

## **STS President Shares His Personal Reflection on Gun Violence** **by John Calhoun, MD**

On May 24, 2022, an 18-year-old man fatally shot 19 students and two teachers and wounded 17 others at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Three of the students and a teacher were brought to my hospital in San Antonio. As chief of cardiac surgery, I was part of the emergency response team, and it was quite a scene in the ER. Thankfully, all survived their injuries, but each will carry the mental scars for the rest of their lives.

Flash back to 1966 when I was a 9-year-old kid living in Austin. One August day, a man climbed up on the iconic University of Texas tower and started shooting people. My dad, also a heart surgeon, thought he heard fireworks as he walked to the hospital to start his shift. He ended up operating on victims of that shooting all night long.

I learned that night how crazy and unpredictable life can be, and the important role of surgeons in leading and managing through crises. Fifty-five years later, Uvalde reminded me of that experience and the devastation that a disturbed individual with an automatic weapon can cause individuals, families, and communities.

My father gave me a single-action shotgun when I was 10 years old, and he taught me how to use it safely. For my father, the main purpose of the gun was to hunt for food that we would eat. I never was allowed to hunt for sport. The secondary purpose of the gun was self-defense. I have always valued that Second Amendment right in the context of my experiences growing up around guns.

But the experience our nation is having today with guns and violence is different. I have come to believe that weapons used for mass assault should not be protected by the Second Amendment. Too many assault rifles are on the streets and in people's hands, and they are too easy to get. These weapons are not needed to defend our homes and families, or to hunt.

When the Second Amendment was adopted in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights, citizens could have a musket, a single-shot pistol, a bow and arrow, and the like. The purpose was to be able to defend yourself and your family from an intruder, most likely a bear or moose at your door. Weapons that would produce high-volume casualties had not yet been invented.

The Second Amendment does not allow citizens to purchase military equipment such as a warship, fighter jet, or tank. I believe the same logic should apply to assault-style weapons designed to kill many people as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Congress last week passed a bipartisan gun safety bill, the most significant federal gun reform in almost 30 years. The package includes expanded federal background checks for buyers under age 21. It also closes loopholes and offers financial incentives for states to adopt "red flag" laws and intervention programs.

The Society of Thoracic Surgeons [has a history of supporting efforts to improve gun safety](#), including public health research. And while I support common sense measures taken by Congress, legislation alone will not solve the problem. There are many factors contributing to the epidemic of gun violence in this country. One prominent cause is mental illness. Sadly, those suffering from mental health issues will still find weapons of mass effect to do harm.

For me, the real problem is the disintegration of society. Too many people lack purpose and meaning in their lives. A growing lack of respect for others, celebrated by social media and violent video games, promotes anti-social behavior that takes root at an early age. We need to address these root causes.

I love our country, and I am optimistic we will get through this challenging time in our history. I believe a big part of the solution is stronger families and a shared sense of spirituality and connectedness.

Another part of the solution is you and me. As surgeons, we are leaders in our institutions and communities. We need to make sure that our voices are heard by policy makers and other influencers. Our families, neighbors, and colleagues are watching. Our opinions and actions matter. Please rededicate yourself as a force for good in our communities.

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