

Patriotic self-defense

Arming youngsters isn't really revolutionary

By John R. Lott

It takes a lot to shock today's jaded movie audiences, especially those attending a Hollywood preview. Yet, Mel Gibson's new movie about America's Revolutionary War, "The Patriot," drew loud gasps at a recent screening. The outrageous scene? Mr. Gibson's character handing over guns to his 10- and 13-year-old sons to help fight off British soldiers. Few critics were soothed by the screenwriter replying that the scenes accurately portrayed the complexities of war — or Mr. Gibson's assurance that he would let his own children use guns in self-defense.

With the Clinton administration blaming recent school violence on the greater accessibility of guns, it is hardly surprising that some are shocked by children using guns. Many people, including George W. Bush and Al Gore, think it should be a crime for anyone under age 21 to possess a handgun.

Despite the political rhetoric, gun availability in the United States has never been as restricted as it is now. As late as 1968, it was possible for children like those in the movie to walk into a hardware store, virtually anywhere in the United States, and buy a rifle. Few states even had age restrictions for buying handguns. Buying a rifle through the mail was easy. Private transfers of guns to juveniles were unrestricted.

But nowhere were guns more common than at school. Until 1969, virtually every public high school in New York City had a shooting club. High school students carried their guns to school on the subways in the morning, turned them over to their homeroom teacher or the gym coach and retrieved

them after school for target practice. Club members were given their rifles and ammunition by the federal government. Students regularly competed in citywide shooting contests for university scholarships.

Contrast that with what is happening today across the country: college and elementary students expelled from school for even accidentally bringing a water pistol; elementary school students suspended for carrying a picture of a gun; kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers and using their hands as guns — and a school superintendent losing his job for even asking whether someone at a school should have a gun to protect the students.

Since the 1960s, the growth of federal gun control has been dramatic. Laws which contained 19,907 words in 1960 quadrupled to 88,413 words by last year. But, it was not a federal crime for those under 18 to possess a handgun until 1994.

State laws have grown similarly. Even a "gun-friendly" state government such as Texas has gun-control provisions containing more than 41,000 words. None of this even begins to include the burgeoning local regulations.

But whose access has really been restricted by these laws? There is no academic study showing that waiting periods and background checks have reduced criminal access, or resulted in less crime or youth violence, though plenty of research indicates the reverse is true. For the Brady law, delays in the accessibility of guns when women are being stalked or threatened have increased rape rates. While the object is obviously to disarm criminals, the laws are primarily obeyed by good people.

To promote "safe zones" for our children, a 1995 federal law now bans guns within 1,000 feet of a school.

Unfortunately, again, it is the law-abiding citizens who disarm — not the criminals intent on harming our children. With the recent school attacks, even the most diehard proponents of this law will be hard-pressed to claim that this law has worked out the way that it was intended.

In Virginia, where rural areas have a long tradition of high school students going hunting in the morning before school, the governor tried in vain to get the state legislature in 1999 to enact an exemption to the federal law allowing high school students to store their guns in their cars on the school parking lot. Interestingly, one reason why few students have been prosecuted for possessing a gun on school grounds is that so many offenses involve these very types of cases. Prosecutors find it unreasonable to send good kids to jail simply because they had a rifle locked in the trunk of their car and didn't park sufficiently far enough off of school property. Recent attempts in Congress to mandate prosecutions will take away this prosecutorial discretion and produce unintended results.

Mr. Gibson's movie illustrates some benefits of letting people defend themselves with guns. It is something that has been sorely missing in the current debate. People use guns to stop school shootings or other violent crimes — 2 million defensive uses a year. Yet, when was the last time the national evening news carried a story about someone using his gun to save lives?

The horror with which people react to guns is inversely related to how accessible guns are. Whether it was colonial times or 30 years ago, people had more association with guns but less fear. Gun-control advocates face something of a dilemma: If guns are the problem, why was it that when guns were really accessible, even inside schools by students, we didn't have the problems that plague us now — including the phenomenon of mass school shootings?

John R. Lott is a senior research scholar at the Yale University Law School. The second edition of his book, "More Guns, Less Crime" (University of Chicago Press) was released this week.