

## **The Great Debate**

### **The Pros and Cons of Guns in the Classroom**

Throughout its history, the United States has had a fascination with guns. Americans have used guns in times of war, for protection, and for hunting. Americans also use guns when they are intent on killing people. When violence happens in school shootings, drive-by shootings, assassination of public officials, or in the workplace and shopping malls, Americans demand something be done. This demand fuels the debate between gun rights and gun control activists. It fuels the debate over the interpretation of the Second Amendment. It fuels the debate on allowing citizens to carry concealed weapons in gun-free zones. This makes us ask the question: Should guns be banned from college campuses?

Two recent college campus massacres have triggered a renewed interest in this debate. On the morning of April 16, 2007, a deeply troubled young man named Seung Hui Cho used two pistols to murder thirty-two students and faculty members, as well as killing himself, at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia (Feldman 284). The second incident happened on February 14, 2008 at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. The twenty-seven year old gunman, Steven Kazmierczak, walked into a lecture hall with three handguns and a shotgun and fired fifty-four rounds from the weapons. He fatally shot five students and himself and wounded sixteen others (Goldman).

These two incidents have brought the gun control vs. the gun rights debate back to the college campuses. The heart of the debate focuses on whether allowing concealed weapons in a college classroom setting can save lives if a similar catastrophe happens again. Activists across the United States are joining forces to make their voices heard. One such group, Students for

Concealed Carry on Campus (SCCC) advocate that students who are concealed handgun license holders should have the right to carry these concealed handguns into university buildings. In opposition, a group called Protest Easy Guns believes that students should not have guns on college campuses (Bella).

Students for Concealed Carry On Campus (SCCC) is a national, non-partisan, grassroots organization with over thirty-five thousand college students, professors, college employees, and parents of college students that was formed after the Virginia Tech tragedy. SCCC has members in all fifty states and the District of Columbia and has two main functions. First, they want to dispel the myths and misconceptions about concealed carry on campus. They point to studies that agree that concealed handgun license holders are five times less likely than non-license holders to commit violent crimes. The second function is to push state legislators and school administrators to grant concealed handgun license holders the same rights on college campuses that those licensees currently enjoy in most other unsecured locations (ConcealedCampus.com). The SCCC sponsored an empty holster protest on October 22 through October 26, 2007. The protest took place in almost all of the one-hundred-eleven universities and colleges represented in the group. Students wore empty gun holsters around their campuses (Bella).

Protest Easy Guns is a grassroots movement focused on protesting lax United States gun laws. They feel these lax laws provide criminals and dangerous individuals easy access to guns. They believe that students should not have guns on college campuses. Compelled by the tragic murders committed on the Virginia Tech campus, thirty-two members of the group staged a demonstration on April 22, 2007 by lying on the ground in front of City Hall in Alexandria, Virginia for several minutes. It was a symbolic protest remembering the thirty-two people killed and the amount of time it took for Seung Hui Cho to obtain his guns (“What We Want”). This

group encourages Americans to write their congressmen to vote for a bill that will close the gun show loophole. The present law allows unlicensed, private dealers to sell guns to people without conducting a background check. They also want Congress to reinstate the assault weapons ban which expired in 2004. Guns such as semiautomatic AK-47s and Uzis are easily available along with high-capacity magazines. It was the availability of such magazines that Seung Hui Cho used to kill so many people so quickly (“What We Want”).

Gun control laws on campuses are being reconsidered by many states after the much publicized shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois Universities. Nadine Mahasneh’s writing in the February 28, 2008 issue of *The Exponent* states that according to an article published in *USA Today*, twelve states have been considering bills that would allow people to carry concealed weapons on public university campuses. The Indiana Senate did vote on a bill that would allow people with permits to carry handguns on state property, except in specific places such as airports. The bill did not pass (Mahasneh). Since the fall semester of 2008, Utah’s state law has allowed licensed individuals to carry concealed handguns on the campuses of all nine public colleges in Utah. Concealed carry has been allowed at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado since 2003 and at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cove, Virginia since 1995. None of these schools have seen a single resulting incident of gun violence, a single gun accident, or a single gun theft (Concealed Campus.com).

In Indiana, one must be eighteen years old to purchase a rifle or shotgun. One does not need a permit or license to do so. The weapon does not need to be registered. One must be twenty-one and have a permit to carry a handgun. It is unlawful for any person to sell or give a firearm to any person who is a convicted felon, a drug or alcohol abuser, or is mentally incompetent. A dealer must do a National Instant Criminal Background Check. It is unlawful to

possess a firearm on school property, property used for a school function, or a school bus. An application for a license to carry a handgun must be made to the chief law enforcement officer of the municipality where the applicant resides. The officer to whom the application is made shall conduct an investigation into the applicant's official records and verify his character, reputation, and information in the application. A set of fingerprints will be taken. The application will be granted or rejected within six days. The license is valid for four years ("What are the Gun Laws in Indiana"). Purdue University's position on gun control allows only law enforcement officers to carry firearms on campus (Mahasneh).

Like most college campuses, Washington, D.C. had a ban on concealed handguns for thirty-two years. The City Council that adopted the ban said it was justified because "handguns have no legitimate use in the purely urban environment of the District of Columbia" ("Justices"). Dick Anthony Heller, an armed security guard in Washington, D.C. did not agree. He sued the District after it rejected his application to keep a handgun at his home for protection ("Justices"). The case was referred to the United States Supreme Court in March, 2008. The Court's five to four ruling struck down the District of Columbia's thirty-two year old handgun ban as incompatible with gun rights under the Second Amendment in June, 2008. The court also struck down Washington's requirement that firearms be equipped with trigger locks or kept disassembled. It left intact the licensing of guns ("Court Rules").

The Second Amendment's unusual phrasing and punctuation states, "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." Gun control opponents contend, "the right of the People to keep and bear arms" is an individual right. Gun control proponents view the Second Amendment as protecting a collective right to own a gun. For them, it means the militias have the right to keep

and bear arms and that the government has the power and authority to regulate the use and sale of firearms (Roleff 59-60). In 1939, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment did not protect an individual's right to own a shotgun in the *United States v. Miller* case because such a right did not have a "reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia." Most courts then accepted the collective rights interpretation of the Second Amendment. In the 1998 *United States v. Emerson* case, the Court supported a restriction on Timothy Emerson's right to own a gun because he was under a protective order for domestic violence. The court also found that individual law-abiding Americans are guaranteed the right to own a gun under the Second Amendment (Haerens 116-17). It seems the Supreme Court is not absolutely sure of the Second Amendment interpretation. The 2008 decision on the Washington, D.C. handgun ban was only overruled by a five to four vote in favor of individual rights.

While all states have rules and regulations on who can or cannot purchase a gun, they are not uniform across the United States. Therefore, tragic events involving guns often bring cries from the American people for federal gun control legislation. Such an event was the assassination attempt on President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 (Feldman 37). The 1930's also saw gangster violence by such well-known criminals as John Dillinger, Al Capone, and Baby Face Nelson. In response to this activity, the National Firearms Act of 1934 became the first attempt at federal control legislation. It was felt something needed to be done to control the spread of weapons into the general population. The Act imposed a two-hundred dollar tax on machine gun and short-barrel firearms. This was a large sum of money in 1934. The idea was to tax such weapons out of circulation (Roleff 124). The Federal Firearms Act of 1938 introduced the concept of the Federal Firearms License for anyone selling or repairing firearms. The holder

of such a license was required to not sell to any convicted felon. The seller must maintain customer records for all firearms and ammunition sales. The Act also made possession of firearms with an altered serial number a crime (Currie 21).

The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, 1968, and United States Senator Robert Kennedy in June, 1968 led to the passage of the Gun Control Act of 1968 (Feldman 39-40). This act prohibited the interstate transfer of guns, prohibited shipping guns and ammunition through the mail system, established a minimum age for firearm purchasers, required all firearms to have a serial number, and expanded the categories of prohibited persons (Currie 21-22).

A third tragic event led to the passage of the Brady Handgun Prevention Act in 1993. On March 30, 1981, John W. Hinckley, Jr. using a .22 caliber Rohm RG-14 revolver fired six rounds in Washington, D.C. hitting President Ronald Reagan in his lung and wounding three others. Press secretary, James S. Brady was one of them. He sustained a wound to his forehead that permanently disabled him (Feldman 12). Criminals and others who were ineligible to buy firearms could easily purchase guns by lying about their background. The Brady Act provided for mandatory background checks and a five-business-day waiting period for the purchase of all revolvers and semiautomatic pistols (Feldman 179-81).

The gun debate is about whether or not stricter gun control laws should be enacted in the United States. Gun control proponents believe that gun control laws would save more lives. Gun control opponents believe the same laws would take away lives. There are two major groups in the United States that debate and promote gun related issues. The largest and oldest group is the National Rifle Association (NRA). It is a nationwide gun club that was established

in 1871 by two Civil War veterans who were upset by lack of marksmanship in their men during the Civil War. Over the years, the NRA has promoted the shooting sport among America's youth. In 1949, they established the first hunter education program. The NRA became the only national trainer of law enforcement officers in 1960. Today the NRA is an active defender of the Second Amendment claiming it protects a citizen's right to gun ownership. The NRA also lobbies Congress to relax gun and ammunition restrictions. The NRA has nearly four million members (Roleff 72-73).

The gun control advocates banded together and formed the National Council to Control Handguns in 1974. It was organized by Mack Borinsky after he was a victim of a robbery at gunpoint. The name was later changed to Handgun Control, Inc. (HCI). Their original purpose was to ban handguns in the United States. They soon adopted a more moderate mission of supporting the enactment and enforcement of gun control laws. They claimed this would ensure only law-abiding citizens could purchase guns. Sarah Brady is HCI's most well-known activist. She fought for gun regulations such as laws requiring adults to store their guns in places inaccessible to children. In 1986, the Law-Enforcement Officer's Protection Act was passed. It bans armor-piercing bullets. The Undetectable Firearms Act was passed in 1988. It outlaws guns that cannot be detected in an airport metal detector. It took HCI until 1993 before they could get the Brady Law passed. The NRA managed to block it for several years (Currie 22-24).

School violence does not just happen on the college campus. A timeline from the book *School Shootings and School Violence* by Barbara Cruz showed there were fifty-seven teachers and students killed and one-hundred-five persons wounded in twenty-seven school shooting incidents across the United States from 1978 to 2001. Most of the killers were teenagers, but in Mount Morris Township, Michigan, a six-year old boy shot and killed a female classmate in their

first-grade classroom on February 29, 2000 (Cruz 53-54). The Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999 gained national attention. Two teenage boys killed thirteen people and wounded twenty-three before they killed themselves. The boys entered the school armed with sawed-off shotguns, a semiautomatic rifle, a semiautomatic pistol, and pipe bombs (Thomas 14-15). It seems violent incidents happen at all age levels. Elementary, junior high, and high school students would not be old enough to carry a concealed weapon.

One must ask, “If students were allowed to carry concealed weapons into a college classroom would it offer protection in case of an attack?” In an April 10, 2009 ABC television broadcast of *20/20*, Diane Sawyer and David Muir reported on a demonstration showing how the average college student would react in different crisis situations. The students were trained and then given a concealed gun to take to a classroom. When a surprise attack occurred, most students found the gun did not protect them. In fact, it seemed to make them more vulnerable to attack. One student simply froze. One could not get the gun out of the holster. One stood up to aim the gun and became a target. It was found the other students ran in all directions screaming when confronted by an attacker. They explained how one’s vision narrows in on the attacker making it very likely the concealed gun holder would be in danger of shooting either a fellow classmate or themselves (“If I Only Had a Gun”).

As can be seen, the gun control vs. the gun rights debate is very complex and permeates every fiber of American society. Every American is vulnerable and could be involved in a tragic situation sometime during their lifetime. For those who spend time in gun-free zones on college and university campuses, one becomes part of the debate. If you land on the gun rights side, what will you do to promote the wise use of guns? If you land on the gun control side, how will you provide a safe environment within the classroom as well as in society? The issues are out

there. The debate is ongoing. Should one be allowed to carry a concealed weapon in a gun-free zone or should one be denied this privilege? The debate is yours.

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