

# Advocates sweat gun decision

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To U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, the Second Amendment to the Constitution is as simple to understand as it was to write: "One sentence with some commas."

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.

To Alexander, R-Quitman, and other lawmakers representing northeastern Louisiana, this means citizens have the right to own and carry guns, unimpeded.

Louisiana is one of 42 states with constitutional provisions acknowledging individual rights to carry guns for non-military purposes. But a Supreme Court ruling due by July could become the most important interpretation of the Second Amendment in history.

And no one believes the court ruling will be as simple as Alexander's conclusion.

The controversy started when a guard at the Federal Judicial Center in Washington applied for a permit to keep a handgun in his home and was denied by the D.C. government, which has banned handguns within the city limits since 1975.

The guard filed a lawsuit, which was dismissed by a U.S. District Court on grounds that the city had a right to enact the legislation, and there was no right to bear arms. An appellate court reversed that ruling, stating the D.C. gun ban is unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court must now expound upon the simple sentence written by our forefathers, who did not delineate whether they meant to preserve an individual's right to own guns for non-military purposes and — in an era when automatic weapons were unheard of

and handguns could not be concealed in a trouser pocket — probably never considered the ramifications.

"If the Supreme Court overrules the lower court decision, it would have a devastating effect," Alexander said. "Some of the larger cities could say, 'OK, we're going to ban handguns.' Or they could say, 'You can have a shot gun, but it has to be locked up, or all of its parts can't be housed in the same location.'"

Those hoping the city's right to ban handguns is upheld cite D.C.'s falling crime rates, but the city still ranks among the nation's worst for violent crime and murders.

D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty said gun crimes have decreased steadily since the handgun law was passed.

The U.S. Justice Department reports America has more privately owned guns than any other country — an estimated 250 million. It said 477,040 violent crimes in 2005 involved an offender with a firearm. FBI records state 72.6 percent of all murders in 2005 were committed with a firearm, and the number grew to 73.4 percent in 2006.

Louisiana's record of protecting the rights of gun users is long documented. And Gov. Bobby Jindal was elected in a landslide last October on a platform that featured protection of gun-owner rights. As a congressman, he wrote legislation preventing government from confiscating weapons in an emergency in response to some New Orleans police rounding up guns after Hurricane Katrina.

The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence rates Louisiana 48th among states in protecting victims. It says Louisiana "lacks common sense gun restrictions," such as requiring child-safety locks and background checks of purchasers at gun shows.

Should the Supreme Court decide to uphold gun bans, cities like Philadel-

phia and New York could be first to latch on. The former has an annual homicide rate of 400, earning the nickname "Kil-ladelphia."

Alexander said he understands those cities' problems, but he hopes the high court understands the position of people in his jurisdiction.

"I hear their argument, but I don't agree with their argument," Alexander said. "Where we live, we can go this afternoon in a shop that has the tools to do a pretty good job of making a weapon that will fire bullets.

"You make a weapon to kill someone, so you're going to still have weapons. The ban is more hype. It's politics at its worst."

Even in northeastern Louisiana's largest city, Monroe City Councilman Red Stevens does not support a gun ban. Stevens represents a district that has the highest crime rates in Monroe.

"Unfortunately, legislation only hinders the law-abiding citizens," Stevens said. "It is a proven fact that the lawbreakers will always have the guns, and the average citizen would be left defenseless.

"I support gun control, if you could control the lawbreakers from having guns and not the people who have them legally."

When a ruling comes, even though the decision directly affects only Washington, "other states and localities will immediately modify their gun laws to comport with the Supreme Court's interpretation of the 2nd Amendment," said Kevin Unter, assistant professor of political science at the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Unter doesn't predict severe fallout in Louisiana outside of New Orleans, however.

"Ultimately, it is unlikely that much will change here in this state, given Louisiana's laws and attitudes regarding gun ownership," he said.