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## Health-Care Overhaul 2010

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### White House Backs Right to Bear Arms, Even Outside Obama Events, if State Laws Allow

By *Alexi Mostrous*  
 Washington Post Staff Writer  
 Wednesday, August 19, 2009

Armed men seen mixing with protesters outside recent events held by President Obama acted within the law, the White House said Tuesday, attempting to allay fears of a security threat.

Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, said people are entitled to carry weapons outside such events if local laws allow it. "There are laws that govern firearms that are done state or locally," he said. "Those laws don't change when the president comes to your state or locality."

Anti-gun campaigners disagreed with Gibbs's comments, voicing fears that volatile debates over health-care reform are more likely to turn violent if gun control is not enforced.

"What Gibbs said is wrong," said Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. "Individuals carrying loaded weapons at these events require constant attention from police and Secret Service officers. It's crazy to bring a gun to these events. It endangers everybody."

The past week has seen a spate of men carrying firearms while milling outside meetings Obama has held to defend his health-care reform effort. On Monday, a man with an AR-15 semiautomatic assault rifle strapped to his shoulder was outside a veterans' event in Phoenix. He was one of a dozen men who reportedly had guns outside the forum.

Phoenix police made no arrests, saying Arizona law allows weapons to be carried in the open.



A man with an AR-15 semiautomatic assault rifle joins protesters outside an event in Phoenix where President Obama was discussing health-care reform. (By Jack Kurtz - Associated Press)

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Last week, a man with a gun strapped to his leg held a sign outside an Obama town hall meeting in Portsmouth, N.H., that read: "It's time to water the tree of liberty."

Before the same meeting, Richard Terry Young, a New Hampshire resident, was arrested by the Secret Service for allegedly having a loaded, unlicensed gun in his car. Young was stopped inside the school where Obama held the forum, having reportedly sneaked past a security perimeter.

Ed Donovan, a spokesman for the Secret Service, said incidents of firearms being carried outside presidential events are a "relatively new phenomenon." But he said the president's safety is not being jeopardized.

"We're well aware of the subjects that are showing up at these events with firearms," he said. "We work closely with local law enforcement to make sure that their very strict laws on gun permits are administered. These people weren't ticketed for events and wouldn't have been allowed inside and weren't in a position outside to offer a threat." The immediate area occupied by Obama on such trips is considered a federal site where weapons are not permitted, Donovan said.

Lawmakers holding tense town hall debates about health-care reform also have seen armed constituents. The staff of some, including Rep. Stephen I. Cohen (D-Tenn.), have taken precautions to guard against guns being brought into gatherings.

"We asked everyone with firearms to check them with the sheriff before we began the meeting," said Marilyn Dillihay, Cohen's chief of staff, describing an Aug. 8 town hall debate in Memphis. "We've never done that before." The decision was made because the number of people at the event and the subject of the debate created a "potentially a volatile situation," she said.

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"Obviously there's a lot of emotion with health care," Dillihay said. "Feelings are very tense, and we were just trying to make sure that things were safe."

One man at the meeting disclosed that he had a firearm and complied with a request to put it in his vehicle, she said.

Other lawmakers said they intended to take no precautions in future town hall meetings or to ask the advice of local law enforcement. C.J. Karamargin, a spokesman for [Rep. Gabrielle Giffords](#) (D-Ariz.), said the congresswoman will "balance rights guaranteed under the Second Amendment and providing her constituents with a safe forum to share their views."

Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University at San Bernardino, said concern about whether Obama will enact new gun restrictions may also be contributing to the tense political climate.

"There's a lot of anger out there," Levin said.

"A key thing that's been bubbling under the surface is what's going on with President Obama and guns," he said. "There is a real question mark not only for extremists but for gun rights advocates in the mainstream."

Staff writer Carrie Johnson contributed to this report.



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