



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2025 Essay Contest

\$100 Scholarship Award Winner

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“The Second Amendment Says What?”

My history teacher asks our class, “The Second amendment says what?”

We all respond, “The right to bear arms!” Some students laugh and pretend with their hands that they’re shooting pistols.

Until I read the prompt for this year’s Americans Against Gun Violence essay contest, that’s all I’d ever known about the Second Amendment. In school and through the news media, I had been taught one thing about the Amendment: that it gives Americans the right to own guns. But reading Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas’s opinion in the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*, I was surprised. Justice 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.

Justice Douglas’s words challenged my prior conception about the Second Amendment and forced me to reconsider not just what the Amendment says, but how it’s been interpreted - and how that interpretation impacts our daily lives. In school, we’re rarely taught the full wording of the Second Amendment. We repeat “the right to bear arms,” without its full context: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State....” Justice Douglas reminds us that the original intent was not about individual gun ownership, but rather collective

defense. He suggests that modern interpretations are more politically motivated than constitutionally grounded.

Reading Justice Douglas's statement and learning the Second Amendment's full wording made me dig deeper into its history. For most of U.S. history, courts didn't view the Amendment as conferring an individual right to gun ownership outside of service in a "well regulated militia." That changed with the 2008 *District of Columbia v. Heller* decision – a decision that was driven more by ideology than historical fact. Learning the true history of the Second Amendment made me question how much of our gun culture is shaped by lobbying and political pressure.

Gun deaths in the U.S. have increased 17% since the *Heller* decision. According to the website, Gun Violence Archive, there were 499 mass shootings in 2024, compared to just 26 in 2008. These aren't just numbers – they represent the deaths of real students and the real fears that all the rest of us students now carry. My own school received a threat during the last week of school. We were supposed to take the AP Physics test, but for my safety, my mom refused to let me go. We're growing up in a country where not just education, but life, liberty, and safety are threatened - just so individuals can own guns?

States and countries with strong gun laws have far fewer gun deaths. So how do we keep claiming guns make us safer when the evidence shows the opposite? Justice Douglas's view - that strong gun laws are both constitutional and necessary - now feels not only reasonable but urgent. He helped me see that protecting people doesn't mean giving up constitutional rights - it means asking which rights the Constitution was really intended to grant and which rights truly keep us free. As the next generation, we can speak out, vote, and challenge the false notion that private gun ownership is a constitutional right that outweighs public safety.

I don't have all the answers, but I do know this: reading Justice Douglas's words helped me realize that real freedom includes the right to live without fear. And it's time we build a future that reflects that realization.