

# Commentary: Campus carry rules should take cue from ancient Greece

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Posted Sep 4, 2016 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 25, 2018 at 2:50 PM

Austin American-Statesman

<https://www.statesman.com/news/20160904/commentary-campus-carry-rules-should-take-cue-from-ancient-greece>

Carrying weapons in daily society has a long history that leads to the debate about how to implement Senate Bill 11 on the University of Texas campus. Here we would like to provide some historical and philosophical perspective.

SB 11 is a charged political matter in the ancient Greek sense of the word “political” — it affects each and every member of a polis, a political society. The greatest polis in terms of cultural, political and economic achievements was classical Athens, roughly the size of UT. Throughout the fifth century the Athenians waged war virtually yearly ending with a 27-year “world war.” They were no strangers to how violent our world and human beings in it can be.

The great historian Thucydides, a general during the first seven years of that brutal world war, commanded men to fight in situations that meant some, often many, of them would die. His summary of the character of violence and power in Greek history is this: “Many Greeks still act as they did in the days of widespread raids and piracy. The custom of carrying weapons is still practiced among these Greeks. All Greeks once used to carry weapons, because the places where they lived were unprotected and their communication with each other was unsafe. Carrying weapons was part of their everyday life just as it is

now with less civilized barbarians. The same way of living once was common to everyone. The Athenians were the first to stop carrying weapons in daily life.”

The implications of Thucydides’ thinking are clear. The violent and insecure world becomes safe and peaceful within our communities if we do not carry weapons in our daily lives with one another. Not carrying weapons helped Athens reach a high standard of good and decent communal daily life. The outside world is nasty enough, without bringing the violence of war into our daily lives with our families and fellow citizens. If guns are part of our daily life, then war still lingers.

Right now, on- and off-campus discussions concerning SB 11 are heated. We need clear thinking and clear statements of principle. We need leaders who reason and speak like Abraham Lincoln, not Bill Clinton. As Lesley Dean-Jones, the chairperson of the Department of Classics wrote in the spirit of Lincoln, “Normalizing the presence of guns normalizes their use.” For this reason, many faculty and staff members of the Department of Classics are opposed to campus carry.

Unfortunately the highest leader of UT Austin has not expressed his opposition to the campus carry law. In a long statement on this issue, UT President Gregory Fenves assured the university community that “the safety of everyone on campus is my paramount concern.” If that is true, he should have said that the presence of guns on campus, aside from guns needed by professional law officers, is a threat to that safety.

Instead, he said, “My goal is to develop a campus carry policy that both reflects the needs of our campus and follows the intent of the law.” This sentence suggests that the needs of the campus include guns; and his goal to follow “the intent of the law” suggests he endorses the spirit of the law, for its intent is to have members of the university bring guns to campus who will shoot people if in their judgment the situation warrants shooting them.

If Fenves disagrees with this principle of vigilantism embodied in SB 11, yet feels that he has an obligation to enforce it and wants to minimize its effect, he should have written, “My goal is to develop a policy that follows the letter of the law.” What we mean is made clear by Shakespeare. In “The Merchant of Venice,” Shylock demands a pound of flesh. Portia enforces his demand by specifying that the pound of flesh he takes must be precisely one pound of flesh and not include any blood. This is how the malignant intent of a bad measure or judgment can be neutralized.

Fenves might add that his goal is to work to repeal the campus carry law. Since “the safety of everyone on campus is (his) paramount concern,” it does him and us no good for him to say that he is just following orders.

Thucydides and Shakespeare would support him. And Abraham Lincoln would applaud.