CENTER VALLEY  – Another shooting. Another officer down. Another funeral. Sadly, we are again witnesses to the aftermath of a police officer being killed in the line of duty. This time the story comes from Philadelphia, but the tale is told in too many places. The U.S. Justice Department reports that, on average, a law enforcement officer is killed in the line of duty every 57 hours in America.

With the death of Sergeant Stephen Liczbinski, public debate over gun laws has become more vociferous. The weapon with which he was killed, an SKS carbine originally designed for the Soviet Army, features a 30-cartridge magazine capable of firing bullets that can pierce bulletproof vests. According to federal authorities, one of whom described it as “very cheap, but very deadly,” this assault rifle is the kind most frequently encountered by law enforcement officers.

The Philadelphia mayor favors a prohibition on the ownership or sale of such weapons, one of five measures unanimously passed by the city council in an effort to stem the tide of gun violence there. The National Rifle Association counters that any such municipal ordinance oversteps federally protected rights and state legislated controls and is therefore unconstitutional. The Philadelphia district attorney refuses to enforce the city’s new gun control laws for fear that arrests would generate extensive civil rights litigation; instead, she suggests that police should carry their own assault weapons in squad cars.

The legal sparring invokes multiple matters of jurisprudence, including how governmental legislation interacts at different levels (federal, state, and local) and whether the second amendment of the Constitution confers an individual right or one
contingent on maintaining a militia. The U.S. Supreme Court is now considering an appeal based on the right “to keep and bear arms,” the first such review of what this clause means in nearly 70 years. But the social debate is even broader, and culturally more important.

On the one hand, guns are merely the means to an end; to be lethal, someone must pull the trigger. At issue, then, is not the mechanics of the weapon (any of which is deadly), but the wanton and callous disregard for human life displayed in every act of gun violence. Whether it results from the mesmerizing images of modern media, or the socioeconomic disparities that plague urban neighborhoods, or the appalling absence of parental education, or even the systemic failures of criminal justice – the acceptability of violence against fellow citizens blackens the conscience of each of us. Because we bear responsibility for shaping our culture, foregoing public safety measures for the sake of preserving individual rights runs the risk of immersing us all in a culture of death.

On the other hand, individual rights lie at the very core of our society. With our recent celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Law Day (May 1), we proudly champion a political system founded on the rule of law rather than on the rule of force. And among those freedoms under the law protected in our way of life is, in fact, the right to keep and bear arms, however that provision comes to be interpreted.

Perhaps, then, the recent signs of violent times occasion an opportunity for broadening our collective sense of what “rights” should be in terms of our social consciousness. Our political and judicial discourse would benefit from moving beyond a purely libertarian view of rights, which emphasizes freedom from governmental coercion or constraint, to incorporate also a dignitarian view of rights, which promotes freedom for the good of each other and for society as a whole. The challenge now before us is how to preserve personal independence and autonomy while also recognizing, as former Harvard Law Professor Mary Ann Glendon once wrote, “that we are constituted in important ways by and through our relations with others, and that each of us develops our potential within a social network of obligations and dependencies.”

A shooting death, particularly of someone dedicated to the service of the community, clearly jeopardizes that balance of individual freedom and social well-being. Absent the anticipated use by potential members of a well-regulated militia, it’s hard to fathom any reasonable need for ordinary citizens to possess, let alone use, military-grade assault rifles. Our life, our liberty, and our pursuit of happiness will only be right when we cultivate a stronger sense of civic solidarity.