

ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN EXPIRES

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A federal government ban on the sale of certain military-style semiautomatic weapons, including Uzis and AK-47s, expires this week.

The U.S. Congress passed the assault weapon ban, prohibiting the sale of 19 weapons and restricting certain modifications of other guns, in 1994. But the law had a 10-year expiration date.

Supporters of the ban, including a Colorado father whose son was shot to death at Columbine High School, had hoped the House of Representatives, the Senate and President Bush would extend the ban. But those supporters conceded defeat as the clock ticked down without a vote.

Gun enthusiasts who criticized the ban and viewed it as chipping away at the Second Amendment right to bear arms celebrated victory.

Some gun sellers, confident the ban would lapse, began taking orders for formerly illegal guns and promised to ship them after Sept. 14.

A political smoking gun

The assault weapons ban was backed and signed by former President Clinton, a Democrat, when Democrats also controlled the Congress. The National Rifle Association, which has spent millions of dollars in campaigns against the ban, calls it the “Clinton Gun Ban” and runs the anti-ban Web site, www.clintongunban.com.

Polls, however, showed a majority of Americans -- 68 percent, according to a recent study by the University of Pennsylvania -- backed extending the ban.

Pres. George W. Bush, endorsed by the NRA as a Republican candidate in 2000, said during that campaign he would support an extension of the weapons ban, but hasn't pressed the issue while in office. The NRA withheld its support from his father, former Pres. George H. W. Bush in a lost re-election bid against Bill Clinton. George H.W. Bush had supported the ban of some semi-automatic rifles as well as other gun control efforts. In fact, since 1980, no Republican has won the highest office without the endorsement of the powerful gun lobby.

A White House spokeswoman said just prior to the ban expiring that President Bush would still sign an extension if Congress could pass it. But Democratic leaders and ban supporters criticized the president for not doing enough to push the issue with key congressional leaders.

“Absent the president twisting arms, it's nil,” said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., an original supporter of the 1994 bill and the lead sponsor of the would-be extension.

But House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, said Thursday: “If the president asked me, it’d still be no ... because we don’t have the votes to pass an assault weapons ban. ... It will expire Monday and that’s that.”

DeLay said the original bill amounted to a “feel-good piece of legislation” that did not prevent criminals from obtaining weapons similar to those that were banned. Indeed many manufacturers were able to skirt the list of 19 banned weapons by designing and selling knockoffs.

What it could mean

Several police chiefs, including those from Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Los Angeles and Seattle, urged lawmakers to renew the ban.

They talked about how their officers are already up against bad guys with better guns. The ban, they argued, would only make the situation worse.

“We’re sick and tired of picking up young bodies off our streets,” said Richard Pennington, Atlanta’s police chief.

“They (the banned weapons) are a threat to the safety of our dedicated police officers and the public,” said Washington, D.C., police Chief Charles Ramsey.

A recent report by the Consumer Federation of America, a conglomerate of 300 consumer groups that favor tighter legislation of the gun industry, concluded “assault weapons will be more lethal and less expensive” without the ban and that police “may be forced to adopt a more militaristic approach.”

The report analyzed gun industry advertisements and other sales materials as well as interviews with gun industry officials.

Most automatic weapons, including most machine guns, that have been illegal since 1934 will remain that way.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, is among those who question the ban’s success and said legislation outlawing guns has the potential to reach “all kinds of hunting rifles.”

Other opponents of the ban criticized the confusing nature of what was specifically outlawed. Richard Batory, a firearms instructor and NRA member from Tucson, Ariz., said the ban is “basically about cosmetics of certain firearms. It doesn’t affect function or the way firearms are being used.”

Opponents also point out that banned weapons manufactured and sold before 1994 were grandfathered in, meaning they were still legal to buy and sell.

Senator Feinstein of California acknowledged the fight is over for now, but she also said she’s not done. Feinstein vowed to re-introduce an assault weapons ban next year.

-- Compiled for NewsHour Extra by Jule Gardner