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It Will Be Ten Years, This Fall

By Lisa Miller Delity

Special to The Sentinel

It will be ten years this fall.

Ten years since a man walked into Washington, DC Metropolitan Police Headquarters on a November afternoon, took the elevator to the second floor, opened the door to the Cold Case Homicide Squad, pulled a MAC-10 assault pistol out from under his jacket, opened fire and killed two FBI agents and a Washington police sergeant and grievously wounded a third FBI agent.

Ten years since one man was able to acquire, conceal and wield sufficient firepower to overwhelm a room full of trained and armed police officers.

Ten years since that man murdered my brother, FBI Special Agent Mike Miller, and devastated the lives of family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and an entire community.

It will also be ten years this fall since the federal assault weapons ban — intended to prohibit the manufacture and sale of military-style semiautomatic assault guns — was made the law of the land.

While the 10-year anniversary of Mike's death has meaning for many, the anniversary of the enactment of the assault weapons ban has meaning for all Americans, for the ban will end in four days, on September 13th. It will expire because President Bush is more intent on getting the NRA endorsement than saving lives — and this from a President who promised us a 'safer world' in his acceptance speech in New York City.

The gun lobby is thrilled with the imminent demise of the ban. Its patrons in the gun industry want nothing more than to make and sell weapons of war to civilians with ease. And they will be able to sell even more assault weapons and high capacity ammunition on September 14th, including the AK-47 and the Uzi pistol.

Assault weapons are not hunting rifles, but are designed to spray bullets rapidly while being fired from the hip. Assault weapons are designed for firepower, not accuracy. They are made to "hose down" an area with a spray of bullets. Maryland deer are better protected than people. Deer hunters may not have an ammunition clip loaded with more than 8 cartridges or bullets whereas assault rifles can be equipped with up to one hundred bullets per magazine. Where is the sense in that?

Nationally, 64% of gun-owning households and half of NRA-member households support banning assault weapons. And 77% of Marylanders favor a strong ban according to a February survey by Gonzales Research.

Many people don't realize that the 1994 law is a partial ban only — a modest restriction on some specific makes of assault weapons. The maker of the MAC-10 assault pistol that was used to kill my brother made a slight cosmetic change to its gun after the ban was enacted and reintroduced it as the "MAC-10 CB", with a campaign bragging that the "MAC is back!"

There are many examples of the gun industry openly evading the ban to line its pockets by making and selling copycat versions of guns explicitly outlawed. A recent study by the DC-based Violence Policy Center (VPC) reveals that more than 40 gunmakers in 22 states are currently marketing "post-ban" assault weapons--including UZIs, AK-47s, AR-15s, MAC-10s, Galils, MP5s, Tommy Guns, Stens, and others (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/USofAW.htm>). The study estimates that more than one million "post-ban" assault weapons have been manufactured in the US since the ban's passage in 1994 and warns that today "there are more assault weapon manufacturers and assault weapons available for sale than ever before."

A Bushmaster assault rifle was used by the DC-area snipers to seriously wound a 13-year-old student at Benjamin Tasker Middle School in October, 2002, where I am a music teacher. Ten people were dead at the end of the DC-sniper shooting spree. And this summer, four police officers were killed and four wounded in separate attacks in Alabama and Indiana by SKS assault rifles, another well-known copycat weapon.

Since 1994 Maryland has banned assault pistols. However, when we tried to extend this to assault rifles during the 2004 General Assembly, the bill was killed in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee by John A. Giannetti, Jr. (D- District 21). To date, Sen. Giannetti has not provided a rational explanation for his action.

Fortunately, Senators Sarbanes and Mikulski have co-sponsored S. 1431, the Lautenberg bill, which would ban

these weapons and their copycats. Only two members of our state's House delegation, Roscoe Bartlett and Wayne Gilchrest, have not co-sponsored H.B. 2038, the companion bill. Eight (8) police chiefs in Bartlett's and twenty-one (21) in Gilchrest's district want a strong federal ban.

It will have been ten years this fall since a man overwhelmed a room full of police officers with the firepower that only an assault weapon could have provided. Our state must pass an assault rifles ban in 2005. We will have law enforcement on our side and hope that our state representatives and the Governor will have the common sense to put the safety of our men and women in uniform above the cowardly concerns of the gun lobby.

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