



27 words: Deconstructing the Second Amendment

By AJ Willingham, CNN

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(CNN) It's only a sentence long; 27 words that barely take up a full line on the Bill of Rights.

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.

And yet, for years, those 27 brief words have been the source of contentious debate -- seen by some as an inalienable protection against tyranny; by others as a dangerous anachronism.

Here's a look at the Second Amendment, its phrases parsed and placed in legal and historical context.

Our guides will be Constitutional experts Jeffrey Rosen and Jack Rakove.



Jeffrey Rosen

President and CEO
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Jack Rakove

Pulitzer Prize-winning author and
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A well regulated Militia,

What is a militia?

At the time of the American Revolutionary War, militias were groups of able-bodied men who protected their towns, colonies, and eventually states. "[When the Constitution was drafted], the militia was a state-based institution," says Rakove. "States were responsible for organizing this."

What did it mean to be well regulated?

One of the biggest challenges in interpreting a centuries-old document is that the meanings of words change or diverge.

"Well-regulated in the 18th century tended to be something like well-organized, well-armed, well-disciplined," says Rakove. "It didn't mean 'regulation' in the sense that we use it now, in that it's not about the regulatory state. There's been nuance there. It means the militia was in an effective shape to fight."

In other words, it didn't mean the state was controlling the militia in a certain way, but rather that the militia was prepared to do its duty.