

Is there an assault weapon in your future?

By Bill Berkowitz

workingforchange.com | September 10, 2004

Despite recent polls showing that most Americans favor it, despite support from a number of major law enforcement agencies, and despite the unqualified support from Senator John Kerry and quasi-support from President Bush – he claims to favor it but has done nothing to push it – the 1994 law signed by President Clinton banning the manufacture and importation of 19 types of assault weapons, including semiautomatic versions of the Intratec Tec-9 pistol and Uzi submachine gun, will expire at midnight Monday, September 13.

While some gun manufacturers managed to find ways around the law, and the gun lobby, spearheaded by the National Rifle Association and its congressional allies, repeatedly tried to repeal the law, the ban remained intact and according to a number of studies proved to successfully remove a rash of deadly weapons from the streets. Now, however, unless Congress acts immediately, the 10-year sunset clause written into the law will kick in and the ban on these assault weapons will automatically expire.

In the 2000 campaign, President Bush indicated he supported the assault weapons ban, but he has done little to press the issue in Congress. A recent *USA Today* editorial summed up the administration's position: "In spite of a drop in gun deaths since the ban was enacted and despite new fears of terrorism, Bush and Republican leaders in Congress seem more concerned about courting favor with the powerful gun lobby than allowing weapons of mass mayhem back on the nation's streets."

Earlier this year, the Senate voted 52 to 47 to approve the ban's renewal "but the provision died after senators defeated a bill it was attached to," *USA Today* reported. In early September, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) defended Congress's refusal to extend the expiring federal ban on assault weapons claiming that "the will of the American people is consistent with letting it expire, so it will expire." In the House, both the Speaker, Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and GOP Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) have had no interest in scheduling a vote on renewing the ban.

Is there an assault rifle in your future? / 2

Up until the final hours before the ban expired, the NRA has continued to urge members to lobby against the extension of what it called “the Clinton gun ban.” “We have come too far in the past 10 years not to pull out all the stops... to ensure this ban expires as Congress intended, and becomes nothing more than a sad footnote in America’s history,” the group said in a message posted on its Web site.

By Tuesday, September 14, gun manufacturers selling military-style firearms will be marketing them again: “The gun industry is champing at the bit for the ban to expire,” Susan Peschin, firearms project director at the Consumer Federation of America, a nonprofit association of 300 consumer groups, recently told the Associated Press.

The group, which favors greater regulation of the gun industry, recently issued a report which concluded that “assault weapons will be[come] more lethal and less expensive” without the ban and that police “may be forced to adopt a more militaristic approach” as greater numbers of firearms flood the market. The group’s report was based on interviews with gun industry experts and marketing representatives and a survey of manufacturers’ catalogs and Web sites.

A study by the Washington, D.C.-based Violence Prevention Center found that “military style semi-automatic assault weapons pose a grave risk to law enforcement officers.” According to *Officer Down-Assault Weapons and the War on Law Enforcement*, “one in every five law enforcement officers slain in the line of duty between January 1st, 1998, and December 31st, 2001, were killed with assault weapons.”

And according to the Fresno Bee, “Nationwide, a 1999 Justice Department study found, 1.6% of the firearms used in crimes since 1994 were banned assault weapons... [which was a] marked reduction from the five years before the federal ban, when assault weapons accounted for 4.8% of the guns used in crimes.”

Now, with the ban about to expire, the Consumer Federation pointed out that a number of gun companies are loaded for bear and ready “to revive models and features outlawed by the ban,” the Washington Post reported. One such company, Beretta, “has been offering customers two free 15-round magazines after Sept. 14 with the purchase of two of its weapons, according to an advertisement. The current law restricts the capacity of ammunition magazines to 10 rounds. The consumer group said manufacturers, including Israel Military Industries Ltd., which makes Uzi brand submachine guns, are likely to introduce semi-automatic models into the U.S. market if the ban is lifted.”

Another gun manufacturer, the Geneseo, Ill.-based ArmaLite Inc., is advertising “The ArmaLite ‘Prepaid-PreBan’ Rifle Program” offering consumers attachments to convert their firearms to their pre-ban configuration, with shipping available Sept. 14. An ArmaLite advertisement notes that its “rifles are made to be easily retrofitted with your new flash

Is there an assault rifle in your future? / 3

suppressor and other pre-ban features, so you don't have to wait if you choose an ArmaLite.”

A study released in March 2004 by the Violence Policy Center concluded that Illinois – the home of House Speaker Hastert – “has more ‘post-ban’ assault weapon manufacturers than any other state.” The report, titled Illinois: Land of Post-Ban Assault Weapons, found that despite the 1994 assault weapons ban, “the gun industry has willfully circumvented federal law and created through a process dubbed ‘sporterization’ a new generation of assault weapons and re-named them ‘post-ban’ or ‘after-ban’ assault weapons.”

“You’re going to see an incredible buying frenzy,” said Robert A. Ricker, a former executive director of the American Shooting Sports Council who now serves as a consultant for groups that favor stricter gun controls. During a conference call with reporters Ricker said that “Fall is the prime buying season for guns. ... I think the gun industry’s mantra is going to be ‘Buy your wife a high-capacity magazine while you can.’“

California Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, co-author of the 1994 assault weapons ban, was critical of the president’s indifference to the renewal. “The president quietly awaits September 13th and hopes that after he lets the ban expire, he can once again receive the endorsement of the NRA,” Feinstein said on the Senate floor earlier this week.