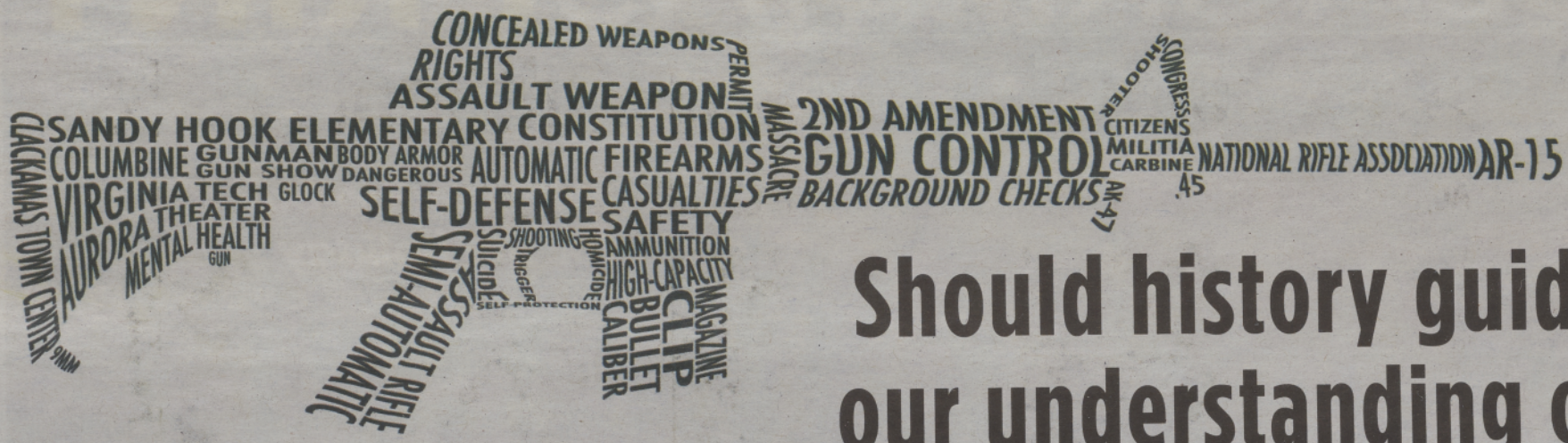

Should history guide our understanding of gun control?

BY IAN VAN ORDEN
NEWS AND OPINION

Ratified on December 15, 1791, the United States Bill of Rights added the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution. Among the included rights are free speech, as noted in the First Amendment, protection against unreasonable searches and seizures, as noted in the Fourth Amendment, and the idea of separation of powers, stated in the 10th Amendment. Along with these is, perhaps, the most controversial right in today's world, the right listed by the Second Amendment of the Constitution, or the right to keep and bear arms.

Hotly debated over the decades, the intention of the Second Amendment and, until as recently as 2008, how far the right extended were unclear. The U.S. Supreme Court decision reached during the District of Columbia v. Heller case helped clarify this aspect, but it hasn't stopped many from arguing against the decision, or even against the very existence of the amendment.

But how important is our right to bear arms, really? The Second Amendment of the Constitution 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."

Throughout the history of our country, there have been substantial disagreements about the meaning of this text. Some argue that the amendment was supposed to apply only to specific, organized bodies, such as the police force or the national guard. Others argue that the amendment applies to all citizens. But which interpretation is correct? In order to make this determination, it's important to look at our country's origins.

Before the War of Independence began, the 13 colonies felt, for a variety of reasons, that they were not being granted the rights that should have been granted to them as Englishmen. Due to their lack of representation within the British government, they believed laws, such as the Sugar Act of 1764, were a violation of their rights. This, along with many other grievances and the growing differences in colonial society, led to events such as the Boston Tea Party, which escalated into the Revolutionary War.

> *"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."*
>
> *– Second Amendment*

Despite their desire for independence, though, the colonists were ill-prepared to fight a war with the better-equipped British Army, and the war was long and bloody, lasting nearly eight and a half years. Though independence was won, many today believe that if the trip from England to the colonies were less treacherous, the fight would have been nearly impossible.

But how do these events play into the decision to include the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights?

Having just won a war against the superior British Army, the Founding Fathers understood the dangers of a potentially tyrannical government who wielded significantly more power than the people it served. They understood that if the people did not have the ability to defend themselves from this kind of government, there was a chance that the country could end up in the same position they had found themselves in with the British government. And having witnessed the outcome of a war with a superior force, they did not want this to be a possible outcome.

Thus, the Second Amendment.

Though the Supreme Court has ruled that the Second Amendment applies to personal protection (see the District of Columbia v. Heller), that was not the amendment's original intent. It wasn't to protect against thieves or murderers, but to protect the people against tyranny, or perhaps against foreign invaders, should the need arise.

George Mason, known as the father of the Bill of Rights, spoke during Virginia's Ratifying Convention about advice given to the British Parliament before the war: "To disarm the people ... is the most effectual way to enslave them."

This, above all else, defines my stance on the Second Amendment. The Founding Fathers' experiences gave them unique wisdom regarding the dangers of tyranny, leading to their decision to include the Second Amendment in our Bill of Rights.

In a perfect world, we will never have to use our right to keep and bear arms for their original intention. We will never have to defend against a foreign invader or a tyrannical government. The possibility of the latter seems absurd in today's world, after all. But if the need should arise, the American people are prepared.

ON THE COVER: The annual "Printsgiving" feast. Photo by Sam Weston. Cover designed by Alexis Wagar.

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