

The Assault Weapons Ban: NRA

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A 10-year-old federal ban on assault weapons expired earlier this week with little chance that a vote to reestablish it will be brought before congress in the near future.

Chris W. Cox, chief lobbyist and executive director of NRA's institute for legislative action, took questions on the association and the expiration of the assault weapons ban.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Chris W. Cox: Hello, everyone. I'm glad to have the opportunity to be here, answer your questions, and have a lively discussion.

Washington, D.C.: Hello,

Could you be as specific as possible and name ALL the gun models that will now be available that were not available before the ban was lifted? I have been listening to the debate on both sides of the ban issue, and it is, frankly, confusing. Also, I heard you on C-SPAN. Why won't you divulge which types of guns you own? Thank you.

Chris W. Cox: The ban banned manufacturing various guns with more than one attachment, from a list of attachments specified in the law, such as conspicuous grips, folding stocks, etc.

Therefore, expiration of the ban means that the guns will be legal to make as they were before the ban, with all of their standard attachments.

San Francisco, Calif.: Flash suppressors, folding stocks, and 30 round magazines were part of the assault weapon ban. Why are these accessories supposedly merely cosmetic according to the NRA?

A flash suppressor would prevent police officers from spotting a shooter's muzzle flash at night.

A 30 round magazine would allow a homicidal maniac, similar to Colin Ferguson, to shoot 30 people before pausing to reload. Colin Ferguson's shooting rampage was stopped by people who tackled him while he was reloading.

A folding stock would help terrorists hide assault rifles in their coats.

Why are these merely harmless, cosmetic accessories according to the NRA? Why is it so important for people to be able to upgrade their weapons in this way, when they already have to right to own a firearm?

Chris W. Cox: It's not only the NRA that says that. A study for the National Institute of Justice, published in June as a final assessment of the ban, pointed out, "The gun ban provision targets a relatively small number of weapons based on outward features or accessories that have little to do with the weapons' operation. . . . In other respects (e.g., type of firing mechanism, ammunition fired, and the ability to accept a detachable magazine), AWs do not differ from other legal semiautomatic weapons."

Columbus, Ohio: Hello, there.

Why are the gun control advocates so unwilling to admit that the criteria that they use to describe an "assault weapon" can also be used to describe virtually every firearm in existence to include many whose designs have existed for over one hundred years? It is terribly disingenuous for the news media to start their news reports showing people firing fully automatic weapons that have been highly regulated since the mid-1930's and then start talking about SEMI-automatic firearms as though they were exactly the same as what was just shown on TV. Just because a rifle uses the same action as an AK-47 and looks the same, doesn't make it an AK-47 if it can only fire one round per trigger pull. The American public has to be told the truth by the gun control advocates and the media, not lies and "switch and bait" reports.

Chris W. Cox: It is certainly unfortunate that, even after nearly 16 years of debate on this issue, the media so often get it wrong about the elementary aspects of the issue. Yes, we are talking about semi-automatic firearms, not machine guns. But as you point out, the imagery and verbiage used by the media make it clear that either they do not know the difference, or they do but for reasons of their own don't want the public to know the difference.

Lake Ridge, Va.: I have never held a gun, let alone fired a gun or owned a gun. Yet, I find the anti-gun advocates to be completely unconvincing in their arguments. I believe in the Constitution, thus I believe in the second amendment right to own a gun. I agree with those who are pro-gun, that criminals don't buy guns legally, so the ban made no difference.

I guess my question is, what is the real motivation behind those who are anti-gun? Why do they feel that limiting the rights of people to buy what they want is so dangerous? I've heard them ask the question: Why does anyone need an assault weapon? My question: Why should the government decide who needs what?

(I really do fall in the middle of the debate, as I do support background checks and stricter regulation and tracking of guns.)

Chris W. Cox: In response to the anti-gun groups' question, "who needs this gun or that gun," I say that the burden of proof in a free society is upon those who want to restrict rights, not upon those who wish to exercise them. And, like I said, this issue has been around a long time -- long enough for the gun control groups to make their case, and -- as pointed out in the recent study for the NIJ, they have failed to do so.

Bethesda, Md.: Is there any evidence that the assault weapons ban reduced crimes committed with these types of guns?

Chris W. Cox: Brady Campaign claims that BATFE firearm trace data says so, but BATFE says it "can in no way vouch for the validity of that claim." And, as pointed out in a very recent report from the Congressional Research Service, "Neither the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) - the principal federal agency charged with the collection of national crime statistics, nor the ATF have endorsed the use of firearm trace data for purposes other than assisting in ongoing criminal investigations."

Monterey, Calif.: Thank you for being here today.

Here is a quote from the NRA website statement on the expiration of the assault weapons ban:

"...Law-abiding citizens, however, will once again be free to purchase semi-automatic firearms, regardless of their cosmetic features, for target shooting, shooting competitions, hunting, collecting, and most importantly, self-defense..."

<http://www.nra.org>

Please explain how assault guns improve self-defense versus regular guns.

What or who exactly is it that NRA members feel they need to defend themselves against? It sounds like there is some danger which requires the additional firepower.

Please answer thoughtfully and be as specific as possible.

Chris W. Cox: The NIJ study found that they have little if anything to do with the guns' operation. I would also point out that some of the features, for example, an adjustable-length stock, are useful for various defensive applications.

Morrisville, N.C.: As an NRA member, a gun owner, and a law student, I strongly believe in the 2nd Amendment and I truly appreciate the great work you folks do. That said, the one thing that really worries me about semi-automatic rifles with large capacity magazines is that street criminals and mentally unstable individuals can basically purchase them almost unchecked at gun shows. As you well know, even citizens with concealed carry would be outmatched against a criminal or lunatic armed with such a weapon. What can NRA do to ensure that the 2nd Amendment remains strong while restricting ownership of these civilian versions of military arms to citizens who aren't going to use them against, say, me? My fear is that under current conditions the "militia"

(as it were) isn't terribly well-regulated...

Chris W. Cox: A study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that less than one percent of felons obtain guns at gun shows. Firearm dealers, whether at gun shows or anywhere else, have to run National Instant Checks on anyone who buys any gun. The NIJ study determined that only about 2% of gun crimes involve the guns we are talking about.

New York, N.Y.: The NRA line is that needing a license to own guns is the first step in the government's attempts to take away all guns. But you need a license to drive a car. The government is not trying to take away people's cars. You need a license to practice medicine. Is the government trying to eliminate doctors? It's nonsense and the influence your organization has over our current elected officials is frightening.

Chris W. Cox: There isn't a shred of evidence that licensing gun ownership in any way prevents a criminal from committing a crime, any more than driver's licenses prevent speeding. Licensing defies common sense. Criminals are not going to get licenses. In fact, the Supreme Court has said that felons are constitutionally protected against the self-incrimination implicit in gun registration, which is analogous to what you are suggesting.

Washington, D.C.: I have read and heard advocates argue that the ban should have been allowed to be dropped because it is ineffective. This, I don't understand -- it seems to me that's an argument for strengthening the ban, not letting it drop altogether. Could you comment?

Chris W. Cox: The NIJ study I mentioned reached a conclusion different than yours. It said that "Mandating further design changes in the outward features of semiautomatic weapons may not produce benefits beyond the current ban." It also said, "Should it be renewed, the ban's effects on gun violence are likely to be small at best and perhaps too small for reliable measurement."

Bethesda, Md.: I respect your position and everyone's right to defend themselves with a firearm. In regards to your use of the 2nd Amendment as reasoning, can you at least acknowledge that our founding fathers wrote this at a time when it took 2 minutes to reload a musket? Imagine the proceedings if they knew a future of Uzis and AK47s.

Chris W. Cox: The Framers of the Constitution believed that individual citizens should be armed for defensive purposes. Technological advances in firearms don't change that basic concept, any more than the advent of printing presses and television change the basic nature of the right to expression.

Rather than focusing on one or another gun that is not so different from other guns, the focus should be on the exceedingly small percentage of criminals who use these guns -- or anything else -- to commit crimes. Like we have said for a long time, prosecute criminals. The data show that getting tough with offenders reduces crime.

Salt Lake City, Utah: I am pleased that our Congress allowed the assault weapons ban to expire. The ban was merely a feel-good measure that was never intended to impact criminal activity, since it only targeted bayonet lugs, flash suppressors, vertical pistol grips and newly-made magazines that hold more than 10 rounds. As there are already millions of guns with those features in circulation, no one can argue with a straight face that the ban was ever intended to reduce crime. In fact the ban was much like the new .50 caliber ban that Governor Schwarzenegger just signed, which bans a gun that has NEVER been used in a crime.

And now my question: John Kerry has stated that he wants a newer, stronger gun ban, including items such as semi-auto shotguns on the banned list. Is there much support for that concept in Congress?

Chris W. Cox: Sen. Kerry is a co-sponsor of a bill that would ban every semi-automatic hunting and sporting semi-automatic shotgun, along with many other guns. He has a 100% voting record from gun-control groups. It's shameless and dishonest to spend your entire career voting against gun owners, then try to repackage yourself for a presidential bid.

Sen. Kerry is desperately trying to hide his anti-gun voting history, and with good reason. Refer to <http://www.nra.org> for details.

Chris W. Cox: At the bottom line, the gun ban was a bad law and bad politics. Study after study show that the ban targeted guns rarely used in crime before the ban in 1994, and that are still rarely used in crime, and that are not different from other guns in terms of how they operate or the ammunition they use. Even a study directed by Bill Clinton's Justice Department found that the guns and magazines in question were "never used in more than a modest fraction of gun murders." The follow-up study for the NIJ agreed and concluded that the ban was ineffective. Experience has proven how you reduce crime, by putting violent criminals in prison and keeping them there. During the 1990s, imprisonment rates increased dramatically and violent crime has fallen to a 27-year low. It started declining in 1992, before the ban or the Brady Bill. Murder rates are the lowest they have been since 1965, even though the number of guns Americans own is at an all-time high, and the number of Right-to-Carry states is at an all-time high. NRA will keep on representing the rights of its 4 million members and those of other gun owners. Thanks for the opportunity to be here.
