

Supreme Court Backs the Right to Bear Arms

A majority of Justices say individuals have the right to keep guns at home for self-defense.

By Karen Fanning

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down a historic ruling in June. The nation's highest court decided that a ban on handguns in Washington, D.C., violates the Second Amendment. The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives people the right to "bear arms."

The justices declared that residents in the nation's capital are allowed to keep properly registered handguns at home for self-defense. The vote was 5-4. It will still be illegal to carry handguns outside the home. And all pistols will still have to be registered with police.

The ownership of guns was banned in Washington, D.C., in 1976. Most private citizens could not own handguns and have them in their homes. In March 2007, a lower court overturned the ban. On June 26, 2008, the Supreme Court agreed with that decision.

Mixed Reaction

Opponents of the ban rejoiced after the decision. They argued that they needed guns to defend themselves against acts of violent crime. President George W. Bush joined them in applauding the court's ruling.

"As a longstanding advocate of the rights of gun owners in America, I applaud the Supreme Court's historic decision today confirming what has always been clear in the Constitution: the Second Amendment protects an individual right to keep and bear firearms," he said.

Supporters of the ban disagreed. They claimed that the Court's decision would make the job of law enforcement officials tougher. Last year, Washington, D.C., had 143 gun-related murders. Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty said that he had hoped for a different outcome. But he promised that city officials would support the Court's decision.

A Constitutional Matter

The Second Amendment reads: "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."

Justice Antonin Scalia wrote the opinion for the majority of justices. He acknowledged that some people think the Second Amendment is outdated, "given the authority of the military and the police to protect our country and its people."

"That is perhaps debatable," Scalia wrote. "But what is not debatable is that it is not the role of this court to pronounce the Second Amendment extinct."

Joining Scalia in overturning the ban were Chief Justice John G. Roberts and Justices Samuel A. Alito, Clarence Thomas, and Anthony Kennedy.

Those in favor of upholding the ban were Justices John Paul Stevens, Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and David Souter.

The National Rifle Association claimed the Supreme Court ruling would now give it the authority to challenge gun-control laws in other cities.

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