

GUEST COLUMN: An assault weapons ban would make a difference

By: Robert Weiner and Brad Star
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Robert Weiner
(photo by Richard A. Bloom)



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(photo by Ben Lasky)

Gun advocates should quit saying that restoring the assault weapons ban would mean nothing. All 15 mass killings of 10 or more since Columbine (April 20, 1999) involved assault weapons under the ban by the Brady Bill, which was sunsetted [after lobbying] by the NRA.

As of the 19th anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, close to no progress has been made on the front of gun control. Obama said it was his biggest disappointment as president. In reality, the automatic and semi-automatic weapons used in each mass shooting over the past two decades would have been barred under an assault weapons ban. This may have appreciably reduced, if not stopped, many of the major shootings, such as the Aurora shooting. (Columbine was one of two shootings killing 10 or more to take place during the ban because the perpetrators were supplied their firearms illegally.)

It's simply not true that, as alleged by gun advocates, an assault weapons ban would make little to no difference in the fight against gun violence.

After the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., Sen. Marco Rubio said, "The Second Amendment is not the cause of this. The cause of this is individuals who happen to abuse that liberty and that constitutional right for the purposes of conducting these atrocities."

Rubio is right - the Second Amendment is not the problem. But the "because" is a bit off base. In fact, qualifications on possession and gun types are perfectly legal under the Second Amendment.

By far the worst and biggest headlines on modern gun events revolve around mass killings committed with assault weapons. Successfully stopping these headlines with an assault weapons ban would go a long way in easing the national angst about the terror of mass shootings in schools, churches, cinemas, clubs and other public spaces. Even the NRA should want that result, so as to take some pressure off - but it would also be a real achievement for our national culture.

Assault weapons - including the semi-automatic handguns used at Columbine and Aurora - were once illegal in the U.S. under the federal Assault Weapons Ban, a subsection of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The federal ban prevented the manufacture for civilian use of certain semi-automatic firearms that the government classified as assault weapons (although most firearm buffs will tell you that semi-automatics weapons are not assault rifles). The ban only applied to weapons produced after the bill's passing.

The Assault Weapons Ban lasted just 10 years, expiring in 2004 due to its sunset provision, which NRA chief lobbyist Tanya Metaska added in an attempt to mitigate a bill she knew was going to pass. Her plan worked, and the Assault Weapons Ban was not reauthorized after 2004.

While some have argued about the ban's impact, there is no denying that mass shootings were less frequent during the ban and are much more of a problem today. Since 1994, 16 mass shootings involving 10 or more deaths have taken place in the U.S. Just two of those shootings, the Columbine massacre and the Atlanta shootings, occurred between 1994 and 2004, the period during which the Assault Weapons Ban was in effect. In the 14 years since the expiration of the Assault Weapons Ban, the U.S. has seen 14 mass shootings.

The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, a bill enacted in 1993 that remains in effect today, has successfully enforced background checks and prevented the purchase of firearms by felons (171 per day, on average), domestic abusers (48) and fugitives (19). However, it is clear that a strict assault weapons ban is necessary to deter the worst and deadliest mass shootings.

Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., introduced an assault weapons ban in the U.S. House in late February, which has garnered 174 co-sponsors thus far. Cicilline's proposal comes a year after a ban proposed to the Senate by Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who spearheaded the original Assault Weapons Ban in 1994. Both options would ban sales of certain semiautomatic rifles that feature military-style accessories, including pistol grips and suppressors.

Although several Republican lawmakers have shown hints of support for an assault weapons ban, lawmakers on the right have yet to offer full endorsement for such a bill.

A realistic first step towards gun control would be a ban of the bump stock, a gun attachment that enables semi-automatic rifles to fire faster and, essentially, become fully automatic. President Donald Trump has called for a bump stock ban. Bump stock bans are also being considered in several states, including Maryland, where Republican Gov. Larry Hogan said he would sign a ban once it reaches his desk.

Settling for only a bump stock ban is far from enough to alleviate the gun control issue. An assault ban is the U.S.'s best chance at eliminating the constant mass shooting headlines.

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