

Safety of our Streets Hinges on Politics

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 1, 2004

In less than two weeks, the Federal Assault Weapons Act expires. I don't know about you, but keeping AK-47s, UZIs, and TEC-9s off our streets seems like a good idea to me. In fact, according to a New York Times/Wall Street Journal poll, fully 78% of my fellow Americans agree. With that kind of support, you'd expect Congress to be rushing to sponsor its renewal. But sadly, once again the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA) lobby has our politicians ducking an important issue. And once again the safety of our streets is at stake.

Don't let the support of the NRA fool you. These weapons are not used for hunting. More powerful than the guns most cops carry, they fire hundreds of rounds in just a couple minutes and oftentimes pierce body armor. They are guns designed for military-style operations—except these sales that are about to happen aren't to the military. According to data maintained by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), assault weapons are 20 times more likely to be used in a crime than conventional firearms. After all, why do you think guys buy them? For protecting their homes from burglars? Hunting Bambi?

Enacted in 1994, the assault weapons ban has had a powerful impact in keeping these guns off our streets. A report from the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, using data from the ATF, shows the number of assault weapons traced to crime has dropped 66% since the law passed. The infamous TEC-9, a gun favored by murderers and criminals for its light weight and ability to mask finger prints, saw production shrink from 75,000 to just short of 6,000 in two years. In fact, the American company producing the TEC-9 ceased operations a few years ago.

When the law was passed, 16% of gun murders of police officers were with assault weapons. Two years later it had dropped to 0%. It's no surprise that over 1,400 police chiefs and sheriffs from 35 states are on record supporting legislation banning assault weapons. It's not politics to them. It's life or death.

As effective as the ban has been, a simple renewal may not be enough. The current law is riddled with loopholes, the most damaging of which is its limitation in scope. The original act barred the production, sale, or possession of just 19 specific assault weapons. Duplicates and copies of these named firearms

were also banned, yet that part of the law hasn't been enforced. Small, often merely cosmetic changes have been enough to skirt the ban. In fact it was modified versions of banned guns that were used in the D.C. sniper shootings and the student murders in Columbine. Broadening the definition of an "assault weapon"—and not just naming specific models—might have prevented the copycat models from ever being manufactured.

Without strengthening the assault weapons ban, or at a least renewing it, our security is threatened. If trends revert to pre-ban levels, the Brady folk expect about 6,000 additional assault weapons traced to crimes each year. And a murder rate nearly 7% higher. A sales and marketing director for an assault weapons manufacturer, quoted in a forthcoming report from the Consumer Federation of America, paints an ominous picture of our future: "When the [ban] sunsets...we will be manufacturing pre-ban style weapons and shipping them to the general public the very next day...We look forward to September 14 with great enthusiasm."

House Speaker Dennis Hastert recently stated, "If we pass [the assault weapons ban] on the floor, there's no promise that we can get it out of the Senate because the Senate has defeated it already." A convenient way not to anger the gun lobby, but also cowardly and untrue. Earlier this year, the Senate approved the reauthorization of the assault weapons ban 52-47. Unfortunately, the underlying bill was later defeated. President Bush has repeatedly said he'll sign the bill if it comes across his desk. Everyone else says Bush hasn't given the word to push the legislation. Again, very convenient. He gets to tell the public he's for the ban, but he doesn't upset the NRA, which, coincidentally enough, is unlikely to endorse a presidential candidate until mid-September. After the fate of the Assault Weapons Act is decided, to be exact.

Both the House and Senate reconvene September 7th, giving them 6 days to come to a conclusion on the ban. If the Bush administration is serious about our homeland's security, the president will act.