



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **The Lesson of Virginia Tech** **by Sheldon Richman**

The lesson from the horrors at Virginia Tech is that no one can really, fully delegate to another his right to and responsibility for self-defense. You may feel the municipal or campus police are looking out for you, but no police force can guarantee to be where you need it when you need it. There's only one person sure to be on the scene when you are attacked: you.

The idea that one's security can be ensured by an external authority underlies ridiculous ideas such as gun-free zones, which end up being free-crime zones. When the innocent have access to guns and take responsibility for security, things turn out differently — crime is stopped cold. In 2002 a suspended Appalachian School of Law student with a poor academic record entered the Virginia campus and opened fire, killing the dean, a professor, and a student. The gunman also wounded three others. When the shots rang out, two students, independently of each other, headed to their cars to retrieve their handguns. Those students confronted the killer, at which point he dropped his gun and was restrained by other students. Three deaths — not 32 killed.

That was not the first time that potential mass murder at a school was stopped by an armed law-abiding person. That it is not widely known can be attributed only to the national media's lack of interest in emphasizing the positive side of gun ownership. No wonder, then, that when a shooting occurs people ask how stricter gun control might have prevented it. In fact, it's gun control that makes crime on that scale possible. Private guns save many lives every year by thwarting crime. That is the great unreported story of our time.

We still have not learned that when government outlaws objects, such as guns or drugs, they don't vanish from society but move into the black market, readily available to those who want them. But let's assume for the sake of argument that handguns could be eliminated. What would happen? According to firearms authority Clayton Cramer, something worse would take their place: sawed-off shotguns. "[A] sawed-off shotgun is substantially more deadly than a handgun," Cramer writes. He quotes criminologists James Wright, Peter Rossi, and Kathleen Daly, who said, "The possibility that even a fraction of the predators who now walk the streets armed

with handguns would, in the face of a handgun ban, prowl with sawed-off shotguns instead, causes one to tremble.”

If a determined Cho Seung-Hui couldn't have gotten a handgun legally, he would have gotten one through illegal channels — or he would have bought a hacksaw and sawed the barrel off a shotgun. Gun laws would not have averted the massacre. But the tools of self-defense in law-abiding hands probably would have.

People also wonder whether better mental-health monitoring can prevent mass shootings. We ought to be careful what we ask for. Mental health and mental illness are nonobjective, elastic labels that are dangerous in the hands of authorities with the power to incarcerate people who have committed no crimes. Do we really want every person considered an oddball monitored by the government? So-called mental-health experts are notoriously unable to predict who will be violent.

America is a big, wide-open society with considerable personal freedom. There is no way to prevent all evil people from doing bad things, although acts such as Cho Seung-Hui's are exceedingly rare. But we can increase the odds in our favor. First, the government should stop interfering with the individual's right to prepare for his self-defense. Second, we should privatize government-owned schools so that private owners have the decentralized authority not only to find the best way to create security, but also to exclude potential troublemakers without risk of lawsuit under civil-rights laws or the Americans with Disabilities Act.

There are no guarantees in life. As long as there are people, there will be occasional atrocities. Freedom, private property, and self-responsibility are the best safeguards.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine.*

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