

Gun Safety Now!

Four gun safety proposals are being heard next week by the Oregon Senate Judiciary Committee. The most important bill for the safety of Oregonians is SB 700, which requires criminal background checks on all gun purchases and transactions except those between immediate family members. This legislation will keep guns out of the possession of felons and those with dangerous mental illnesses. The three other bills seek to keep weapons out of our schools and the Capitol building and to require that gun purchasers pass a firing range test. Another important bill, HB 3200, the ban on semi-automatic weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines, has not yet been scheduled for hearing.

Based on my review as a law professor at Willamette University, these gun safety bills currently pending in the Oregon legislature in no way violate the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court recently has reaffirmed longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill. The Court also has upheld laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings; laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of firearms; and laws prohibiting possession of dangerous and unusual weapons. All of the legislative proposals on gun safety fit well within the confines of the most restrictive reading of Supreme Court decisions.

As our lawmakers consider the pending gun safety legislation, I urge them to consider more than the political grandstanding of a minority of Oregonians. More than 90% of Americans, including Oregonians, support universal background checks. Most Americans, including Oregonians, support bans on semi-automatic weapons and high volume ammunition magazines. As Oregonians reflect on this issue, they will not forget Thurston, they will not forget Clackamas, and they most certainly will not forget Sandy Hook. I believe they will support representatives who refuse to be intimidated by the political rhetoric of NRA leaders or to be enticed by NRA campaign contributions.

It is clear that semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines are dangerous in the hands of civilians. These killing machines cannot be justified as a matter of self-protection. They are particularly dangerous in the hands of those who suffer from dangerous mental illnesses or who have manifested shown their utter disregard for society's laws. From the standpoint of a mother whose beloved son intends to embark on a law enforcement career, I find it inexcusable for anyone to allow these weapons, or any firearm, to fall into the possession hands of drug dealers and others who will someday attempt to take my son's life.

For those who doubt that our gun laws need strengthening, I urge them to revisit their own faith values, particularly with regard to the sanctity of human life. Some

assert that unregulated gun ownership is somehow a God-given right in a Christian nation. As a seminary student currently seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ, I find that position particularly especially curious. As Jesus was arrested, he dissuaded his companions from fighting Roman soldiers. He taught us to turn the other cheek, and he emphasized the idea of loving God and loving our fellow human beings as ourselves as the most important of the tenets of our faith. How can anyone assert that owning these weapons, which are designed solely for killing people, is an act consistent with our faith?

I personally believe that those mistaken souls who find solace in possessing semi-automatic weapons actually lack conviction that the universe is guided by a benign intelligence whose infinite love embraces all humanity. They are afraid. Forty-five years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, the words of his sermon "Antidote to Fear" resonate:

Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God...with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us, and love to keep us. God's boundless love supports and contains us as a mighty ocean contains and supports the tiny drops of every wave... Any person who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life without the fatigue of pessimism and the weight of morbid fears....Herein lies the answer to the neurotic fear of death that plagues so many of our lives...Death is inevitable...We need not fear it...The God who brought our whirling planet from primal vapor and has led the human pilgrimage for lo these many centuries can most assuredly lead us through death's dark night into the bright daybreak of eternal life... Death is not the ultimate evil; the ultimate evil is to be outside God's love.

I hope lawmakers will reflect thoughtfully on these matters and be guided by the wisdom, strength, and love all of us find when we listen deeply to the voice within.

Susan Lea Smith
Director, Law and Government Certificate Program
Professor of Law
Willamette University