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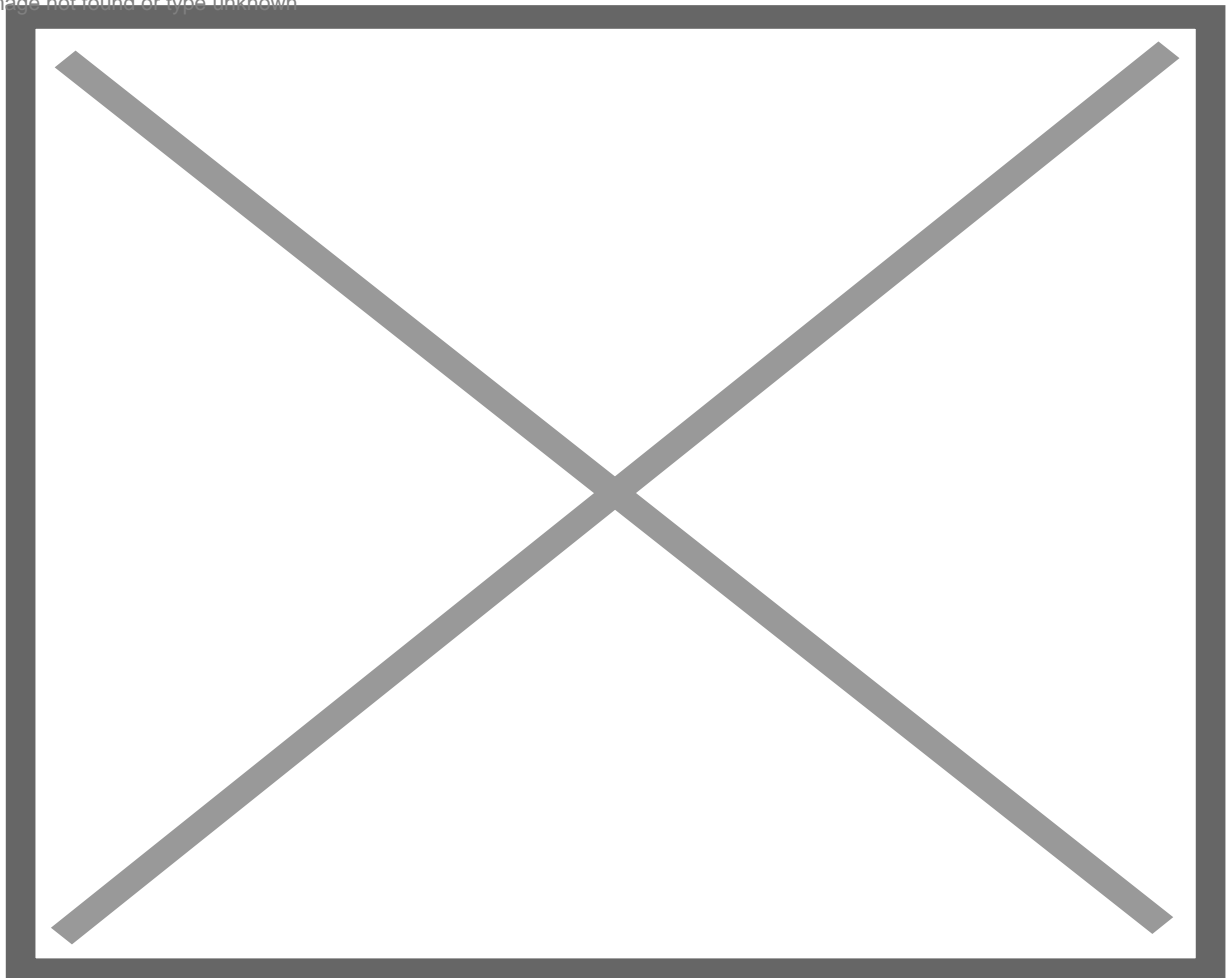
Banning Assault Weapons Won't Decrease Street Crime, Lawmakers Told. They Voted In Favor of The Ban Anyway

Bill 36-0144 bans assault rifles, large-capacity magazines, and suppressors while mandating safety training. Sen. Joseph insists the measure saves lives, but VIPD urges moderation, Gov. Bryan warns of unintended consequences, and gun owners fear overreach

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The CCMG Dissent MK4, an assault-style firearm lawmakers say poses a threat due to its concealability, armor-piercing potential, and compatibility with suppressors and military-grade accessories.

Despite public concern over potential Second Amendment infringement, lawmakers voted in favor of a bill that prohibits assault rifles and ban suppressors and silencers in the territory, citing alignment with constitutional rights and the need to preserve public safety.

As Attorney General Gordon Rhea noted, the Second Amendment is not an “unfettered right.” While individual citizens have the right to bear arms, “the community has legal authority under the Constitution to protect itself,” he argued.

[Bill 36-0144](#), sponsored by Senator Clifford Joseph Sr., goes further than defining and prohibiting assault rifles and banning suppressors and silencers. The measure also requires safety training for licensed rifle and shotgun holders and prohibits large-capacity magazines. Sen. Joseph presented the proposed legislation before the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety on Thursday.

He emphasized that the bill does not “intend to infringe on the Second Amendment rights afforded to our citizens” but instead seeks to “prohibit weapons of war from our streets.” He argued that assault weapons continue to pose a “serious threat to public safety” and are designed for “maximum damage.” Aware of some opposition, Joseph maintained that “no civilian needs access to firearms [with the] capability of firing dozens of rounds in a matter of moments.”

Bill 36-0144 explicitly mentioned weapons such as the Sig Sauer MCX pistol, the Daniel Defense DDM4 PDW, CCMG Dissent MK4, and Smith & Wesson M&P 15. The draft legislation states that weapons such as these “pose a distinct threat to law enforcement and the public, particularly due to their concealability, armor-piercing potential, and compatibility with suppressors, rifle scopes, and military-grade accessories.”

Senator Joseph has insisted that the bill does not take away gun owners’ rights, but “is about making responsible life-saving choices.”

The bill has received some support of the V.I. Police Department, with Assistant Commissioner Sean Santos explaining that it “fits squarely within [the] Supreme Court's Second Amendment framework.” The Supreme Court, explained Mr. Santos, “has long recognized the Second Amendment protects firearms in common use for lawful purposes while allowing restrictions on dangerous and unusual weapons.” The ban on suppressors too, is on “firm constitutional footing,” Mr. Santos argued.

While Assistant Commissioner Santos agreed that the bill only targets “excessively dangerous arms”, he called the “outright prohibition” “overly broad.” As it stands, the blanket bans could “negatively impact lawful owners of these firearms who use them for lawful purposes,” he acknowledged. Bill 36-0144 states that any individual in possession of one of the weapons defined in the proposed measure must surrender it to the VIPD within 90 days of the legislation's enactment. The bill also offers options to transfer the weapon off-island through a “federally licensed firearm dealer” and then “surrender any firearm license issued for the firearm to VIPD for immediate revocation.”

It is not certain, though, if Bill 36-1044 will receive Governor Albert Bryan Jr’s stamp of approval. In January, he [complained to the Consortium](#) that restrictive gun laws were driving more residents to obtain illegal firearms. He proposed a new system that simplified legal gun ownership.

Assistant Commissioner Santos has urged the bill’s sponsor to consider restricting the use of the weapons in question to within the home for the “express purpose of self-defense and the

protection of their families and properties” and for target practice at “licensed shooting ranges and facilities.” In keeping with that proposed modification, he requested that Sen. Joseph delete the provision of mandatory surrender. As far as the VIPD is aware, two such weapons are registered in the territory, both in the St. Thomas/St. John district.

Lawmakers like Senator Novelle Francis and Ray Fonseca seemed to agree with the assistant commissioner, and urged a “balanced” approach. Senator Fonseca, for his part, was cautious about potentially penalizing licensed firearm holders. “We don’t want them in jail because they didn’t turn it in in 90 days...I’m sure we’ll be a little bit flexible,” he said.

It became apparent on Thursday that many licensed firearm holders are at odds with lawmakers when it comes to Bill 36-0144. A letter from the Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners organization was shared during Thursday’s meeting, but not placed on the record. In the correspondence, the group’s founder Kosei Ohno wrote that there are “better approaches” to making the territory’s streets safer. He expressed concern that the bill would violate the Second Amendment, and unintentionally invite federal oversight “in the form of another Consent Decree.”

Mr. Ohno offered several additional reasons for the group’s opposition, including the “burden on law-abiding citizens”, “economic impact”, and “ineffectiveness in reducing crime.” Mr. Ohno is currently [suing the VIPD](#) over what he claims to be the unlawful blocking of his application to renew a license for one of his firearms.

It has long been acknowledged that licensed firearm holders rarely commit gun crime. Senator Milton Potter’s stated concern was whether the “outright ban on assault rifles would curb this increase in violent crime that we’re seeing on the streets.”

“The answer is no,” stated Assistant Commissioner Santos. It’s why he says he prefers restriction instead of prohibition.

“Unfortunately, banning things usually pushes these illegal activity further underground than it already is,” Antonio Emmanuel, director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, had agreed earlier in the discussion. Nonetheless, he admitted that “if I had to take a side, I would agree doing something is better than doing nothing.” He suggested careful consideration of which weapons should be banned.

The bill’s sponsor had already assumed a similar position. “I can live with knowing that I tried to stop access to weapons of war from being accessible to bad actors trained to bring harm to people,” he said in his introduction of the bill.

An amended version of Bill 36-0144 will be considered in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. The reading of the amendments, however, was waived during Thursday’s meeting.