## 2025 Essay Contest

\$1,000 Scholarship Award Winner

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### Freedom at Gunpoint

In his dissenting opinion in the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*, Supreme Court Justice William Douglas warned of a dangerous distortion in American culture and constitutional law – a distortion that twists the Second Amendment into a justification for virtually unlimited access to what have been appropriately referred to as “weapons of mass destruction;”[1] a distortion that wrongfully equates safety regulations with tyranny; and a distortion rooted in multi-million dollar lobbying schemes, with vested interests placing monetary profit over public safety.[2] Justice Douglas wrote in the *Adams* case:

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.[3]

Over fifty years later, the “din” of the gun lobby’s influence still rings deafeningly loud. We live in a nation where students rehearse lockdown drills before learning algebra. Where places of worship, work, and leisure transform into crime scenes on the daily news. Where obtaining a gun is easier and less regulated than a driver’s license.[4] Amidst this terrifying backdrop, Justice Douglas recognized a fundamental truth: that the Second Amendment was never meant to grant unchecked access to firearms. Its language begins not with the unrestricted rights of the people, but rather, with “A well-regulated militia.” Regulation is not a violation of the Second Amendment; it is an explicit stipulation.

Many wrongfully believe that regulating firearms infringes upon our freedom – with freedom being the virtue that is often cited as best defining our country's alleged greatness. But we must remember that the most important freedom is our right to life; other freedoms cannot be enjoyed without first meeting this prerequisite. We uphold the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, for instance, but we create limitations in the interest of protecting American lives to prevent dangerous incitements of violence.[5] The same logic applies to gun control. Our Constitution recognizes that freedom is not the absence of law; it is the presence of laws that protect life and dignity.

Douglas argued that nothing within the Constitution prevents us from enacting "stiff state laws governing the purchase and possession of pistols." He understood what too many politicians today refuse to admit: that the proliferation of privately owned firearms, and especially handguns, threatens public safety and corrodes the very freedom the Constitution was designed to protect.

Handguns are the type of firearms that are used most often in both homicides and suicides in the United States.[6,7] They are small, easily concealable, and the weapons used in the vast majority of the more than 40,000 gun-related deaths that occur annually in our country, with the United States having by far the highest per capita rate out of gun-related deaths of all high-income nations worldwide.[8,9] While the gun lobby preaches that liberal civilian gun ownership is the "true palladium of liberty,"[10] the direct relationship between rates of private gun ownership and gun-related deaths, coupled with the fact that the United States is an extreme outlier in both categories as compared with other high income democracies[11], reveals the hypocrisy in the argument that more guns convey more freedom.

Other democratic nations have proven that gun violence is not an inevitable or necessary danger. Australia, for example, responded swiftly and decisively to the 1996 Port Arthur Massacre which was committed with semi-automatic rifles by completely banning civilian ownership of these kinds of weapons, including buying back and destroying all such weapons that were already privately owned. In the 25 years following the adoption of the ban, which was also accompanied by more stringent gun licensing, registration, and storage laws, the rate of gun-related deaths in Australia dropped to one third the pre-1996 level.[12]

Similarly, after the 1996 mass shooting at the elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, which was committed with a handgun, Great Britain, which already had a ban on semi-automatic rifles, completely banned civilian ownership of handguns.[13] There have been no more school shootings since the ban went into effect, and Britain currently has one of the lowest rates of gun-related deaths of any democratic country, second only to Japan which has even stricter gun laws.

Australia, Britain, Japan, and other democratic countries serve as models of effective, necessary regulations - with their rates of gun violence a mere fraction of ours.[14] We, too, owe it to our nation's children, our neighbors, and ourselves to

demand policies rooted in reason, not fear. To remember that regulation is not tyranny; it is a promise. A promise that our nation values life enough to protect it.

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