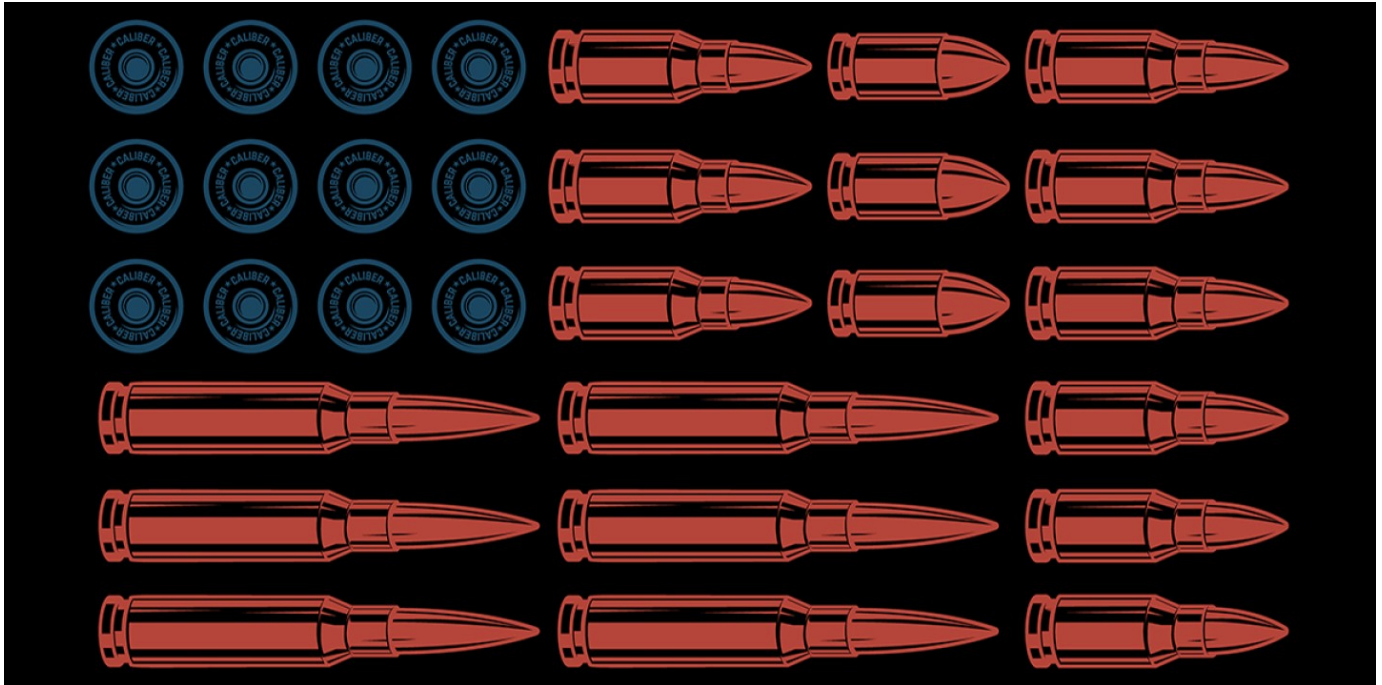


The Second Amendment has been shaped into an altar

## Cowardly politicians sacrifice the helpless upon it.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration © ioanmasay / iStock / Getty)

The cowardice of politicians who refuse to consider serious gun safety legislation is striking. Every fresh bloodbath of innocents, they tell us, is the price that must be paid for the freedom to own firearms. Putting military-grade weapons in the hands of adolescent boys who dream of killing sprees only underscores how costly this right has become.

Marilynne Robinson recently noted that the Second Amendment “has been made the bedrock of our helplessness.” Absolutists for gun rights have forced this sense of helplessness upon us by turning the wording of the Second Amendment into an idolatrous altar, one prepared for the sacrifice of innocent victims at any time. Uvalde fourth graders, Buffalo grocery shoppers, and Pittsburgh Jews celebrating Shabbat never deserved to die. But up against assault-style weapons that gun-rights fundamentalists refuse to regulate, they died helplessly upon this altar.

The Second Amendment altar is reminiscent of those built to Baal and Molech by people in antiquity. The prophet Jeremiah fiercely denounces these gods to whom people sacrificed their children: “[Never] did it enter my mind that they would practice such abominations” (Jer. 32:35). Do-nothing political leaders in our day are practicing abomination every time they bow at the altar of Second Amendment idolatry and wash their hands of responsibility for innocent victims.

Whatever right the Second Amendment confers for legitimately owning a firearm, it is the “illusion of absoluteness,” to borrow Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon’s phrase, that has bent the amendment into the shape of an altar. In her book *Rights Talk* (1991), Glendon warns of the rhetorical tendency of Americans to conceptualize rights as unlimited. Absolutizing individual rights can obscure the extent of communal harm they create—“my owning a gun to defend myself is nobody else’s business”—which only leads to the absurdity of all-or-nothing solutions. Instead of regulating anyone, priests of the Second Amendment propose arming everyone from kindergarten teachers and soccer coaches to store clerks and restaurant servers. I call this the consecration of sheer madness and the death of civil society.

To desacralize the altar of the Second Amendment, or at least slow the blood ritual associated with it, it’s time we look at amending the Constitution. The very name of the altar reminds us that this is possible. Instead of understanding rights as autonomous claims that belong solely to individuals, rights that pose an acute threat to the common good ought to be adjusted, subject to the rule of law. Even if one believes that the framers of the Constitution were determined to ensure that citizens would have the right to bear arms capable of mowing down dozens of people in a matter of seconds, one has to acknowledge the right of other Americans to not bear arms and still be safe. Because US courts have largely declined to recognize positive rights (e.g., the right to safety, health care, food, and shelter), establishing a right to not bear arms and still be safe would be a hope-filled change. It’s also time we get honest about one of the explicit purposes of a “well-regulated militia”—to put down rebellions of enslaved people.

The possibilities for refining the relationship between public safety and private rights are many. It’s the sickness of bowing at one particular altar that’s much tougher to end.

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