



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest \$100 Scholarship Award Winner

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A Right to Safety: Rethinking the Second Amendment

There is a moment - hushed, weighty - when the classroom is locked down during an active shooter drill. Lights off. Blinds closed. Thirty held breaths, waiting, wondering: Is this one real? My generation came into the world in a nation where this fear has become the norm. But it should not be. In America, the right for school age children and youth to live, learn, and thrive has become subordinate to another purported right: the virtually unfettered freedom of almost anyone beyond a certain age to own and carry deadly weapons.

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

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.

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas's statement in *Adams v. Williams* more than half a century ago rings out as a challenge for us to question the interpretation of the Second Amendment that prevails today. Do we now esteem the "right to bear arms" above the right of schoolchildren to be safe in their classrooms? This question is more than a legal one - it's a moral one. And it's one my generation must respond to.

In *Adams v. Williams*, Justice Douglas warned that a "powerful lobby" was twisting the Second Amendment and convincing Americans that any restriction on gun ownership was unconstitutional. But if one examines the full history and text of the

Second Amendment – as Justice Douglas noted in 1972 that the Supreme Court had already done in “our decisions” - its meaning is clear. The Amendment was intended by our nation’s Founders to provide for a volunteer citizens militia that could substitute for a standing army in providing for the common defense. It wasn’t intended to confer an individual right to gun ownership for any other purpose, and it was never interpreted that way by the Supreme Court until the rogue 5-4 *Heller* decision in 2008. The majority opinions in *Heller* and subsequent related Supreme Court cases that the Second Amendment was intended to ensure virtually unlimited civilian access to modern firearms is a dangerous misrepresentation of the Amendment – and one that has been driven by political pressure rather than historical evidence.

Justice Douglas was right. There is no constitutional reason – Second Amendment or otherwise – why strict gun control laws cannot be enacted in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries. Australia, the UK, and Japan adopted stringent gun control laws long ago, and as a result, they have much less gun violence. The United States, on the other hand, with its weak gun control laws, leads the developed world in rates of gun homicide, school shootings, and other mass shootings. Gun control opponents call their interpretation of the Second Amendment “the true palladium of liberty” (a phrase from the *Heller* majority opinion) - but liberty from what?

Gun violence isn't a nightmare - it's a waking terror. Students like myself are raised anticipating the unthinkable. We memorize emergency exits rather than poetry. We stop listening to our teachers' voices when we hear footsteps in the hall. The Second Amendment was never supposed to make us fear for our lives.

My generation of youth must be brought into the solution. With leadership, advocacy, and courage, we can demand change. We know that rights must be weighed against responsibility - and that an alleged “right to bear arms” should never outweigh our right to live and learn free from the threat of gun violence.

Justice Douglas was brave enough to speak truth to noise - to assert what most people today, including most elected officials and even the current majority of Supreme Court justices are afraid to: that our understanding of the Second Amendment has been hijacked, twisted, militarized. But the Constitution was not meant to be a suicide pact. It was built to function for the people - to evolve with them.

We are the lockdown generation. But we're also the generation from which our country's future leaders will emerge. We won't be bullied by special interests. We won't inherit a broken system without a fight. Our voices, votes, vision - these are the tools we'll use to build a safer future.

Safety is not a privilege. It's not Republican or Democratic. It's human. When historians look back, let them remember that ours was the generation that flipped fear into action - and tragedy into positive change.