

Extrava-gun-za: The silence on guns is killing us

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For the second year in a row the state of South Carolina has sponsored a Second Amendment Weekend—popularly called “the extravaganza.” For two days over the Thanksgiving weekend shoppers can buy handguns, rifles and shotguns—but not ammunition and accessories—without paying the state’s 9 percent sales tax. If the sponsors of this gun-tax break have their way, the annual tax-free weekend for gun purchases will become permanent.

It could be argued that this is just the quirky practice of a small, conservative, gun-loving state. But gun sales have consequences: South Carolina is among the five states that are the source of 85 percent of the illegal handguns recovered in New York City.

Obama’s election has led to an upsurge in gun and ammunitions sales—many people fear Obama will impose stricter gun laws. One gun shop in South Carolina displays a t-shirt with a likeness of the president, tagging him as “Gun Salesman of the Decade.” A sponsor of the South Carolina bill made it clear that the tax-break weekend was intended not as an economic stimulus but as a defense of the Second Amendment.

That amendment is filled with ambiguity. Is the focus on the first clause—“a well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State”—or the second—“the right of the people to keep and bear arms”? Usually liberals argue for the broadest interpretation of individual rights, but on the Second Amendment it is conservatives who do so.

Lately the Supreme Court has sided with the conservatives. In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the court ruled 5–4 in favor of a retired security guard who had been denied a permit to maintain a handgun in his home. Gun rights advocates happily view this ruling as a major blow to efforts to regulate the sale of handguns. That’s bad news for cities like Chicago, where gun violence is epidemic. In 2008 more people were

murdered in Chicago (509)—mostly with guns—than U.S. soldiers were killed in Iraq (314).

Sadly, gun regulation, like Social Security, has become virtually untouchable in American politics. Democrats are afraid to raise the issue lest they alienate moderates and independents and therefore lose majority control of Congress.

President Obama has demonstrated an ability to address a controversial issue and encourage a rational and civil debate, whether on race, Islam or the war in Afghanistan. Let's hope that sometime during his administration he takes on the issue of guns and encourages a national conversation. The silence on guns is killing us.