

Tocqueville's Fears of Radical Individualism Proven Valid by Proponents of Arming Teachers

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Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat on his visit to nineteenth-century America, wrote his famous book *Democracy in America*, detailing and reflecting on what he observed during his visit. Writing in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville reflects on the individualism exhibited in the Americans he encountered, and he posits the potentially negative effects such individualism could have on America if taken too far. Nearly two centuries later, in response to America's unparalleled rate of school shootings, many conservatives have come up with a simple solution to the issue: put more guns in schools by arming teachers. The idea that the best response to gun violence in our schools is more guns, specifically the policy of arming teachers, is a perfect manifestation of the radical individualism Tocqueville was concerned about, as it moves to advance individualistic goals at the possible expense of our children's safety and the greater public interest.

Alexis de Tocqueville recognized and reflected on the prevalence of individualism in America. Writing in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville noted, "[Americans] owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man" (Tocqueville 690). William E. Hudson, a professor of political science at Providence College, titles the third chapter of his book, *American Democracy in Peril: Eight Challenges to America's Future*, "The Third Challenge: Radical Individualism." In his book, Hudson chronicles what he sees as the main threats to modern

American democracy. One of his concerns, radical individualism, was shared by Tocqueville some two centuries ago. Tocqueville “was concerned that when taken too far, individualism could undermine democracy” (Hudson 107). According to Hudson, when taken to the extreme, Tocqueville believed individualism could easily develop into egoism, defined as “an ethical theory that treats self-interest as the foundation of morality” (“Egoism”). People who exhibit individualism in excess are labeled by Tocqueville as “egoists.” However, Hudson prefers to call them by a different name: “radical individualists.” Hudson writes, “A society of egoists [(or radical individualists)], Tocqueville feared, would be vulnerable to despotism” (107-108). Rather than acquiring the habits of heart necessary for a prosperous democratic society, Tocqueville said of individualistic Americans that “they acquire the habit[s] of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands” (609). Tocqueville, as he reflected in *Democracy in America*, believed that egoism (or radical individualism) presented a danger to American democracy. However, in our modern-day world, radical individualism presents a danger to American lives as well.

Selfish and radical acts, such as school shootings carried out by unreasonably and heavily armed individuals, are the type of development that Tocqueville was concerned about when he wrote about radical individualism in *Democracy in America*. A CNN article by Chip Grabow and Lisa Rose analyzes the number of school shootings in the United States compared to the other G7 Nations such as France and Germany. America’s two-hundred and eighty-eight school shootings versus five for the rest of the G7, a ratio of 57:1, is shocking (Grabow

and Rose). It is, however, unsurprising, given the prevalence of radical individualism present in today's America and specifically its gun culture.

The Second Amendment more than ever before is seen as an individualistic doctrine on gun rights in our country. Chad Kautzer, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Lehigh University, writes about this interpretation in a 2015 article published in *Law and Critique*. As Kautzer describes, the Supreme Court, in a landmark 2008 decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, ruled that the Second Amendment specifically included the individual right to bear arms for the purpose of self-defense (178). This decision in regard to the Second Amendment, Kautzer laments, is “a radically individualist interpretation” (178). This “radically individualist interpretation” of the Second Amendment in recent years is less directly responsible for America's disproportionate number of school shootings than it is for the ways in which we seek to deal with such school shootings, which are arguably even more radically individualistic in nature.

As Kautzer notes, the ruling in *DC v. Heller* launched a flurry of new legislation seeking to expand the public places in which guns could be carried, including in schools (179). Following high-profile school shootings such as Sandy Hook and Parkland, many conservatives, especially those in the gun lobby, have suggested arming teachers with firearms as a potential solution to protect students against the increasing rate of school shootings in America. In a post-Sandy Hook press conference, NRA Executive Vice-President Wayne LaPierre made the following statement: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (Kautzer 176). As Kautzer notes, in the press

conference, LaPierre called for the arming of teachers, principals, and parents, and for hiring armed guards in schools (176). Wayne LaPierre and the gun lobby have not been alone in their support of arming teachers as a solution to school shootings, however. President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos have also expressed support for the policy following the Parkland shooting in 2018 (Blad, et al.).

Regardless of its support, arming teachers is simply unproven as a concept. Douglas Yacek, a postdoctoral research fellow and lecturer at the Leibniz University in Hanover, Germany, authored an article on the subject of arming teachers in 2018. In his article, Yacek argues that data that shows that schools who arm teachers exhibit demonstrable changes in school safety would be useful in assessing the efficacy of arming teachers (9). However, as Yacek goes on to state, “the problem here is that this data is lacking and there is important ethical constraints on collecting such data” (9). Even if such supporting data did exist, Yacek argues it would be difficult to discern if such changes to school safety were as a result of arming teachers or if they were as a result of additional safety measures that were implemented (9).

Interestingly, many scholars argue the limited data that does exist suggests arming teachers may actually make schools less safe. Todd DeMitchell and Christine Rath, professors at UNH and Plymouth State, respectively, discuss such data in their article in the *BYU Education and Law Journal*. In their article, DeMitchell and Rath discuss a *Politifact* study, which found that in 2016, NYPD officers had a hit rate of only 35% when firing at suspects (88). DeMitchell and Rath argue therefore, that if law enforcement officers cannot achieve a shooting accuracy of greater than 50%, untrained or undertrained teachers

would be even less likely to be able to do so, and ricocheting bullets could harm students or other innocent bystanders (88). Generally speaking, scholars like DeMitchell and Rath are of the opinion that “More guns may lead to more mistakes, and these mistakes can be deadly” (91).

Further providing evidence of the potential dangers of arming teachers, Everytown for Gun Safety, a gun-control advocacy group, found that “Access to a firearm, irrespective of age [...] doubles the risk of death by homicide” (“Arming Teachers”). In support of this claim, there have been many documented firearm mishaps and misfortunes resulting from arming teachers and school staff; they range from accidental gun discharges by armed teachers, to suicides and homicides committed by armed school staff members (“Arming Teachers”). Gun-control advocacy groups, alongside scholars, provide evidence that arming teachers actually increases the potential for violence and harm to students in schools, the opposite of what proponents of the policy intend.

Simply put, arming teachers isn’t proven to protect kids in our schools, and it potentially puts them in even more danger. Even in light of these facts, according to Everytown For Gun Safety, fifteen states in 2018 allowed for various levels of concealed carrying of firearms within schools, with over two dozen states considering similar policies the same year (Blad, et al.). It begs the question: if arming teachers is a potentially dangerous and unproven policy, why do so many people support the policy in response to school shootings?

Many Americans view their individual liberties as second to none, and routinely put self-interest above the public interest. This

sentiment is expressed best by a Texan's Facebook comment discussing arming teachers after Sandy Hook: "We need to arm our teachers and let them defend our kids, there should be no gun ban or legislation, we have our rights from our founding fathers for a reason" (Pérez 141). Many Americans would tend to agree with this sentiment, including members of the gun lobby like Wayne LaPierre. On the heels of Sandy Hook, LaPierre said in support of arming teachers that "politicians have no business—and no authority—denying us the right, the ability, or the moral imperative to protect ourselves and our loved ones from harm" (Kautzer 176). It is self-interest, or as LaPierre says, a "moral imperative to protect ourselves and our loved ones," that has driven many conservatives to support the policy of arming teachers. Individuals such as LaPierre connected to the NRA and other gun lobbying organizations also have a vested self-interest in the sale of guns. According to the Violence Policy Center, the gun industry donated between nineteen and sixty million dollars to the NRA between 2005 and 2013 ("Manufacturer of Assault Rifle"). Firearms sales among teachers would likely increase if they were to be armed, which would be a positive outcome for gun lobbyists and the gun industry they receive funding from. Regardless of their ulterior motives or reasoning, proponents of arming teachers claim that it is a sound public policy that would protect students in schools and ultimately save lives. Protecting students and saving lives is a goal that is undeniably in the public interest to achieve.

Arming teachers, as aforementioned, is unproven in its efficacy and may actually increase the likelihood of children being harmed in schools. Even when all the facts are considered, conservatives and

members of the gun lobby continue to support arming teachers in pursuit of their own individual self-interests, rather than for the reasons of public interest they may claim. While Hudson used the words “radical individualism,” Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* used the word “egoism” when describing his concerns about unchecked individualism in America. Egoism, again defended as an ethical theory that treats self-interest as the foundation of morality, is exemplified in statements made by proponents of arming teachers. By claiming a “moral imperative” to arm teachers, a dangerous and unproven public policy in which Wayne LaPierre has vested self-interest, he concedes to the egoism, or linkage of morality and self-interest, that is present in many of the arguments proponents of arming teachers present.

Writing in *American Democracy in Peril*, William E. Hudson says the following: “The American radical-individualist culture encourages most Americans to think primarily in terms of their individual-self interest rather than the public interest when thinking about public policy” (127). Arming teachers might as well be the poster-child policy for Hudson’s statement: an unproven and potentially dangerous policy that puts individual self-interests above the public interest at large. Proponents of arming teachers regularly have legitimate and pronounced self-interests in promoting the policy, a policy that is simply at odds with the safety of students and thus the general public interest. As such, proponents of arming teachers nearly two centuries later have proven valid the concerns about egoism (or radical individualism) that Alexis De Tocqueville expressed in *Democracy in America*.

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