

Of guns and neighbors

In the Bible, social issues are always framed primarily as questions of obligation, not individual rights.

From the Editors in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue



The "Knotted Gun" sculpture at the U.N. Some rights reserved by [Jim, the Photographer](#).

When the Supreme Court in 2008 declared that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to own a gun, the justices made it clear that this right—like any right—is not unlimited. "The court's opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill . . . or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms."

For the past 20 years, the "conditions and qualifications" attached to gun ownership have been steadily removed, mostly at the behest of the National Rifle Association, which insists on a virtually absolute right to gun possession. But the massacre of 20 children and six teachers at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, has finally led President Obama and other leaders to push for significant gun-control measures, including limits on the number of bullets that gun clips can hold; reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons; and universal background checks for all gun buyers.

The coming weeks will be a crucial period for Americans to support passage of such measures, which would serve the welfare of all (though not the financial welfare of the gun manufacturers who support and profit from the NRA's political influence).

Most Americans are horrified at the easy availability of military-style weapons. They are astonished that 40 percent of all firearms purchased in this country are sold without checking if the buyer has a record of crime, drug addiction or mental illness. That loophole exists because the 1993 Brady bill—the last significant piece of federal legislation on guns—requires background checks only for sales by licensed dealers, not for private sales. Ending the private sales loophole is a crucial step in reducing gun violence.

And such a proposal has widespread support. Though the NRA fought the Brady bill at every step and even challenged its constitutionality, polls show that 74 percent of NRA members and 84 percent of gun owners—and 95 percent of all Americans—think submitting to a background check is a reasonable condition for gun ownership.

In the biblical perspective, social issues are always framed primarily as questions of obligation, not of individual rights: not “What do I get to do?” but “What do we owe to God and neighbor?” The biblical tradition readily accepts the fact that loving one's neighbor will entail “conditions and qualifications” on one's actions.

In that spirit, the book of Deuteronomy includes this very practical directive about everyday life: “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof; otherwise you might have bloodguilt on your house, if anyone should fall from it” (22:8). The point of this rule is clear, and it is as relevant in our time as in ancient Israel, as applicable to guns as to houses: if the things you want to build and possess present a life-threatening hazard to your neighbors, you need to take steps to eliminate the danger.