

The Second Amendment, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution

The NRA has one thing right: The Second Amendment isn't primarily about allowing gun ownership for hunting purposes. That doesn't mean it's primarily about possessing the means to resist the tyranny of one's own government, as NRA officials claim.

Historically, there have been various arguments for the "right to bear arms," including self-defense, suppressing insurrection, participating in law enforcement, and enabling the organization of militias, as well as resisting tyranny. Read the text. See what you think: "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."

Surely the emphasis is on preserving "the security of a free state." And that phrase about a "well regulated militia" hardly sounds like every citizen possessing an inviolable individual right to be armed to the teeth. Preserving "the security of a free state" is rather different from resisting the tyranny of a state no longer regarded as free.

I'm not saying there's nothing to fear from governing authorities. Certainly some framers of our Constitution worried about granting too great powers to the federal government. Indeed, real danger lurks in current erosions of civil liberties and civil and human rights, from suspension of habeas corpus and due process to unwarranted and unlimited detentions, from unauthorized surveillance and electronic eavesdropping to torture, extraordinary rendition, and drone strikes, from the Patriot Act to CISPA (Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act), from extrajudicial assassinations to militarization of police forces to violations of posse comitatus (use of federal military forces for domestic policing). The incipient tyranny of Big Brother looms large.

If only these were the usurpations of power that agitated the NRA! But no, top NRA officials seem hung up on Obamacare, cap and trade policies, economic stimulus measures, and other domestic programs advanced by the President. In short, they typically point to the administration's legislative agenda when shouting "tyranny" -- like crying "wolf" at an intruding mouse nibbling on crumbs, while ignoring the approaching grizzly bear that is threatening to make mincemeat of our hard-won civil rights and liberties.

Regarding guns, let's ban all military assault weapons from all domestic ownership and use. If the police and National Guard lack access to such weapons for domestic use, then private citizens shouldn't need them to defend themselves from any governmental tyranny, real or imagined. Let private citizens keep appropriate guns for self-defense, if they must. Let police and National Guard forces keep guns for enforcing law and order in criminal and crisis situations. And, of course, let hunters and sportsmen and -women keep guns for recreation and food provisioning.

As for resisting tyranny, let all NRA members re-visit 1984. Then ask them to devote their economic and political resources to full restoration of those individual and political rights and liberties that the rest of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are supposed to guarantee to all citizens and inhabitants of these shores.

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