

Federal Gun Control in America: A Historic Guide to Major Federal Gun Control Laws and Acts

For Americans, the crux of gun control laws has been how to disarm dangerous individuals without disarming the public at large. Ever-present in this quest is the question of how the perception of danger should impact guaranteed freedoms protected within the Bill of Rights.

Not only is such a balancing act difficult as-is, but there are also two additional factors that make it even more challenging: America's federal government is constitutionally bound by the Second Amendment, and politicians notoriously take advantage of tragedies to pass irrational laws when emotions are at their highest. As President Obama's former Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, once famously remarked:

You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.

This line of thought is not new to American politics. From the emancipation of enslaved Americans and the organized crime wave of the 1930s to the assassinations of prominent leaders in the 1960s and the attempted assassination of President Reagan in the 1980s, fear has proved a powerful catalyst for appeals about gun control.

Below is an overview of the history behind major gun control laws in the federal government, capturing how we've gone from the Founding Fathers' America of the New World to the United States of the 21st century.

Second Amendment in America's Bill of Rights: Ratified December 15, 1791

Congress added the Bill of Rights to the Constitution of the United States specifically "to prevent misconstruction or abuse of its powers." The Second Amendment is the foundational cornerstone of every American's right to bear arms, stating:

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.

The right to bear arms was second only to the first – the most vital freedoms of religion,

speech, the press, the right to assemble and the right to petition government for redress of grievances. Meanwhile, conflicting views have left government and personal interest groups struggling to reconcile technological advances, isolated but significant violent anomalies and the constitutional mandate protecting the natural right to self defense and this most basic aspect of the Bill of Rights.

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