

# Assault Weapon Bans: Can They Survive Rational Basis Scrutiny?

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ABSTRACT: In the last two decades, legislatures and courts have been increasingly willing to argue that a certain class of firearms termed “assault weapons” are not protected by the Second Amendment, and may be regulated or banned even though functionally identical firearms are not generally subject to such laws. Do such underinclusive bans survive even the lowest level of scrutiny: rational basis?

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## I. Introduction

The U.S. Supreme Court has long recognized that distinctions in laws must be rationally related to a legitimate state interest.<sup>2</sup> Do AW bans meet this standard, or are they panic driven responses to fear of gang violence and random mass murders?

## II. What Is An “Assault Weapon”?

Starting in 1989, with passage of California’s Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act<sup>3</sup> a new term has entered American legal vocabulary: “assault weapon” (AW). What are they? Generally, these are semiautomatic rifles and pistols which use detachable magazines. The rifles are functionally identical to sporting arms that have been in use for decades in America (although AWs usually fire a less powerful cartridge than hunting rifles), with a somewhat military appearance (black plastic stocks, pistol grips, and bayonet lugs being common components). The handguns are functionally indistinguishable from handguns used for more than a century by civilians in the U.S. (semiautomatic, detachable magazine fed).

Most statutes have combined a ban based on maker and model name with a prohibition on weapons that are “substantially identical”<sup>4</sup> to those on the named list. These named lists in different laws, while similar, tend to vary slightly. New Jersey’s named list

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<sup>2</sup> *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, 473 US 432, 436, 440 (1985) (“The general rule is that legislation is presumed to be valid and will be sustained if the classification drawn by the statute is rationally related to a legitimate state interest.”)

<sup>3</sup> Carl Ingram, *Assault Gun Ban Wins Final Vote: Deukmejian's Promised Approval Would Make It 1st Such U.S. Law*, *TIMES*, May 19, 1989, [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-05-19/news/mn-112\\_1\\_assault-weapons-ban-military-style-assault-types-of-semiautomatic-rifles/2](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-05-19/news/mn-112_1_assault-weapons-ban-military-style-assault-types-of-semiautomatic-rifles/2), last accessed February 27, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> N.J.S.A. 2C:39-1(w)(2) (“Any firearm manufactured under any designation which is substantially identical to any of the firearms listed above.”)

bans the “Demro TAC-1 carbine” which is not named by California’s similar statute.<sup>5</sup> Yet many guns appear on both lists (sometimes with very slight differences in name): FN-FAL, FN-LAR, or FN-FNC type semiautomatic firearms (in New Jersey’s list);<sup>6</sup> Fabrique Nationale FAL, LAR, FNC (in California’s list).<sup>7</sup>

That most such laws choose to ban AWs primarily by name and model number, and not by functional characteristics, should be a tipoff that whatever the public safety hazards of these weapons, those interested in banning them had a hard time finding the common risk factors that would have enabled them to write a functional definition of an AW.

Comparing the lists of named weapons and functional characteristics leads to some startling conclusions. The weapons in most cases were derived from full automatic military weapons and bear a strong resemblance to their full automatic ancestors. There are some exceptions, such as the Calico M-950, which has no military origins. None of these weapons are readily convertible to full automatic fire; if they were, they would already be considered machineguns ( “machinegun” is one word in federal law, but two words everywhere else) under federal law<sup>8</sup> and subject to the much stricter federal<sup>9</sup> and state licensing laws regulating machine guns.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 30510 (2014).

<sup>6</sup> N.J.S.A. 2C:39-1(w)(1).

<sup>7</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 30510 (2014).

<sup>8</sup> 26 USC § 5845(b) (2014)(“The term ‘machinegun’ means any weapon which shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot, automatically more than one shot, without manual reloading, by a single function of the trigger. The term shall also include the frame or receiver of any such weapon, any part designed and intended solely and exclusively, or combination of parts designed and intended, for use in converting a weapon into a machinegun, and any combination of parts from which a machinegun can be assembled if such parts are in the possession or under the control of a person.”) See 27 Code of Federal Regulations §179.11, ATF Rul. 82-3, 82-8, 83-5, and 81-4 for regulations redefining previously semiautomatic guns or parts into machineguns.

<sup>9</sup> Generally see 26 USC §§ 5801-5872.

<sup>10</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 32650(a)(2014).

### III. Named Lists As Careless Bills of Attainder

American laws usually prohibit or regulate items not by name but by functional characteristics. As an example, California defines a number of items as “destructive devices.” One clearly describes a Molotov cocktail, by functional characteristics, not by name: “Any breakable container that contains a flammable liquid with a flashpoint of 150 degrees Fahrenheit or less and has a wick or similar device capable of being ignited, other than a device which is commercially manufactured primarily for the purpose of illumination.”<sup>11</sup> This clearly matches the dictionary definition: “a crude incendiary grenade consisting of a glass container filled with flammable liquid and a wick for ignition.”<sup>12</sup> The California Penal Code definition is clearly legally superior to a dictionary definition for the following reasons: a defendant could argue that he did not know what the phrase “Molotov cocktail” meant and was therefore ignorant that he was violating the law; minor non-functional changes (such as substituting an electrical ignitor instead of a wick) might create questions as to whether a named prohibition of a “Molotov cocktail” was insufficiently precise.

While most AW bans also have functional definitions of the banned weapons, named list definitions based on manufacturer’s name and model number are a common part of these laws. These are similar to “bills of attainder,” in which legislative acts punish persons by name for alleged crimes instead of specifying a crime and allowing due process by the courts to determine guilt. While Colt Industries is not a person, and Colt’s AR-15 is not a person, it is clear that a law banning sale of a named product made by Colt, with

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<sup>11</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 16460(5) (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher G. Morris, *Academic Press Dictionary of Science and Technology* 1404 (1991).

no similar ban on sales by another manufacturer would effectively deny Colt equal protection of the law. To make these distinctions in an arbitrary manner is contrary to existing case law.<sup>13</sup>

Not only does the named list approach lead to equal protection problems, but it makes it very easy to subvert these laws. As an example of the defective nature of named lists, California's Assault Weapons Control Act (AWCA) banned the Intratec TEC-9 by name. The manufacturer responded by making minor non-functional changes to the gun and giving it a new model number: DC9<sup>14</sup> (presumably "Designed for California"). The TEC-9 and TEC-DC9 are otherwise identical."<sup>15</sup> When the 1994 federal ban took effect listing the TEC-9: "Intratec... manufactured an AB-10 ('after ban') model that does not have a threaded barrel or a barrel shroud but is identical to the TEC-9 in other respects, including the ability to accept an ammunition magazine outside the pistol grip." While the federal AW ban prohibited new manufacture of 32 round magazines, ones made before the new law work in the AB-10.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. Constitution's Art. I, sec. 10 prohibition on states passing bills of attainder only limits the legislative branches of state government.<sup>17</sup> In the past, clever state governments have worked around this by executive orders, such as Missouri Governor

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<sup>13</sup> *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, 473 U.S. 432, 439 (1985) ("The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment commands that no State shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws," which is essentially a direction that all persons similarly situated should be treated alike.")

<sup>14</sup> Bruce H. Kobayashi and Joseph E. Olson, *In Re 101 California Street: A Legal and Economic Analysis of Strict Liability for the Manufacture and Sale of "Assault Weapons"*, *STANFORD LAW & POLICY REVIEW*, 8:41, 46, 47 (1997).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher S. Koper, *An Updated Assessment of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban: Impacts on Gun Markets and Gun Violence, 1994-2003*, 10 <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf>, last accessed March 14, 2016. This report was funded by the Department of Justice in response to a request by Congress.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Const., Art I, § 9., cl 1. ("No State shall ... pass any Bill of Attainder...")

Boggs' 1838 order to the militia that Mormons be driven from the state or killed.<sup>18</sup> As a recent work on constitutional law described the problem of bills of attainder:

[T]he paradigmatic example of legislation whose violation of equality and due process contravenes the rule of law. It denies the separation of powers between legislature and judiciary, and the related distinction between legislative and judicial process, and so removes the protection that law is meant to provide from governmental hostility and arbitrary power.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1990s, the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals struck down named list “assault weapon” bans for vagueness.<sup>20</sup> Even when the ordinance was amended to prohibit “assault weapons” based on functional characteristics, the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit ruled that such definitions were vague, because they may require more knowledge than a person of “average intelligence [possesses] to determine whether a particular firearm is included within its prohibition.”<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. What Makes “Assault Weapons” So Dangerous?

The California Department of Justice examined the issue of AWs and public safety both before and after passage of the AWCA in 1989. These reports were not part of the legislative process. They demonstrate that there was no rational basis for the law. Steve

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<sup>18</sup> W. Paul Reeve, Ardis E. Parshall, ed., *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia* 330 (2010).

<sup>19</sup> T.R.S. Allen, *Constitutional Justice: A Liberal Theory of the Rule of Law* 148 (2001).

<sup>20</sup> *Springfield Armory, Inc. v. City of Columbus*, 29 F. 3d 250, 251 (6th Cir. 1994) (Striking down a city ordinance for vagueness and not reaching bill of attainder question because of vagueness: “The ordinance defines “assault weapon” as any one of thirty-four specific rifles, three specific shotguns and nine specific pistols, or “[o]ther models by the same manufacturer with the same action design that have slight modifications or enhancements....” The weapons are specified by brand name and model, not generically or by defined categories.... Plaintiffs challenge the ordinance as an unconstitutional bill of attainder because it constrains only the named manufacturers while other manufacturers are free to make and sell similar products. Plaintiffs also contend that the ordinance is unconstitutionally vague.”)

<sup>21</sup> *Peoples Rights Organization v. City of Columbus*, 152 F. 3d 522, 535 (6th Cir. 1998) (“Therefore, anyone who possesses a semiautomatic center fire rifle or carbine that accepts a detachable magazine is subject to prosecution so long as a magazine exists with a capacity of twenty rounds or more. Since the ordinance contains no scienter requirement, an owner's complete lack of knowledge as to the magazine's existence is of no consequence.”)

Helsey, Acting Assistant Director of the Investigation and Enforcement Branch wrote a memo on October 31, 1988, a year before the bill passed, answering the question “whether a definition could be formulated which would allow legislative control of ‘assault rifles’ without infringing on sporting weapons. I do not think that the necessary precision in possible.”<sup>22</sup> Helsey also pointed out that,

Obviously, there have been some high visibility crimes which involved semi-automatics UZI’s and AK-47’s, but I suspect a close analysis would put that frequency at or slightly above the statistical aberration level. Last year, I surveyed the firearms used in violent crimes which were submitted to BFS [Bureau of Forensic Services] analysis (Attachment 18). I believed that this would provide a good picture of what criminals use when they want to hurt someone. The figures are self-explanatory and confirmed our intuition that assault type firearms were the least of our worries. It’s really the .22 and .38 Caliber handguns and 12 gauge shotguns that inflict the majority of the carnage.

Consequently, I believe that assault weapons cannot be defined in a workable way, by size, caliber, action type or magazine capacity. ... Unless a realistic definition can be developed for “assault weapons”, we should leave the issue alone.<sup>23</sup>

After passage of the law in 1989, the California Criminalistics Institute (a unit of the California Department of Justice),<sup>24</sup> studied the use of “assault weapons” in 1990 based on information from crime labs throughout the state. Their conclusions?

It is clear from this data that assault weapons play a very small role in assault and homicide cases submitted to city and county labs. This data shows that in the neighborhood of less than 5% of homicide and assault weapons fall into the §12276 PC list. This is in agreement with previous data collected on firearms submitted to CA DOJ labs prior to the enactment of the AWCA [Assault Weapons Control Act] as well as for the year following the effective date of that law.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> S.C. Helsey to G.W. Clemons, Assault Rifles, October 31, 1988, 1. Because this document required a Public Records Access request to pry loose, you can read it at <http://www.claytoncramer.com/primary/other/Helsley88AWCa.pdf>, last accessed April 6, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>24</sup> California Criminalistics Institute, <https://oag.ca.gov/cci>, last accessed April 5, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Torrey D. Johnson, Report on a Survey of the Use of “Assault Weapons” in California in 1990, 1, available at <http://www.claytoncramer.com/primary/other/Johnson91AWCa.pdf>.

The report explains that they counted “4844 guns which included 45 ‘assault weapons’ (>1% assault weapons).” (Assault weapons were actually 0.9% of this total.) As the report further explained, the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Office destroyed 3881 guns, preventing their identification. “If the LASO data is ignored, the total number of guns is 963 which includes 36 ‘assault weapons’ (~3.7%) which is probably a more accurate reflection of numbers of ‘assault weapons’ actual[ly] encountered in homicides and assaults.” Even with this significant loss of data, the report explained why relying on crime labs for determining frequency of criminal use of assault weapons likely overstated their presence:

First, if all guns are not being examined by forensic laboratories, many of those not seen will be the usual pistols and revolvers which make up the bulk of guns used in violent crimes thus maintaining the proportions. It is likely that, if there is a skewing of the data, that it is to accentuate the apparent use of “assault weapons”. This because these weapons are infrequently seen by law enforcement so they are unfamiliar with them as a group and there is frequently a question of whether the firearm is or has been converted to full automatic fire (machine gun). This results in an increased likelihood that a recovered ‘assault weapon’ will be examined by a forensic specialist.<sup>26</sup>

The report also acknowledges that there were difficulties determining whether a particular firearm was actually a weapon regulated by the AWCA, and they used the “most generous interpretation... This will give the worst case results.”<sup>27</sup> The report concludes: “The incidence of the use of ‘assault weapons’ is very much lower than the media and law makers seem to represent.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 7.



So with so much agreement within the California Department of Justice that assault weapons constituted only a tiny fraction of criminal misuses, why did California Attorney-General John van de Kamp assert the importance of passing the AWCA? His speech to California police chiefs suggests that he saw this as a wedge issue for breaking open the gates to more restrictive gun control laws:

"It can win, but the margin of victory will be narrow at best," he said. Past defeats have resulted from debate deteriorating "into a pitched battle between those who would ban all guns and those who would regulate none of them," he said.

This time, Van de Kamp said, the debate should be limited to law enforcement issues. He said there are many members of the NRA, among them police officers, who do not agree with the association's consistent opposition to all forms of gun control.<sup>29</sup>

Other evidence suggests the AWCA was based not on public safety but political expedience: "Sponsors of the AWCA, including Senator Roberti, Assemblyman Roos, Attorney General Van de Kamp, and law enforcement administrators, held a strategy session at which they decided that 'certain weapons probably had too large a constituency to ever be worth the risk of including, Ruger Mini 14, M1 Carbine, M1 Garand, etc.'<sup>30</sup> and that "[i]nformation on assault weapons would not be sought from forensic laboratories as it was unlikely to support the theses [that assault weapons were the preferred choice of drug-trafficking organizations and violent criminals] on which the legislation would be based."<sup>31</sup> [bracketed material in original] Helsley also explained the very odd named list

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<sup>29</sup> Steve Emmons, Van de Kamp Asks Police Chiefs for Support in Outlawing Assault Rifles, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Feb. 9, 1989.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Helsley to Steve Patrick Kenady, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081201093921/http://www.hoboes.com/pub/Politics/United%20States/Trust%20the%20Government/Insight%20into%20Anti-Legislation>, last accessed April 9, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce H. Kobayashi and Joseph E. Olson, In Re 101 California Street: A Legal and Economic Analysis of Strict Liability for the Manufacture and Sale of "Assault Weapons", STANFORD LAW & POLICY REVIEW, 8:41, 44 (1997).

this way: “[T]he list had become an odd collection of firearms which range from the long out of production, to exorbitantly expensive, to the ‘evil’ AK 47. As no specifically defined problem drove our efforts, such an odd collection should not be surprising. ... Most if not all of the principal players in crafting the legislation had absolutely no knowledge of firearms. Most of the weapons on the list are low production or long out of production items that constitute absolutely no conceivable threat.”<sup>32</sup> In some cases, non-firearms have been added to the list: the Knight’s Armament RAS was on the list in 2000<sup>33</sup> even though the RAS is only a rail adapter system for attaching sights, flashlights, and the like.<sup>34</sup>

The clear intent was to go after a small minority of guns and their owners, a group unlikely to have the political power to defend their interests. The relevance of this will appear when we examine the Romer decision. Excluding data that would argue against their claims demonstrates a lack of rational basis and intellectual honesty.

Also, Van de Kamp was widely considered an unannounced candidate for governor at the time<sup>35</sup> and likely was using his support for this law as an opportunity to have a high public profile. While seeking higher public office is not intrinsically problematic, it is not an adequate justification to avoid rational basis. The percentages of AWs criminally used were so low that a ban on handguns or knives would have had a far stronger effect in reducing murders, but this would have been a bridge too far in the California of 1989. Failure to pass it would have done nothing to raise van de Kamp’s visibility for higher office.

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<sup>32</sup> *Op cit.*, n. 35.

<sup>33</sup> <http://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/firearms/infobuls/kaslist.pdf>, last accessed April 13, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.knightarmco.com/portfolio/m4-carbine-ras/>, last accessed April 13, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Hoover, California Attorney General Urges Assault Rifle Ban, UPI, Feb. 13, 1989.

Other studies also demonstrate that AW bans were politicians' irrational responses to public safety concerns. In 1994, the federal government passed an assault weapon ban similar to those passed by many of the states in years before and after 1994, based on named lists and functional specifications.<sup>36</sup> The federal ban also prohibited new manufacture for civilian use of Large Capacity Magazines (LCMs) (those holding more than 10 rounds).<sup>37</sup> This law was passed with a sunset clause, causing its automatic repeal in 2004.<sup>38</sup>

One part of the federal law directed the U.S. Attorney-General to "to study the ban's impact and report the results to Congress within 30 months of the ban's enactment ..."<sup>39</sup> That first report on the effectiveness of the federal law found very little measureable result. The authors (Roth and Koper) admitted on the very first page that they had a hard time "discerning the effects of the ban" at least partly because "the banned weapons and magazines were rarely used to commit murders in this country" before the 1994 ban.<sup>40</sup>

Roth and Koper tried to figure out if the ban reduced the number of victims per mass murder.<sup>41</sup> If the public safety hazard associated with AWs was because of high capacity magazines with the ability to spray bullets everywhere, you would expect to see mass murders decline.

So what did the report find? They found a 6.7% reduction in murder rates in the 15 states where the federal ban *could* have made a difference. But this reduction was not statistically significant. Because assault weapons had been used in a tiny percentage of

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<sup>36</sup> *Op cit.* n. 11 at 4-6.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey A. Roth and Christopher S. Koper, "Impacts of the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban: 1994-96," INCIJ 173405, (Washington: National Institute of Justice, 1999), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/173405.pdf>, last accessed Mar. 17, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, at 7.

murders before the ban, "it is highly improbable that the assault weapons ban produced an effect this large...."<sup>42</sup> "The ban did not produce declines in the average number of victims per incident of gun murder or of gun murder victims with multiple wounds."<sup>43</sup>

What about "protecting police officers?" This was a reason offered repeatedly for the ban. There was a decline in assault weapons used to murder police officers, but Roth and Koper also admitted that "such incidents are sufficiently rare" that it was impossible to determine whether or not the law reduced gun murders of police officers.<sup>44</sup>

Koper's 2004 final report on the effect of the federal ban on crime rates observes the ban was so narrowly written as to be easily subverted: "Relatively cosmetic changes, such as removing a flash hider or bayonet mount, are sufficient to transform a banned weapon into a legal substitute, and a number of manufacturers now produce modified, legal versions of some of the banned guns ...."<sup>45</sup> One recent reminder was the 2015 San Bernadino terrorist attack in which the shooter purchased one of these slightly altered guns, and modified it to be functionally equivalent to a banned AW.<sup>46</sup> Emphasizing the cosmetic nature of both the named list and functional irrelevance of the specification lists, Koper observes:

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. Removing some or all of these features is sufficient to make the weapons legal. In other respects (e.g, type of firing mechanism, ammunition fired, and the ability to accept a detachable

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<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Op cit.* note 11 at 10.

<sup>46</sup> Josh Richman, San Bernardino shooting stirs gun debate, San Jose Mercury-News, Dec. 4, 2015, [http://www.mercurynews.com/california/ci\\_29204710/san-bernardino-shoots-reignites-californias-gun-debate](http://www.mercurynews.com/california/ci_29204710/san-bernardino-shoots-reignites-californias-gun-debate), last accessed Mar. 17. 2016.

magazine), AWs do not differ from other legal semiautomatic weapons.<sup>47</sup>

If these bans were so easily subverted in ways that did not involve any significant functional change to the firearms available for sale, can such laws qualify as rationally based?

Along with how easily these laws were subverted, Koper summarized other studies showing that the banned guns were used in a tiny percentage of crimes. While the definition of AWs varied across different studies:

According to these accounts, AWs typically accounted for up to 8% of guns used in crime, depending on the specific AW definition and data source used .... A compilation of 38 sources indicated that AWs accounted for 2% of crime guns on average. Similarly, the most common AWs prohibited by the 1994 federal ban accounted for between 1% and 6% of guns used in crime according to most of several national and local data sources examined for this and our prior study ...<sup>48</sup>

By comparison, “knives and other cutting instruments” in 2014 caused 13.1% of U.S. murders.<sup>49</sup> Yet knives can be purchased over the Internet or mail order with no questions asked, even when the search phrase is, “combat knives military” (roughly analogous to “assault weapons”) which returns 1,625 results on Amazon.com with prices starting at \$3.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike AWs, knives are silent, and can be used without neighbors calling 911 to report gunshots. Even publications long supportive of AW bans have sometimes admitted that there was no rational basis for such laws:

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<sup>47</sup> *Op cit.* note 11 at 11.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*, at 15.

<sup>49</sup> FBI, Crime in the United States 2014, Table 7.

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[http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=sp\\_pg\\_3?fst=as%3Aoff&rh=n%3A3375251%2Cn%3A10971181011%2Cn%3A706813011%2Cn%3A3222111011%2Cn%3A3222119011%2Ck%3Acombat+knives+military&page=3&sort=price-asc-rank&keywords=combat+knives+military&ie=UTF8&qid=1457994371](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=sp_pg_3?fst=as%3Aoff&rh=n%3A3375251%2Cn%3A10971181011%2Cn%3A706813011%2Cn%3A3222111011%2Cn%3A3222119011%2Ck%3Acombat+knives+military&page=3&sort=price-asc-rank&keywords=combat+knives+military&ie=UTF8&qid=1457994371). Last accessed March 14, 2016.

But in the 10 years since the previous ban lapsed, even gun control advocates acknowledge a larger truth: The law that barred the sale of assault weapons from 1994 to 2004 made little difference.

It turns out that big, scary military rifles don't kill the vast majority of the 11,000 Americans murdered with guns each year. Little handguns do.

In 2012, only 322 people were murdered with any kind of rifle, F.B.I. data shows.

The continuing focus on assault weapons stems from the media's obsessive focus on mass shootings, which disproportionately involve weapons like the AR-15, a civilian version of the military M16 rifle. This, in turn, obscures some grim truths about who is really dying from gunshots....

One reason: The use of these weapons may be rare over all, but they're used frequently in the gun violence that gets the most media coverage, mass shootings.

The criminologist [James Alan Fox](#) at Northeastern University estimates that there have been an average of 100 victims killed each year in mass shootings over the past three decades. That's less than 1 percent of gun homicide victims.<sup>51</sup>

"We spent a whole bunch of time and a whole bunch of political capital yelling and screaming about assault weapons," Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu of New Orleans said. He called it a "zero sum political fight about a symbolic weapon."<sup>52</sup>

So, if the guns prohibited were a tiny fraction of criminally misused guns, and a tiny fraction of far more commonly used and available murder weapons, why was so much political capital spent on these laws? As Koper's study observes, their use in the highly publicized but rare mass murders gave them a high profile:

Early studies of AWs, though sometimes based on limited and potentially unrepresentative data, also suggested that AWs recovered by police were often associated with drug trafficking and organized crime (Cox Newspapers, 1989; also see Roth and Koper, 1997, Chapter 5),

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<sup>51</sup> Lois Beckett, The Assault Weapon Myth, N.Y. Times, Sep. 14, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/sunday-review/the-assault-weapon-myth.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/sunday-review/the-assault-weapon-myth.html?_r=0), last accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

fueling a **perception** that AWs were guns of choice among drug dealers and other particularly violent groups.<sup>53</sup> [emphasis added]

As Koper points out: “Looking at the nation’s gun crime problem more broadly, however, AWs and LCMs were used in only a minority of gun crimes prior to the 1994 federal ban, and AWs were used in a particularly small percentage of gun crimes.”<sup>54</sup> It hardly needs saying that perception is not reality, although reality is certainly a requirement for an action being reasonable.

Underlying all of the “assault weapon” statutes and ordinances is the explicitly stated belief that they are a public safety hazard. California’s Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act (AWCA) justified its need by: “The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the proliferation and use of assault weapons poses a threat to the health, safety, and security of all citizens of this state.”<sup>55</sup> While the statement might well be true, the same could be said for handguns, knives, and automobiles, all of which caused more deaths than the rarely criminally misused named AWs as we discussed above. In light of the apparent suppression of contrary data on criminal misuse, can this statement of need be adjudicated as rational?

So, AW bans seem to be a strong reaction to a category of weapons that are used far less often for murder than the relatively lightly regulated category of knives. The statutes also seem to be easily subverted by functionally irrelevant changes to firearms.

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<sup>53</sup> *Op cit.* n. 11 at 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 12275.5(a)(1990).

## V. Sentence Length As An Indicator of Irrationality

Looking at the minimum sentences provided for AW violations relative to other crimes gives a pretty clear picture of what the legislatures considered the level of public safety hazard associated with AWs. California’s minimum sentence for possession of an unlicensed machine gun<sup>56</sup> is substantially shorter than the minimum sentence for sale or importation of an “assault weapon.”<sup>57</sup> Even more curiously, possession of a hand grenade is even a lighter sentence than either.<sup>58</sup> (This is a prohibition on functional hand grenades; possession or importation of a “metal military practice handgrenade or metal replica handgrenade” is prohibited elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>) Adding to this strange disparity, the minimum sentence for forcible rape<sup>60</sup> is less than the minimum sentence for import or transfer of an “assault weapon.” Clearly, the California legislature considers “assault weapons” a greater public safety hazard than machine guns, grenades, or rapists, if the severity of the sentence is any indicator. This suggests a panic reaction, not a rational decision.

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<sup>56</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 32625(a) and 1170 (h)(1) (“a felony punishable pursuant to this subdivision where the term is not specified in the underlying offense shall be punishable by a term of imprisonment in a county jail for 16 months, or two or three years.”).

<sup>57</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 30600 (2014) (“[U]pon conviction shall be punished by imprisonment pursuant to subdivision (h) of Section 1170 for four, six, or eight years.”)

<sup>58</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 12301(a)(2) (defines grenade as “destructive device”) and 12301(b) (2014) (“shall be punished by imprisonment in the county jail for a term not to exceed one year, or in state prison, or by a fine not to exceed ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) or by both such fine and imprisonment.”)

<sup>59</sup> Cal. Penal Code § 12020(a)(1)(2014) (“Any person in this state who does any of the following is punishable by imprisonment in a county jail not exceeding one year or in the state prison: . . . Manufactures or causes to be manufactured, imports into the state, keeps for sale, or offers or exposes for sale, or who gives, lends, or possesses any metal military practice handgrenade or metal replica handgrenade. . . .”)

<sup>60</sup> Cal. PenalCode § 264(a)(2014) (“ [R]ape, as defined in Section 261 or 262, is punishable by imprisonment in the state prison for three, six, or eight years.



## VI. Rational Basis Scrutiny

Can AW laws survive “rational basis” scrutiny? What is the legitimate state interest rationally related to AW bans? They affect weapons that are a small minority of criminally misused guns, and which are already subject to substantial federal and state regulations because they are firearms. Weapons that are more commonly used for murder are available for mail order purchase with no similar level of restrictions.

What is the “rational basis” test? In *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center* (1985), the U.S. Supreme Court held that, “The general rule is that legislation is presumed to be valid and will be sustained if the classification drawn by the statute is rationally related to a legitimate state interest.”<sup>61</sup> Preventing mentally delayed people from living a residential neighborhood was not a legitimate state interest.

Many of the existing Equal Protection Clause cases have involved not criminal prosecutions, but administrative actions for which, while there might be genuine concerns about inequality in results, no one would be going to prison. In *Plyer v. Doe* (1977), the Court struck down a law that denied public school education to illegal alien children, upholding a District Court opinion that the discrimination lacked “rational basis.”<sup>62</sup> In *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center* (1985), the city of Cleburne denied a special use permit for a group home for the retarded in a residential neighborhood.<sup>63</sup> In *FCC v. Beach Communications, Inc.* (1993) the Court held that a cable TV company was subject to city

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<sup>61</sup> *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, 473 US 432, 436, 437 (1985).

<sup>62</sup> *Plyer v. Doe*, 457 US 202, 208 (1977).

<sup>63</sup> *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, 473 US 432, 436, 437 (1985).

franchise rules because “transmission lines interconnect separately owned and managed buildings or if its lines use or cross any public right-of-way.”<sup>64</sup>

Worse, the minimum sentences associated with some of these AW bans (such as California’s) are far more severe than those for possession of machine guns and hand grenades, both of which would seem at least as severe a public safety hazard as AWs. That violation of the AW bans is more serious than forcible rape also shows a certain disproportionate reaction by the legislature.

The AW bans impose prison sentences on violators—far more serious a consequence than the largely economic injuries struck down in many of the previously mentioned cases. But there are Supreme Court decisions where there was no “reasonable” connection between the statute and legitimate governmental end<sup>65</sup> and where jail time was the penalty.<sup>66</sup> By comparison, the Supreme Court’s decision *D.C. v. Heller* (2008) explicitly rejects “rational basis” as the standard of scrutiny concerning “the right to keep and bear arms ...” pointing to *U.S. v. Carolene Products* (1938) n. 4.<sup>67</sup>

In *Romer v. Evans* (1996) the Court overruled an amendment to the Colorado State Constitution because:

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<sup>64</sup> *FCC v. Beach Communications, Inc.*, 508 US 307, 311 (1993).

<sup>65</sup> *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390, 399, 400 (1923) (“The established doctrine is that this liberty may not be interfered with, under the guise of protecting the public interest, by legislative action which is arbitrary or without **reasonable** relation to some purpose within the competency of the State to effect.”); *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 US 510, 536 (1925) (“Plaintiffs asked protection against arbitrary, **unreasonable** and unlawful interference with their patrons and the consequent destruction of their business and property.”).

<sup>66</sup> *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 US 390, 397 (1923) (“Any person who violates any of the provisions of this act shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction, shall be subject to a fine of not less than twenty-five dollars (\$25), nor more than one hundred dollars (\$100) or be confined in the county jail for any period not exceeding thirty days for each offense.”)

<sup>67</sup> *D.C. v. Heller*, 128 S. Ct. 2783, 2817 n. 27 (“If all that was required to overcome the right to keep and bear arms was a rational basis, the Second Amendment would be redundant with the separate constitutional prohibitions on irrational laws, and would have no effect.”)

First, the amendment has the peculiar property of imposing a broad and undifferentiated disability on a single named group, an exceptional and, as we shall explain, invalid form of legislation. Second, its sheer breadth is so discontinuous with the reasons offered for it that the amendment seems inexplicable by anything but animus toward the class it affects; it lacks a rational relationship to legitimate state interests.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly,

A second and related point is that laws of the kind now before us raise the inevitable inference that the disadvantage imposed is born of animosity toward the class of persons affected. "[I]f the constitutional conception of 'equal protection of the laws' means anything, it must at the very least mean that a bare . . . desire to harm a politically unpopular group cannot constitute a *legitimate* governmental interest."<sup>69</sup>

The AW bans impose a “broad and undifferentiated disability on a single named group,” a category of firearms that have very little in common except for a somewhat menacing appearance, as well as creating a risk of arrest and prison for their owners. (Those who register them are losing privacy rights even if the AWs remain in their owner’s home.)

Like homosexuals (the protected group in *Romer*), gun owners and sometimes AW owners have been subject to ferocious, often religiously based criticism, comparing them to sexual deviants: “Why can't they stand up and be proud and let the rest of the world know about their guns? Why all this shame over being ‘outed’?”<sup>70</sup> While many of the Tweets below are not specific to AW owners, it is a pretty good assumption that the authors of these bigoted statements would apply them even more to AW owners. Other comments continue in that same frame of denigrating gun owners as sexually confused, inadequate, or terrorists, although often more vulgarly:

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<sup>68</sup> *Romer v. Evans*, 517 US 620, 632 (1996).

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 634.

<sup>70</sup> Comment by honoredcitizen on Noah Rothman, Jeanine Pirro Rips Into Newspaper That Outed Her As A Gun Owner In ‘Pedophile-Like’ Online Map, Mediaite, Jan. 7, 2013, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/jeanine-pirro-rips-into-newspaper-that-outed-her-as-a-gun-owner-in-pedophile-like-online-map/>, last access Mar. 16, 2016.

- The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence Tweeted about the gun industry: “You’d be hard-pressed to imagine a more degenerate, immoral industry.”<sup>71</sup>
- “[W]hat kind of a pussyboy needs a gun at a bbq. ... “[N]o, they have the gun because their sausage is so small, they might have to defend themselves from the pig.”
- With reference to the magazine whose article CSGV was insulting: “Well what do you expect from a porn rag?”<sup>72</sup>
- An article about guns intended for younger or smaller shooters included these comments: “Gun owners are terrorists ...” “They’re nuts.” “How is this different from ISIS sending kids out with bombs strapped to their bodies.” “Like they want them to be terrorists?”<sup>73</sup>
- A poster from CSGV showing Satan has the headline: “If the devil did exist, he’d certainly fetishize weapons designed to take human life.”
- CSGV’s responses to criticism of the religious angle of the poster certainly shows the religious-like fanaticism that drives the contempt.<sup>74</sup> This is another parallel to the assumptions the Romer decision made about the reasons why Coloradoans passed Amendment 2.

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<sup>71</sup> CSGV BBQ Guns 1, <http://gunfreezone.net/index.php/2015/11/20/csgv-discovers-bbq-guns-bigotry-and-stupidity-ensues/csgv-bbq-guns-1/>, last accessed Mar. 17, 2016. The gunfreezone.net web page is archive of Tweets by CSGV and its followers who understandably would not want most of this preserved.

<sup>72</sup> Comments, *Id.*

<sup>73</sup> Comments, <http://gunfreezone.net/index.php/2016/02/24/latest-gun-outrage-is-late/csgv-cricket-2/>, last accessed Mar. 17, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> <http://gunfreezone.net/index.php/2015/07/31/csgv-ratchets-up-the-rhetoric-some-followers-are-not-amused/csgv-devil-1/>, last accessed Mar. 17, 2016.

In response to the CSGV question, “What’s the first word that comes to your mind when you hear ‘Gun Culture’?”<sup>75</sup> Comments again included sexual perversion and bigoted attacks:

- “Probably amosexual. But the vision that comes to mind is more powerful – a bunch of fat, unkempt, white guys walking around with guns in their belts and dangling off their shoulders, in public places attempting to intimidate others, but claiming they aren’t.”
- “[C]oward, fear mongering, disrespectful, misogynist, racist redneck white men that run around with physical penis limitations armed with their penis extensions and their low i.q. scaring me and my friends.”
- “Insecure, bullying rednecks.”
- “Stench.”
- “Hill billies[sic]”
- “IDIOTS REDNECKS STUBBORN UNKIND SELFISH”
- “Under-endowed”
- “Fear of death by intellectually challenged yahoos.”
- “Small dicks”
- “Terrorist”.<sup>76</sup>

One would hope that these will be recognized as bigoted descriptions, much like describing gay men as effeminate child molesters. These comments by gun control

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<sup>75</sup> <http://gunfreezone.net/index.php/2015/07/15/csgv-hitting-every-branch-of-the-bigot-tree-on-their-way-down/csgv-gun-culture-2/>, last accessed Mar. 17, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Comments, *Id.*

organizations and activists are probably not typical of Americans, in the same way that the Westboro Baptist Church of “God Hates Fags!” is hardly typical of the support for Colorado’s Amendment Two at the heart of the Romer decision, but it certainly shows the same irrational bigotry.

Others have been less anonymous in their comparisons and denigration.

If you own multiple guns or feel the need to possess a military-style assault weapon, it's because you have a small penis. ... But owning lots of guns or pseudo-machine guns means you have a tiny wiener and you're incredibly self-conscious about it. That's the plain and simple truth, even if it's not true.<sup>77</sup>

That last sentence can be read several different ways, but when your claim is that is that something is truth even though not true, you have defined “not rational.”

Another problem with AW bans is that owners of assault weapons are rejected as legitimate citizens. After New York passed the SAFE Act in 2013, Governor Cuomo made it very clear that people who disagreed with the SAFE Act should leave the state, albeit on less severe conditions than Gov. Boggs’ order to the Mormons in 1838:

Are they these extreme conservatives who are right-to-life, pro-assault-weapon, anti-gay? Is that who they are? Because if that's who they are and they're the extreme conservatives, they have no place in the state of New York, because that's not who New Yorkers are.<sup>78</sup>

Cuomo essentially told AW owners that they were outside the legitimate membership of the polity of New York, almost like they were illegal aliens (the parallel to Plyer). While journalists and gun control advocates might properly be considered outside the mainstream, the elected governor of New York is not.

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<sup>77</sup> Todd Hartley, I’m With Stupid, ASPEN TIMES, Dec. 28, 2012, <http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20121228/COLUMN/121229911>, last accessed Mar. 16, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Jesse McKinley, Comment by Cuomo Outrages Republicans, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/nyregion/cuomo-comment-elicits-retort-from-republicans.html? r=0>, last accessed March 16, 2016.,

Court decisions have also demonstrated an irrational basis for such laws.

Upholding an Illinois city AW ban, Judge Easterbrook wrote:

If it has no other effect, Highland Park's ordinance may increase the public's sense of safety. Mass shootings are rare, but they are highly salient, and people tend to overestimate the likelihood of salient events. . . . If a ban on semiautomatic guns and large-capacity magazines reduces the perceived risk from a mass shooting, and makes the public feel safer as a result, that's a substantial benefit.<sup>79</sup>

The same reasoning could have been applied to uphold the constitutional provision struck down in *Romer*: “Colorado voters may be irrational in their bigotry against homosexuals, but if it reduces their perceived risk of homosexuals being given free rein to molest children, that’s a substantial benefit.” Clearly, when the courts argue that *feeling* safer is a legitimate reason to do something that makes no *real* difference in public safety, this is the definition of irrational. It makes people feel better, but without any actual basis in fact.

## VII. AW Bans Fail Rational Basis Analysis

The evidence is clear that AW bans fail rational basis scrutiny because AWs are seldom criminally misused relative to more readily accessible weapons. The disproportionate minimum sentences in California’s AWCA law relative to much more dangerous weapons suggests a panic reaction that is hardly rational. The comments of journalists, elected officials, and gun control activists reveal bigotry that makes Colorado Amendment 2 seem pretty calm by comparison. Even the courts are reduced to arguing that *perceived* benefit as opposed to *actual* benefit is a sufficient reason to uphold bans.

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<sup>79</sup> *Friedman v. City of Highland Park, Illinois*, 784 F. 3d 406, 412 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2015).

There is no way to hold that AW bans which deny a fundamental right, as Heller determined the Second Amendment to protect, survives the “rational basis” standard of scrutiny.