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OPINION

I Was a Marine. I Don't Want a Gun in My Classroom.

By Anthony Swofford

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Before the United States Marine Corps allowed me to carry a live M-16 assault rifle, I went through hundreds of hours of firearms training. Classroom sessions devoted to nomenclature, maintenance and basic operation accounted for more than two weeks of study before I even set eyes on ammunition. For weeks, I carried an M-16 without a magazine — a dummy weapon, basically. I secured it with a padlock overnight while I slept in the barracks, and unlocked it each morning before chow.

Only at the shooting range was I allowed to check out magazines and ammo from the armory. The first day at the range I spent 12 hours disassembling, cleaning and reassembling the weapon. I had to do this blindfolded. I had to do this while a drill instructor hurried me, yelling that enemies were at the gate. I had to do this while fellow Marines wept nearby from doing hundreds of burpees as punishment for not being able to reassemble their weapons fast enough.

The military issue M-16 is the model for the AR-15 assault rifle that the accused shooter used to kill 17 people this month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. The shooter bought the weapon lawfully. He received zero hours of mandated training. There is no reason that any civilian, of any age, should possess this rifle.

At the White House on Wednesday, President Trump suggested that if a football coach at the high school, Aaron Feis, had been armed, he would have saved even more lives than he did, perhaps even his own, because rather than simply shielding students from gunfire, he could have drawn his weapon, fired and killed the assailant — putting a tidy end to the rampage.

This is absurd. More likely, had Mr. Feis been armed, he would not have been able to draw his weapon (a side arm, presumably) quickly enough to stop the shooter, who with an AR-15 would have had the coach outgunned. Even if the coach had been able to draw his weapon — from where? his athletic shorts? — any shots he managed to fire would have risked being errant,

possibly injuring or killing additional students. As some studies have shown, even police officers have missed their targets more than 50 percent of the time. In firing a weapon, Mr. Feis would have only added to the carnage and confusion.

What if a history teacher had also been armed? And an English teacher, and a math teacher, and the janitorial staff members? In this National Rifle Association fever dream, a high school would concentrate so much firepower in the hands of its employees that no deranged individual with a weapon would dare enter the premises.

This sort of thinking also has no grounding in reality. People attack heavily armed institutions all too often, as with the mass shootings in 2009 at Fort Hood in Texas and in 2013 at the Washington Navy Yard. Assailants in such cases aren't typically worried about losing their lives in the process. Usually, losing their lives is part of the plan.

A few days ago, the lunacy of the suggestion to arm teachers was driven home to me as I prepared to teach my undergraduate creative writing class. I arrived uncharacteristically early and sat down with a few students to banter about this and that.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang outside. Everyone froze, until we realized it was a campus utility truck backing up to a loading dock. Then the students relaxed again.

But I spent the next few minutes before class thinking about whether the windows opened fully and would enable 20 kids to escape an active shooter. I checked: They did not open at all. I noticed to my dismay that the door to the classroom opened out, not in, which thwarted my plan to throw my heavy table up against the door in case a shooter blasted his way down the hall. Even after class began, I found myself fantasizing about inventing a bulletproof Kevlar curtain that I could have at the ready to affix to the door frame if the need arose.

Here is something I didn't think about: I did not think about arming myself to protect my students. President Trump on Thursday specified that he wants only certain teachers — “highly adept people, people that understand weaponry” — to be armed. I will immodestly state that among professors in the United States, I am almost certainly one of the best shooters. But I would never bring a weapon into a classroom. The presence of a firearm is always an invitation to violence. Weapons have no place in a learning environment.

Last month, the State Legislature in West Virginia, where my university is located, introduced the Campus Self-Defense Act. This would prohibit colleges and universities from designating their campuses as gun-free zones. If this act becomes law, I will resign my professorship. I will not work in an environment where professors and students pack heat.

When I was a young Marine, I had to learn how to use many weapons. It was part of my mission to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” My mission these days is to write books and teach literature and creative writing. It's a noble calling, too. But no one should be

asked to put his life on the line for it.

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