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Expired ban on assault weapons will leave us vulnerable

by Juliet Leftwich

Chalk up another one for the National Rifle Association. Because of the organization's enormous political influence, Congress and President Bush are poised to allow the 10-year-old federal assault-weapons ban to expire after midnight Monday. As a result, military-style firearms like semi-automatic AK-47s and Uzis will be legal again nationwide, unless banned by state or local laws.

We should be deeply disturbed by this turn of events. Assault weapons are a class of semi-automatic firearms designed with military features, such as high-capacity ammunition magazines (some capable of holding 100 bullets) and pistol grips, to allow rapid and accurate spray firing. They are not designed for "sport"; they are designed to kill humans quickly and efficiently. Assault weapons have been used in many mass shootings, including:

- The July 1984 massacre at a McDonald's in San Ysidro (San Diego County), which left 21 dead and 19 wounded;
- The January 1989 rampage at an elementary school in Stockton, which left five dead and 30 wounded;
- The July 1993 shooting at a San Francisco law firm and other offices at 101 California St., which left eight dead and six wounded (one of whom later died);
- The April 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., which left 13 dead and 23 wounded; and
- The October 2002 sniper attacks in and around Washington, D.C., which left 10 dead and three wounded.

Congress banned assault weapons in 1994 with the support of every major law enforcement organization in the nation. Presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan and Clinton also supported the law. Since 1994, the percentage of crime-gun traces involving assault weapons has dropped dramatically.

Unfortunately, prior to the adoption of the assault-weapons ban, the NRA succeeded in adding provisions to weaken the law's impact, including a 10-year sunset provision. Although Bush pledged his support for renewal of the ban during the last presidential campaign, he has failed to lift a finger to act on that pledge, despite the fact that renewal is supported by an overwhelming majority of the American public, including gun owners. The Republican leadership in the House has refused even to bring a renewal bill to a vote, stating it would only take action if urged to do so by Bush. But Bush has failed to act, saying simply that he would sign such a bill if it "reached

his desk." This transparent gamesmanship has allowed the president to do the NRA's bidding while feigning support for the popular assault-weapons law.

The Senate voted to extend the assault weapons ban in March 2004. However, the vote arose as an amendment to an NRA-sponsored bill to provide unprecedented legal immunity to the gun industry. The NRA ultimately directed its supporters to oppose the bill -- its top legislative priority -- rather than risk renewal of the assault-weapons ban.

This is not the first time the NRA has dictated federal gun policy. The group has succeeded in blocking all significant gun bills introduced in Congress over the last 10 years, including those to authorize the federal government to set safety standards for firearms (firearms are specifically exempt from the Consumer Product Safety Act) and require background checks at gun shows. With NRA support, Attorney General John Ashcroft (a longtime NRA member) has refused to allow law enforcement officials to check the federal list of firearm purchasers for suspected terrorists, purportedly because to do so would violate the privacy rights of gun owners.

Fortunately, state and local governments nationwide are pursuing significant measures to protect the public from gun violence. California has the strongest assault-weapons ban in the country (which, together with six other state bans and a number of local laws, will remain in effect even if the federal ban lapses). Eleven states require background checks for all firearm sales at gun shows; several states set consumer safety standards for firearms, and the District of Columbia and more than a dozen Illinois communities prohibit handgun possession and/or sale.

State and local governments should be prepared to act quickly to fill the void left by the expiration of the federal assault-weapons ban. State and local gun laws provide the best opportunity to reduce the nearly 30,000 annual gun deaths in this country -- indeed, perhaps the only opportunity absent a "regime change" of our own.

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