

Is the NRA the Best Advocate for Black Family Safety?

Last year, the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. put the issue of gun control back at the forefront of public debate in America. Predictably, most celebrities voiced their support of stricter gun control laws as a response to the tragedy. Samuel L. Jackson surprised many when he articulated a different opinion:

“I don’t think it’s about more gun control. I grew up in the South with guns everywhere and we never shot anyone. This [shooting] is about people who aren’t taught the value of life,” the actor told the *Los Angeles Times*. Jackson’s comments recall a time when blacks could not count on the police to show up to protect their lives and property. The right to bear arms was not an issue of hunting or hobby; it was a matter of survival.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice echoed similar sentiments in 2005 when she explained her strong support of the Second Amendment to Larry King. “The way I come out of my own personal experience, in which in Birmingham, Ala., my father and his friends defended our community in 1962 and 1963 against White Knight Riders by going to the head of the community, the head of the cul-de-sac, and sitting there, armed. And so I’m very concerned about any abridgement of the Second Amendment.”

The history of gun control in the United States is steeped in racism. Unsurprisingly, state laws in the antebellum South prohibited slaves from owning or carrying weapons. But some states forbade free blacks from owning firearms as well; Tennessee actually amended their state constitution to clarify that “the free white men of this State have a right to keep and to bear arms for their common defense.”

After the Civil War, many southern states went to extensive measures to try to prevent or restrict black gun ownership. Since they could no longer abridge the Second Amendment rights based on race, as with voting, they sought to institute fees and a permit system that would deny blacks the ability to carry a firearm for all practical purposes. In fact, as late as 1941, a justice in the Florida State Supreme Court noted the history of such a gun control law:

“The original Act of 1893 was passed when there was a great influx of Negro laborers in this State drawn here for the purpose of working in turpentine and lumber camps. The same condition existed when the Act was amended in 1901 and the Act was passed for the purpose of disarming the Negro laborers...The statute was never intended to be applied to the white population and in practice has never been so applied.” (Watson v. Stone)

So for most of the nation's history, abridging the Second Amendment was understood to encroach on the rights of blacks in particular to defend themselves and their property when they could not count on the police to do so. But today, many of the traditional spokesmen for civil rights have sided with those who want to disarm law-abiding blacks. Former congressman and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume recently defended stricter gun laws, saying, “Easily available handguns are being used to turn many of our communities into war zones. The fact that the illegal trafficking of firearms disproportionately affects minority communities in this country is indisputable. Urban communities have sadly become so accustomed to the prevalence of firearms in their neighborhoods that they are no longer shocked at the sound of gunfire.”

Unfortunately, stricter gun laws by definition will not affect the “illegal trafficking of firearms.” Right now, there are between 250 and 300 million privately owned guns in the United States. There is no credible plan to locate and collect these

weapons. (Countries like Japan, with very low rates of gun violence, also have very few firearms within their national borders.) So any further restrictions will only keep guns out of the hands of law-abiding citizens.

Last Sunday, the *Washington Post* had a cover story stating that a huge number of African-Americans have been murdered by other peoples' guns versus a lower, but significant number of whites who took their own lives with guns they owned themselves. It is obvious that America has lost its emotional and spiritual equilibrium with the appropriate use of violence and guns. It is also obvious that if any group needed to consider arming themselves, it would African-Americans because of the disproportionate number of murders in their community. Ironically, many of our clergy are recommending that guns be turned in instead of increased policing or increased mental health evaluations of homeless folk and unstable veterans in our community.

It seems to me that the "emperor" has fooled around and taken off his clothes again and nobody but his children are pointing out that fact. I am anxious to see whether the NRA will come up with recommendations that will help curb the violence that exists in schools within our urban communities. Their proposal is due soon. The question is: will their proposal advocate for black family safety?

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