

Honest citizens don't need guns

An English court would never interpret the right to bear arms in the US Constitution to justify gun ownership, says **Richard Barr**



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It was Piers Morgan at 35,000 feet who finally put an end to my love affair with the USA. In the past I have on this page expressed fondness for the country – especially as half of me is American. Like a fickle lover, I have now transferred affections down under, to Australia.

I have always found the UK (which despite everything remains my first love) frustrating in our negative attitude towards innovation – there always seem to be a hundred good reasons for not doing something, yet in Australia it damn well gets done. That used to be the case too with the USA.

But what the UK and Australia do not have is gun craziness. And here enter Piers Morgan who has written a new book *Shooting Straight* – an autobiographical account of how he took over a long standing chat show in the USA and then started campaigning for effective gun control over there. I read the whole book on the flight to Australia.

In diary format Morgan records his increasing determination to bring some sense into the gun laws of a country where the ownership of semi-automatic or automatic weapons is not prohibited despite the fact that these are weapons of choice for every deranged man who guns down innocent children and adults in schools and other public places. In the USA there is one gun for every man woman and child, and every year the country has 40 times more gun deaths per 100,000 people than the UK.

More guns

Yet every time there is another senseless massacre, Americans buy more guns (For an excellent overview of the problem, see Jill Lepore's article in *The New Yorker*, 'Battleground America', 23 April 2012). After the Sandy Hook massacre, where 20 pupils and six teachers were murdered, the National Rifle Association (NRA) – which campaigns against gun control under the guise of being "America's longest-standing civil



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rights organization" – attracted 100,000 new members. Sales of guns shot up at the same time. What these gung-ho people will not understand is that the more guns you have, the more they will be used. After the Dunblane and Hungerford massacres in the UK, gun laws were extensively tightened. That does not guarantee that there will be no gun murders, but the statistics show that the horrors wrought by America's gun laws are significantly less likely in countries where the ownership of guns is strictly controlled.

The NRA claims to derive justification for its view from the Second Amendment to the American Constitution which, ironically, was clearly never intended to have the interpretation now given to it. It 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."

For two centuries it attracted little attention, until it came within the sights of the political wing of the NRA – the Institute for Legislative Action.

According to its website it is "committed to preserving the right of all law-abiding individuals to purchase, possess and use firearms for legitimate purposes as guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution."

If interpretation of that amendment came before English courts the judiciary would resort to a bit of latin – *ejusdem generem* – and say that

these so called rights relate to the government, not private individuals, being able to have weapons. In the US "the people" is often used in place of "the state" in court documents.

If you want to scare yourself, go to the website of the NRA to get a taste of what they get up to when they aim to have their way. Their efforts include "enacting laws that recognize the right of honest citizens to carry firearms for self-protection; preemption bills to prevent attacks on gun owner rights by local anti-gun politicians, and fighting for legislation to prevent the bankrupting of America's firearms industry through reckless lawsuits."

Deport Piers Morgan

Not everyone is a fan of Piers Morgan. Opponents of gun control organised a petition to the White House to have him deported. It has attracted more than 100,000 signatures. Almost immediately another petition was started by a British man who wanted to keep Morgan in the USA. In the words of Jeremy Clarkson (quoted in the book): "it took us 40 years to get rid of Piers Morgan. Please don't send him back."

It is a further irony that it takes an Englishman to galvanise opposition to the pro-gun lobby. Like him or hate him, you cannot but help admiring his determination to bring some common sense to my former love. Come on right thinking Americans, I am fickle and can be persuaded to love you again if you change your ways. **SJ**