

OT-Condoleezza Rice on Gun rights.

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Rice says gun rights are as important as right to free speech and religion

WASHINGTON – Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, recalling how her father took up arms to defend fellow blacks from racist whites in the segregated South, said Wednesday the constitutional right of Americans to own guns is as important as their rights to free speech and religion.

In an interview on CNN's "Larry King Live," Rice said she came to that view from personal experience. She said her father, a black minister, and his friends armed themselves to defend the black community in Birmingham, Ala., against the White Knight Riders in 1962 and 1963. She said if local authorities had had lists of registered weapons, she did not think her father and other blacks would have been able to defend themselves.

Birmingham, where Rice was born in 1954, was a focal point of racial tension. Four black girls were killed when a bomb exploded at a Birmingham church in 1963, a galvanizing moment in the fight for civil rights.

Rice said she favored background checks and controls at gun shows. However, she added, "we have to be very careful when we start abridging rights that the Founding Fathers thought very important."

Rice said the Founding Fathers understood "there might be circumstances that people like my father experienced in Birmingham, Ala., when, in fact, the police weren't going to protect you."

"I also don't think we get to pick and choose from the Constitution," she said in the interview, which was taped for airing Wednesday night. "The Second Amendment is as important as the First Amendment."

The First Amendment protects religious, press and speech freedoms as well as the rights to assemble and petition the government. The Second Amendment guarantees "a well-regulated militia" and "the right of the people to keep and bear arms." Gun-rights supporters and those who

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favor gun control disagree over whether the amendment guarantees individual gun ownership.

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