

Guns Aren' t a Bulwark Against Tyranny. The Rule of Law Is.

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Guns on exhibit at the National Rifle Association convention in Kentucky in 2016.

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In the wake of the Las Vegas massacre — the worst in modern American history, with 58 dead and some 500 wounded — the onus falls once again to those against gun control to make their case. The two most common arguments made in defense of broad gun ownership are a) self protection and b) as a bulwark against tyranny. Let' s consider each one.

Stories about the use of guns in self-defense — a good guy with a gun dispensing with a bad guy with a gun — are legion among gun enthusiasts and conservative talk radio hosts. But a 1998 study in *the Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, to take one of many examples, found that “every time a gun in the home was used in a self-defense or legally justifiable shooting, there were four unintentional shootings, seven criminal assaults or homicides and 11 attempted or completed suicides.” That means a gun is 22 times more likely to be used in a criminal assault, an accidental death or injury, a suicide attempt or a homicide than it is for self-defense.

A 2003 study published in the journal *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, which examined gun ownership levels among thousands of murder and suicide victims and

nonvictims, found that gun-owning households were 41 percent more likely to experience a homicide and 244 percent more like to experience a suicide. The Second Amendment protects your right to own a gun, but having one in your home involves a risk-benefit calculation you should seriously consider.

Gun-rights advocates also make the grandiose claim that gun ownership is a deterrent against tyrannical governments. Indeed, the wording of the Second Amendment ^{威慑力量} makes this point explicitly: “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.”

That may have made sense in the 1770s, when breech-loading flintlock muskets were the primary weapons tyrants used to conquer other peoples and subdue their own citizens who could, in turn, equalize the power equation by arming themselves with equivalent firepower. But that is no longer true. ^{后膛} ^{燧发枪}

If you think stock piling firearms from the local Guns and Guitars store, where the Las Vegas shooter purchased some of his many weapons, and dressing up in camouflage and body armor is going to protect you from an American military capable of delivering tanks and armored vehicles full Navy SEALs to your door, you’ re delusional.

The tragic incidents at Ruby Ridge, in Idaho, and Waco, Tex., in the 1990s, in which citizens armed to the teeth collided with government agencies and lost badly, is a case study for what would happen were the citizenry to rise up in violence against the state today.

And in any case, if you’ re having trouble with the government, a lawyer is a much more potent weapon than a gun. Politicians and police fear citizens armed with legal counsel more than they do a public fortified with guns. The latter they can just shoot. The former means they have to appear before a judge.

A civil society based on the rule of law with a professional military to protect its citizens from external threats; a police force to protect civilians from internal dangers; a criminal justice system to peacefully settle disputes between the state and its citizenry; and a civil court system to enable individuals to resolve conflicts nonviolently — these institutions have been the primary drivers in the dramatic decline of violence over the past several centuries, not an increasingly well-armed public.

States reduce violence by asserting a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, thereby replacing what criminologists call “self-help justice,” in which individuals ^{报仇} settle their own scores, often violently, such as drug gangs and the Mafia.

Homicide rates, for example, have plummeted a hundredfold since 14th-century England, in which there were 110 homicides per 100,000 people a year, compared with less than one per 100,000 today. Similar declines in murder rates have been documented in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the Netherlands and Scandinavia (American homicide rates are around five times higher than in Europe, owing primarily to the deadly combination of guns and gangs.)

There's no question that tyrannical states have abused the freedom of their citizens. But it is no longer realistic to think that arming citizens to the teeth is going to stop tyranny should it arise. Far superior are nonviolent democratic checks and balances on power, constitutional guardians of civil rights and legal protections of liberties.