

ASSAULT WEAPON BAN TESTIMONY

By Rebecca Thoman

Executive Director, Citizens for a Safer Minnesota

My name is Rebecca Thoman and I am Executive Director of Citizens for a Safer Minnesota, Minnesota's state-based non-profit, gun violence prevention organization.

I'd like to thank you, Congresswoman McCollum, for co-sponsoring the Assault Weapons Ban and Law Enforcement Protection Act of 2003. For more than a year, you have worked with colleagues to take up the assault weapons ban well before the impending sunset of the law in September. The citizens of Minnesota thank you for your leadership.

In 1994, Congress approved a ten-year ban on the manufacture and sale of semi-automatic assault weapons and ammunition magazines holding more than 10 rounds. I'd like to address some of the confusion that surrounds the argument over whether the assault weapon ban, due to expire on September 13, should be renewed.

Let's start by defining what is an assault weapon?

This discussion has been fraught with misinformation because the gun lobby has gone to great lengths to confuse the public. I'm not a gun expert, but I can clarify in simple terms the difference between an assault weapon and a hunting rifle.

Assault weapons are modeled after military weapons. They have unique features not found on hunting rifles: 1) A pistol grip which allows for spray fire from the hip; 2) a large capacity magazine holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition, and 3) a forward insulating grip which protects the shooter's hands from the hot barrel when multiple shots are fired rapidly.

An important distinction to understand about assault weapons is that they come in both automatic and semi-automatic versions. Automatic weapons are machine guns, where one pull of the trigger fires multiple shots. These have been banned for many years.

Semi-automatic refers to one pull of the trigger firing one bullet, with a new bullet entering the chamber. Today's military weapons come with the ability to switch between automatic and semi-automatic mode.

But note that many types of guns are semi-automatic, including hunting rifles and pistols. Let me repeat that, many types of pistols and rifles are semi-automatic. But not all pistols and rifles are assault weapons.

Semi-automatic assault weapons contain the three features that allow for rapid stray-fire from the hip. Their purpose is to hose down an area killing as many as possible as quickly as possible.

This video comes from a gun manufacturer's website. Note the features that define this as an assault weapon. Remember, this is semi-automatic, where one pull of the trigger fires one bullet.

[Video]

This shooter was able to empty four 30-round magazines in just 45 seconds. This is no hunting rifle.

A hunting rifle, by contrast, is designed to fire a projectile from the shoulder and in a precise manner and does not contain the three features of an assault weapon.

The gun lobby likes to lump all semi-automatics together in order to scare hunters into believing that the ban applies to all rifles. But the truth is that assault weapons, unlike hunting rifles, are designed to kill people, not ducks. That's why the gun industry calls them "assault weapons."

[Vulcan Arms Ad]

Hunters know that assault weapons are not meant for sport. In the 2003 Hunting Survey from Field and Stream Magazine, 65% of hunters responding to the survey agreed that assault weapons are NOT legitimate sporting rifles.

So, if they're not for hunting, who uses assault weapons?

It is clear that criminals use assault weapons. While assault weapons represent only about 1% of all firearms, they represent 30% of the weapons traced to gangs and drug crimes.

Citizens associate assault weapons with high profile shootings like Stockton, Columbine or the DC Sniper, but in fact, police are far more likely to encounter assault weapons than average citizens, especially when they raid meth labs or crack houses.

A report from the Violence Policy Center using FBI data from 1998 to 2001 shows that 1 out of 5 law enforcement officer killed in the line of duty is killed with an assault weapon! That's twenty percent. Clearly assault weapons are killing cops at a disproportionately high level.

That's why the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association and individual Police Chiefs from Bemidji to Winona are urging Congress to take action.

Third, does the assault weapons ban work?

It is clear that the guns banned by name in the 1994 law have been greatly reduced in traces to crime. The gun lobby likes to suggest that the ban was ineffective. The truth, however, is that some gun manufacturers have exploited loopholes in the ban to circumvent its intent, producing "copycat" assault weapons.

That's why we need a strong and effective ban that will take assault weapons off our streets once and for all and protect our law enforcement officers. That's why Congress must take action immediately.

If the assault weapon ban expires, Tec-9s and UZI's will be back on our streets in ever-increasing numbers.

Citizens support the ban.

Finally, I'd like to point out that Minnesotans, like most Americans, support a strong and effective assault weapons ban. The 2003 Minnesota State Survey, conducted by the University of Minnesota's Center for Survey Research asked 800 residents this question:

Question here

A full 75% of Minnesotans SUPPORT strengthening and renewing the assault weapons ban in order to take these weapons of war off our streets. Whether urban, rural, male, female, Democrat or Republican, majorities in every demographic group indicated their support for strengthening and renewing the ban.

Again, I'd like to thank you, Congresswoman McCollum and Representative Slawik, for raising public awareness by holding this hearing today. Congress and the President have an obligation to provide a measure of safety for the men and women in law enforcement who protect and serve us everyday.