

SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

An Open Letter about Firearms at AAR-SBL Annual Meetings in 2016 and Beyond

From John F. Kutsko (Executive Director, SBL) and Jack R. Fitzmier (Executive Director, AAR)

In recent weeks we have received a number of requests for information about laws that govern firearm restrictions in the state of Texas, host to our 2016 Annual Meetings. In this memo we hope to address three topics: what Texas firearm laws permit; how we plan to deal with these realities during our San Antonio Annual Meetings; and how we plan to deal with this question in cities that we will visit in the years to come.

A. Like 44 other states, Texas law allows its citizens to acquire permits for both concealed and open carry handguns. This fact alone has raised concerns among our members. In addition, however, Texas recently became one of the ten states to allow some form of carry on college and university campuses and in college and university classrooms. AAR and SBL, along with other member societies of the American Council of Learned Societies, have published public statements objecting to concealed carry in classrooms. Those statements can be seen here:

http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/2015-CCL_LS_Joint_Statement.pdf

<https://www.aarweb.org/about/aar-acls-and-campus-carry>

Indeed, our hunch is that the concerns about firearms in Texas were heightened as much by the classroom concerns as by the other provisions of Texas' new law.

B. Each year, teams of AAR and SBL staff make multiple site visits to our destination cities in order to plan the details of our conventions. This year, we asked our staff planners to focus close attention on the question of firearms. In February, our staffs met with the management of the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, general managers of hotels, directors of security, and Convention and Visitors Bureau officials in San Antonio and raised a number of questions about firearm policies in the city, in particular, how we might (or might not) be able to designate areas of our meetings that would be gun free. Staff found them eager to discuss how their properties were responding. They were all very aware and responsive to our concerns about the recent changes in Texas' law regarding firearms.

We are pleased to report that we have more capacity to designate areas as “gun free” than we had anticipated. For the San Antonio Annual Meetings, we can break this out among three venues we will use most – the Convention Center, the hotels in which we have booked meeting space, and other San Antonio restaurants, bars, and businesses our members might frequent.

The Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center: As a municipally-owned venue, the HBGCC is required to comply with state law as it pertains to the open and concealed carrying of handguns. However, private entities that license use of the Center make the determination as to whether open carry is allowed within its leased space during the time of an event. Consequently, the Convention Center will allow us to post signage banning firearms in all of the space we have rented, which includes our exhibit hall, meeting rooms, and the pre-function space outside of our meeting rooms. We shall post such signage.

Hotels: The Grand Hyatt, Hyatt Regency, and Hilton Palacio Del Rio ban firearms (both openly carried and concealed) from their properties. They have signage to this effect at all entrances. Two hotels allow open and concealed carry, the Marriott Rivercenter and the Marriott Riverwalk. However, they will allow us to post signage banning firearms in all of the space we have rented, which includes our meeting rooms and the pre-function space outside of our meeting rooms (i.e., the entire second floor of the Marriott Riverwalk and the entire third floor of the Marriott Rivercenter). Again, we shall post such signage. We are collecting the firearm policies of the overflow hotels so as to make sure our attendees know about those policies as they make choices about hotels at which they would like to stay. Finally, we plan to link to the firearm policies of our hotels on the web pages used for our meeting and hotel registration. We will make every effort to provide the information that allows members to make informed decisions according to their individual interests and concerns.

Other: Most restaurants and other businesses in downtown San Antonio have opted to declare their properties firearm-free. Handguns are prohibited in bars and restaurants with 51% or more of the revenue from the sale of alcoholic beverages. We trust that our members will observe posted signs about the presence of firearms during their visit to San Antonio, and that they will frequent private businesses with regard to their own views on these matters.

C. We are keenly aware that our members have a variety of views on gun ownership and gun control. Although we do not plan to enter general debates about these matters, we will continue to do all we can to protect academic freedom in classrooms

and to provide Annual Meeting spaces at which our members feel safe and comfortable. With this in mind, we want to acknowledge two realities:

First, all fifty states in the U.S. allow some form of concealed carry, and forty-five states allow some form of open carry handguns. Because there is no overarching federal law, the states have come up with a variety of different, often confusing regulations regarding firearms. In this respect, our San Antonio, Texas meetings (excepting, perhaps, the matter of concealed carry in classrooms) are not the exception, but the rule. All the cities that can provide us the resources necessary to hold our meetings are located in states that allow citizens to carry firearms with varying restrictions and permits. This has been true (to greater or lesser extent, given differing state laws) in Atlanta (2015), San Diego (2014), Baltimore (2013), and Chicago (2012). It will be true in the days ahead as well: in San Antonio (2016), Boston (2017), Denver (2018), San Diego (2019), Boston (2020), and San Antonio (2021).

Second, we want to register our concern about this general trend. With that in mind, we assure our members that in venues we have already booked (from 2016 through 2021), as well as in our negotiations for years beyond 2021, we will make every effort to prevent the presence of firearms at our Annual Meetings. We have been successful in limiting the presence of firearms at our San Antonio meetings and we are confident we shall have continued success in the years ahead. The safety and security of all of our Annual Meeting attendees is always our first priority, and we work closely with local law enforcement, emergency services, and property security to provide the expertise and trained personnel so we can conduct our academic meetings.

Posted 21 March 2016