

On Shooting Massacres in American Schools

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In the wake of the most recent shooting massacre at a school in America--this one occurred in Connecticut, where a deranged gunman killed 20 children, most of them 6-year olds, as well as seven female school staff--there have been calls for armed guards to be placed in classrooms. A sort of sky marshal in the school. The state of South Dakota has passed a law allowing (though not requiring) teachers to carry firearms in the classroom; they are to be called "school sentinals." This is a daft idea. It would be an inefficient use of manpower and not a credible deterrent. First, if an assailant intended to shoot up a school, he would assume that every teacher is armed; he would therefore first target teachers (all of them, not just ones who happen to be armed, since an assailant could not know which are in fact armed) before shooting up the rest of the school's attendees (children, janitors, staff, etc.). Second, an assailant could easily out-gun or outmaneuver a classroom sentinal. All an assailant need to do would be to take a pupil hostage, and a sentinal would be paralyzed. The assailant could then gun down as many children as his magazines hold rounds.

The obvious solution is to send children to school with their own weapons. An assailant who entered a well-armed classroom would be confronted not merely with a single marshal or sentinal, probably packing nothing more serious than a small-caliber pistol, but rather with rows and rows of muzzles pointed at him. He might, at most, cut down the first row of children before himself being rendered harmless by the second and third rows. Thus, the casualty rate would drop by two-thirds, and a new generation of heroic Minute Men will have been raised up.

This proposal would also increase employment for Americans. If each child were to take a weapon to school, the weapons would first have to be purchased, and then the ammunition, and then the training how to use them, and the regular target practise at the local shooting range, and so on. Indeed, schools could add gun safety classes to the curriculum--more jobs for more teachers!--and build target ranges next to their gymnasia. School safety and more employment for the whole nation, all in one clean shot! What more could you ask for?

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Postscript:

The full text of the second amendment to the United States Constitution reads as follows: “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.”

It is worth reading this in conjunction with the next article, which reads as follows: “No soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.”

Regarding the third amendment or article quoted above: it was thought necessary to include this in the Bill of Rights because it had been common practise up until that time for armies to simply move into any houses they happened to take a fancy to and stay until the army moved on. Not only was this a great imposition upon house or farm owners, to have to feed and bed soldiers at their own expense, but it was also a great injustice--for a common house owner or farmer had no recourse if the soldiers took a fancy to his daughters as well as to his property. It is perhaps not obvious from the wording of the article that armies did not quarter in barracks, but were rather like locusts which descended upon a hapless town or village and left it destitute when they moved on.

Now, to the second article: the gun lobby in America is convinced that the right keep and bear arms is absolute and inviolable. They are wrong: it is neither absolute nor inviolable. The article states: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State,” which is a sort of *if* clause; “the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed” which is a sort of *then* clause. If or when the *if* clause no longer obtains, then the *then* clause no longer does either. The historical context makes clear why this article was put in at all, and also why it takes the grammatical form it does: there was at that time no standing army to defend the borders of the fledgling state; moreover, there were professional armies on North American soil which took their commands from well-established states in Europe--England and France, to name names. There was clear and present danger to the fledgling state of the United States of America, and no standing army to defend the borders. *So*, under these conditions, it made sense to require of every able-bodied man that he appear on a moment’s notice in the village square, equipped (at his own expense) to defend the geographical and political integrity of his community. Remember the “Minute Men”? They constituted the “well regulated militia” of which mention is made in Article II of the Bill of Rights. As soon, however, as a standing army came into being, consisting of full-time professional soldiers, paid and equipped by the federal government, and quartered in barracks, a “well regulated militia” was no longer necessary. At that moment in time, the right to keep and bear arms lapsed, since the security of the state was otherwise ensured.

There are people who argue that the wording of the amendment is not, grammatically speaking, a conditional. But read the other nine amendments carefully: Article One states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press ...” Article Three states, “No soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house...” Article Four states, “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated...” Article Five states, “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury ...” And so on. In no other case is there any preliminary clause or preamble explaining why the right is a good thing or in any way limiting it. There *is* such a clause or preamble to Article Two, the right to keep and bear arms; the preliminary clause gives a reason *why* the right is necessary and limits it. When the reason why no longer applies, the right lapses.

Regarding the supposed absoluteness and inviolability of the rights enumerated in the American Bill of Rights, including the right to keep and bear arms: it is a well-established principle of American law and court precedent that one man’s right may be trumped by another man’s right, or by the general weal. For example, the right to freedom of speech does not include shouting “fire!” in a crowded theater when there is no fire and thereby inciting a panic. One man’s right to freedom of speech is trumped by other men’s right not to be stampeded. The right to own property is not absolute and inviolable either; it may be trumped by an overriding advantage to the local community. For example, if a man happens to

own a piece of land which would be uniquely suited to be developed as a harbor for a whole community, then he may be dispossessed of it. Though not without due process of law and not without compensation (e.g., a fair price for his land or an equivalent piece of land elsewhere). I submit that the right to keep and bear arms should also be trumped by an obvious advantage to the general weal--such as that children not be gunned down in schools (or anywhere else, for that matter)

As a practical matter, I appreciate that any attempt to reduce the number of firearms in circulation would lead to massive resistance, hoarding, and probably open rebellion. I do, however, have some practical advice for concerned parents: homeschool your children. It's legal, and it would send a louder message to the government than any petition with 400,000 signatures. The amount of subsidy a school district receives depends on enrollment; if enrollment drops, the money dries up.