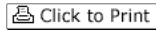




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Plate: Let's lay down our right to bear arms

By Tom Plate
Special to CNN

Editor's note: Tom Plate, former editor of the editorial pages of the Los Angeles Times, is a professor of communication and policy studies at UCLA. He is author of a new book, "Confessions of an American Media Man."

Read an opposing take on gun control from Ted Nugent: [Gun-free zones are recipe for disaster](#)

LOS ANGELES (CNN) – Most days, it is not at all hard to feel proud to be an American. But on days such as this, it is very difficult.

The pain that the parents of the slain students feel hits deep into everyone's hearts. At the University of California, Los Angeles, students are talking about little else. It is not that they feel especially vulnerable because they are students at a major university, as is Virginia Tech, but because they are (to be blunt) citizens of High Noon America.

"High Noon" is a famous film. The 1952 Western told the story of a town marshal (played by the superstar actor Gary Cooper) who is forced to eliminate a gang of killers by himself. They are eventually gunned down.

The use of guns is often the American technique of choice for all kinds of conflict resolution. Our famous Constitution, about which many of us are generally so proud, enshrines -- along with the right to freedom of speech, press, religion and assembly -- the right to own guns. That's an apples and oranges list if there ever was one.

Not all of us are so proud and triumphant about the gun-guarantee clause. The right to free speech, press, religion and assembly and so on seem to be working well, but the gun part, not so much.

Let me explain. Some misguided people will focus on the fact that the 23-year-old student who killed his classmates and others at Virginia Tech was ethnically Korean. This is one of those observations that's 99.99 percent irrelevant. What are we to make of the fact that he is Korean? Ban Ki-moon is also Korean! Our brilliant new United Nations secretary general has not only never fired a gun, it looks like he may have just put together a peace formula for civil war-wracked Sudan -- a formula that escaped his predecessor.

So let's just disregard all the hoopla about the race of the student responsible for the slayings. These students were not killed by a Korean, they were killed by a 9 mm handgun and a .22-caliber handgun.

In the nineties, the Los Angeles Times courageously endorsed an all-but-complete ban on privately owned guns, in an effort to greatly reduce their availability. By the time the series of editorials had concluded, the newspaper had received more angry letters and fiery faxes from the well-armed U.S. gun lobby than on any other issue during my privileged six-year tenure as the newspaper's editorial page editor.

But the paper, by the way, also received more supportive letters than on any other issue about which it editorialized during that era. The common sense of ordinary citizens told them that whatever Americans were and are good for, carrying around guns like costume jewelry was not on our Mature List of Notable Cultural Accomplishments.

"Guns don't kill people," goes the gun lobby's absurd mantra. Far fewer guns in America would logically result in far fewer deaths from people pulling the trigger. The probability of the Virginia Tech gun massacre happening would have been greatly reduced if guns weren't so easily available to ordinary citizens.

Foreigners sometimes believe that celebrities in America are more often the targets of gun violence than the rest of us. Not true. Celebrity shootings just make better news stories, so perhaps they seem common. They're not. All of us are targets because with so many guns swishing around our culture, no one is immune -- not even us non-celebrities.

When the great pop composer and legendary member of the Beatles John Lennon was shot in 1980 in New York, many in the foreign press tabbed it a war on celebrities. Now, some in the media will declare a war on students or some-such. This is all misplaced. The correct target of our concern needs to be guns. America has more than it can possibly handle. How many can our society handle? My opinion is: as close to zero as possible.

Last month, I was robbed at 10 in the evening in the alley behind my home. As I was carrying groceries inside, a man with a gun approached me where my car was parked. The gun he carried featured one of those red-dot laser beams, which he pointed right at my head.

Because I'm anything but a James Bond type, I quickly complied with all of his requests. Perhaps because of my rapid response (it is called surrender), he chose not to shoot me; but he just as easily could have. What was to stop him?

This occurred in Beverly Hills, a low-crime area dotted with upscale boutiques, restaurants and businesses -- a city best known perhaps for its glamour and celebrity sightings.

Oh, and police tell me the armed robber definitely was not Korean. Not that I would have known one way or the other: Basically the only thing I saw or can remember was the gun, with the red dot, pointed right at my head.

A near-death experience does focus the mind. We need to get rid of our guns.

What is your take on this commentary? [E-mail us](#)

The opinions expressed in this commentary are those of the writer. This is part of an occasional series of commentaries on CNN.com that offers a broad range of perspectives, thoughts and points of view.

Read Ted Nugent's take on gun control here: [Gun-free zones are recipe for disaster](#)

Your responses

CNN.com asked readers for their thoughts on this commentary. Below you will find a small selection of these e-mails, some of which have been edited for length and spelling:

Eileen Lazur, King of Prussia, Pennsylvania

I totally agree with Mr. Tom Plate regarding his anti-gun article. The United States needs to make it more difficult to get guns. It's a no-brainer -- the fewer guns the fewer shootings. Why do we even make automatic weapons? They should be outlawed. I'm sad that the U.S. has not acknowledged this. I would gladly vote for a candidate who took a firm stand against the NRA! It needs to happen now.

Juan Garcia, Syracuse, New York

I'm sorry you had experienced having a gun aimed at your head, but let's assume the robber knew that more and more Americans have armed themselves. Do you think he would have been brave enough to rob another armed person? Probably not.

D. Wilhelm, Edmond, Oklahoma

A very short sighted argument, indeed. I don't have a gun and am not going to get one. But the sad truth is that anti-gun laws will only stop law abiding citizens from having guns. Those who murder and rob will not comply with these laws. Illegal drugs are illegal, yet does that stop anyone from getting them that wants them? Gun control is a hurried reaction to try to solve our violence problem that goes far deeper than fire arms.

Ron Bell, Snellville State, Georgia

I couldn't agree more. The idea that private citizens owning one or more (usually more) guns makes them safer or helps them to ensure protection for their family and/or belongings is absolutely ludicrous. It simply escalates matters and helps ensure that somebody is going to get hurt, usually very badly and almost always the most innocent party.

Mike, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The right to bear arms was a construct designed to prevent the proliferation of governmental tyranny. A constituency made up of a potentially armed militia served as a great deterrent against those with designs of establishing a new monarchy or dictatorship. Believe it or not, a fledgling representative democracy had plenty to fear from a world, at best, unfamiliar, and at worst, openly hostile to this new form of self-governance. Would Mr. Plate feel better about his citizenship if the lunatic in Virginia had strapped 100 pieces of dynamite to his body and blown himself up in a crowded area? Would he be any more comfortable living in this country if his assailant had used a knife instead of a pistol to commit a crime against his person?

Laurence Hewitt, New York, New York

I would just add one more thing to Mr. Plate's well thought-out commentary. The constitution stipulates that the right to bear arms is for the purpose of "maintaining a standing militia." Which, in modern terms, outside of Iraq and the Golan Heights, refers to maintaining a national guard. It does not say that every man, woman and child has the right to carry around a handgun, as the NRA would have you believe.

Brian, Seattle, Washington

If the writer here had a gun, he could have defended himself! I myself do not have a gun, but I can tell you if I ever felt compelled to defend myself or my family I want that right. I don't want to rely on someone else to protect me, because 9 out of 10 times, I'd be dead. As with any seen evil (drugs, alcohol, etc), we've shown in a free country that abolition doesn't work, but I believe controlled regulation coupled with education can.

Matthew Brice, Fairbanks, Alaska

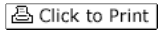
I could not agree more. This county is unnecessarily awash is guns. The U.S. Constitution does guarantee the right to bear arms, but we need to fully appreciate the context with which the right was framed. It was penned over 200 hundred years ago in a much different world. When was the last time a person with a flat tire on the freeway was required to subsistence hunt until help arrived? While I believe that most persons (including myself) can responsibly own a gun, I would freely give up that right to keep guns out of those that do not.

Mark Tegtman, Ft. Collins, Colorado

Typical liberal view....The guns did all of the killing; they just happened to be in the hands of a madman who went about the process of obtaining guns through legal means. Had one student or teacher had a gun in their possession, this whole incident might have been very different. Take guns away from responsible people and there will be a major catastrophe in this wonderful country.

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