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Reactions mixed to Supreme Court decision on handguns

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Yesterday, in a landmark decision, the United States Supreme Court struck down a 32-year-old ban on handguns in the District of Columbia.

In its first interpretation of the Second Amendment since it was ratified in 1791, the courts 5-4 decision identified the ban on handguns as unlawful under gun rights set forth in the amendment, effectively ruling that Americans have a right to own guns for self-defense.

The 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."

According to the Associated Press, the basic issue facing the justices was whether the amendment protects an individual's right to own guns in any case, or whether that right is tied to service in a state militia.

In an area where the debate over gun ownership is somewhat quiet, the decision seems to have little effect on an already strong region of firearm supporters, however still garnered reactions from those directly involved with firearms.

"I wouldn't think it would really affect us in North Carolina," Surry County Sheriff Graham Atkinson said Thursday. "We are pretty liberal in terms of gun ownership and gun laws with very few restrictions on it, I don't see it having any bearing."

Atkinson, whose office is responsible for issuing permits necessary to purchase a handgun, said he thinks the focus of reducing firearm-related injuries should be placed on the individual and not the firearm itself.

"I have always been pretty much of the opinion that instead of laws restricting fire arms we should have laws which punish those who use them in the wrong way and try to enforce the law keeping convicted felons from owning guns," Atkinson said.

Mark Stanley, owner and operator of Mark's Guns and Ammo in Dobson, has been in business specializing in conceal carry weapons for 24 years. He said being in the business he encounters a lot of talk surrounding gun control and gun laws.

"When you've got a situation where you have no handguns, you've got an open area for crime," Stanley said. "If a person knows there is an armed and responsible person in the realm of a particular area where concealed weapons are legal, there will be less crime. It's because they know they may be dealing with the wrong person."

Roxane Colar with North Carolinians Against Gun Violence (NCGV) said her organization anticipated the decision, but hopes the ruling will allow the conversation on gun safety to move from a personal rights issue to a safety issue.

"We are quite happy that it is a personal right, it is not an unlimited right," Colar said Thursday. "Justice

Scalia himself said the right is not a right to keep and carry any weapon. So while the case says you cannot prohibit all handguns, you still have the restrictions in place on sale to convicted felons, the dangerous mentally ill, and prohibiting carrying firearms on school grounds and public buildings. We view that as a good sign.

"Now that this has been established, groups who often fear that they may lose their right to own firearms may stop preventing sensible gun safety legislation and worry about safety and not about personal rights."

Reaction across Washington was more divided, as both sides of the argument laid their case.

Justice Antonin Scalia said that an individual right to bear arms is supported by "the historical narrative" both before and after the Second Amendment was adopted.

Dissenting Justice John Paul Stevens wrote that the majority "would have us believe that over 200 years ago, the Framers made a choice to limit the tools available to elected officials wishing to regulate civilian uses of weapons."

He said such evidence "is nowhere to be found."

Justice Stephen Breyer wrote a separate dissent in which he said, "In my view, there simply is no untouchable constitutional right guaranteed by the Second Amendment to keep loaded handguns in the house in crime-ridden urban areas."

Joining Scalia were Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Samuel Alito, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas. Other dissenters were Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and David Souter.

Some in Washington expressed fears the decision could lead to the undoing of other gun regulations, including restrictions on the sale of machine guns and laws preventing felons from buying guns and requiring instant background checks.

According to the Associated Press, White House reaction was restrained.

"We're pleased that the Supreme Court affirmed that the Second Amendment protects the right of Americans to keep and bear arms," White House spokesman Tony Fratto said.

Scalia said nothing in Thursday's ruling should "cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons or the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings."

Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association hailed the decision.

"I consider this the opening salvo in a step-by-step process of providing relief for law-abiding Americans everywhere that have been deprived of this freedom," LaPierre said.

According to the Associated Press, the NRA will file lawsuits in San Francisco, Chicago and several of its suburbs challenging handgun restrictions there based on Thursday's outcome.

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