Clarion Review

Political Science

A Right to Bear Arms? What Were the Founders Thinking?
Gerald Petersen
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Five Stars (out of Five)

The year 2012 was one of the worst on record for mass shootings in the United States. Sixteen high-profile shootings occurred in a variety of settings, one an elementary school in Connecticut where 27 people, including 20 children, were killed, making it the second deadliest mass shooting in US history. The current debate over the Second Amendment right to bear arms makes Gerald Petersen's *A Right to Bear Arms? What Were the Founders Thinking?* a timely publication.

Petersen begins his in-depth look at the right to bear arms by taking each word of the Second Amendment and pairing it to its definition in *Webster's Dictionary*. His point is to show that the amendment is poorly worded. He argues that the amendment is mainly about the right of militias to bear arms and that individual ownership of outside the context of a militia is not necessarily implied.

Petersen describes how many of the framers of the US Constitution were afraid that standing armies during peacetime could easily lead to tyranny, so they left the young nation's defense to individual state militias, which led to the strange and careful wording of the Second Amendment. That wording introduced conflicting interpretations by the US Supreme Court over time as state militias eventually disappeared.

Petersen's points are meticulously researched and sourced, and his analysis of the Second Amendment is equally thorough. In addition to his endnotes and list of further readings, Petersen provides the text of the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments of the US Constitution) and other documents of interest.

Petersen's prose is always clear and engaging, and his points are often thoughtful. For instance, when showing how tricky the interpretation of the Second Amendment can be, Petersen writes: "It is most important to consider that the Second Amendment is the only part of

the Constitution in which loose or liberal interpretation or even strict interpretation can cause the loss of people's natural or inalienable rights, such as life, liberty, property, or the pursuit of happiness."

History buffs will enjoy Petersen's deep dive into early American politics, while law junkies and social policymakers may find the book a much-needed analysis beyond the black and white of the modern gun control debate.

Katerie Prior