

What the Founding Fathers Said About the Second Amendment

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The controversy about gun rights in the United States often comes down to several specific areas of dispute. One question often argued about is what the founding fathers meant by the term “militia” in the Second Amendment of the Constitution; does “militia” refer to specific needs of the local citizens of that time period, needs that are no longer relevant today, or does the term seek to protect the individual rights to bear arms of the people as a whole?

No matter your personal views on gun rights, the intent of the founding fathers is not ambiguous. There are numerous documents and records of their discussions about the Amendments to the Constitution, and I will provide a link to some quotes from these records below that should clear up this issue. Many people say that there are “different interpretations of the Second Amendment,” but there should not be, because there is nothing that needs to be interpreted when we have so many documents telling us exactly what the founding fathers meant. I believe our mistake is that the courts, and people debating this issue, tend to only look at the specific statement in the Second Amendment: 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.

However, this is not all the information we have available to “interpret” the Second Amendment. Take a look at the quotes provided below, and see what conclusion you can come to yourself about what the founding fathers intended.

Quotes on the Second Amendment

The Founding Fathers on the Second Amendment

“I ask, Sir, what is the militia? It is the whole people. To disarm the people is the best and most effectual way to enslave them.”

George Mason

Co-author of the Second Amendment

during Virginia’s Convention to Ratify the Constitution, 1788

“A militia, when properly formed, are in fact the people themselves ...”

Richard Henry Lee

writing in *Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republic*, Letter XVIII, May, 1788.

“The people are not to be disarmed of their weapons. They are left in full possession of them.”

Zachariah Johnson

Elliot’s Debates, vol. 3 “The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution.”

“... the people are confirmed by the next article in their right to keep and bear their private arms”

Philadelphia Federal Gazette

June 18, 1789, Pg. 2, Col. 2

Article on the Bill of Rights

"And that the said Constitution be never construed to authorize Congress to infringe the just liberty of the Press, or the rights of Conscience; or to prevent the people of the United States, who are peaceable citizens, from keeping their own arms; ..."

Samuel Adams

quoted in the Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, August 20, 1789, "Propositions submitted to the Convention of this State"

The Founding Fathers on Arms

"The supposed quietude of a good man allures the ruffian; while on the other hand arms, like laws, discourage and keep the invader and plunderer in awe, and preserve order in the world as property. The same balance would be preserved were all the world destitute of arms, for all would be alike; but since some will not, others dare not lay them aside ... Horrid mischief would ensue were the law-abiding deprived of the use of them."

Thomas Paine

"To preserve liberty, it is essential that the whole body of the people always possess arms and be taught alike, especially when young, how to use them."

Richard Henry Lee

American Statesman, 1788

"The great object is that every man be armed." and "Everyone who is able may have a gun."

Patrick Henry

American Patriot

"Are we at last brought to such humiliating and debasing degradation, that we cannot be trusted with arms for our defense? Where is the difference between having our arms in possession and under our direction and having them under the management of Congress? If our defense be the real object of having those arms, in whose hands can they be trusted with more propriety, or equal safety to us, as in our own hands?"

Patrick Henry

American Patriot

"The constitutions of most of our States assert that all power is inherent in the people; that ... it is their right and duty to be at all times armed; ... "

Thomas Jefferson

letter to Justice John Cartwright, June 5, 1824. ME 16:45.

"The best we can help for concerning the people at large is that they be properly armed."

Alexander Hamilton

The Federalist Papers at 184-8

The Founding Fathers on Maintaining Freedom

"The greatest danger to American freedom is a government that ignores the Constitution."

Thomas Jefferson

Third President of the United States

"There are men in all ages who mean to govern well, but they mean to govern. They promise to be good masters, but they mean to be masters. "

Noah Webster

American Lexicographer

"The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion."

Edmund Burke

British Statesman, 1784

"What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance. Let them take arms."

Thomas Jefferson

to James Madison

"They that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Ben Franklin

American Statesman

"Whenever governments mean to invade the rights and liberties of the people, they always attempt to destroy the militia, in order to raise an army upon their ruins."

Rep. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, spoken during floor debate over the Second Amendment, I Annals of Congress at 750, August 17, 1789.

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*The above quotes were provided using the following websites (though not all quotes listed on these websites are correct, and I have filtered out those):

<http://cap-n-ball.com/fathers.htm>

<http://www.constitution.org/cons/quotes01.txt>

*Note: I have checked each quote listed above to make sure it comes up on other reputable websites and sources. However, it is possible that there is something I've missed; if you find a mistake, please let me know in the comments and I will investigate/edit information as needed.

<http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/libertylinks/2013/03/25/what-the-founding-fathers-said-about-the-second-amendment/>