

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

November 14, 1997

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY

SUBJECT: Importation of Modified Semiautomatic
Assault-Type Rifles

The Gun Control Act of 1968 restricts the importation of firearms unless they are determined to be particularly suitable for or readily adaptable to sporting purposes. In 1989, the Department of the Treasury (the Department) conducted a review of existing criteria for applying the statutory test based on changing patterns of gun use. As a result of that review, 43 assault-type rifles were specifically banned from importation. However, manufacturers have modified many of those weapons banned in 1989 to remove certain military features without changing their essential operational mechanism. Examples of such weapons are the Galil and the Uzi.

In recent weeks Members of Congress have strongly urged that it is again necessary to review the manner in which the Department is applying the sporting purposes test, in order to ensure that the agency's practice is consistent with the statute and current patterns of gun use. A letter signed by 30 Senators strongly urged that modified assault-type weapons are not properly importable under the statute and that I should use my authority to suspend temporarily their importation while the Department conducts an intensive, expedited review. A recent letter from Senator Dianne Feinstein emphasized again that weapons of this type are designed not for sporting purposes but for the commission of crime. In addition, 34 Members of the House of Representatives signed a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu requesting that he intervene to stop all sales of Galils and Uzis into the United States. These concerns have caused the Government of Israel to announce a temporary moratorium on the exportation of Galils and Uzis so that the United States can review the importability of these weapons under the Gun Control Act.

The number of weapons at issue underscores the potential threat to the public health and safety that necessitates immediate action. Firearms importers have obtained permits to import nearly 600,000 modified assault-type rifles. In addition, there are pending before the Department applications to import more than 1 million additional such weapons. The number of rifles covered by outstanding permits is comparable to that which existed in 1989 when the Bush Administration temporarily suspended import permits for assault-type rifles. The number of weapons for which permits for importation are being sought through pending applications is approximately 10 times greater than in 1989. The number of such firearms for which import applications have been filed has skyrocketed from 10,000 on October 9, 1997, to more than 1 million today.

My Administration is committed to enforcing the statutory restrictions on importation of firearms that do not meet the sporting purposes test. It is necessary that we ensure that the statute is being correctly applied and that the current use of these modified weapons is consistent with the statute's criteria for importability. This review should be conducted at once on an expedited basis. The review is directed to weapons such as the Uzi and Galil that failed to meet the sporting purposes test in 1989, but were later found importable when certain military features were removed. The results of this review should be applied to all pending and future applications.

The existence of outstanding permits for nearly 600,000 modified assault-type rifles threatens to defeat the purpose of the expedited review unless, as in 1989, the Department temporarily suspends such permits. Importers typically obtain authorization to import firearms in far greater numbers than are actually imported into the United States. However, gun importers could effectively negate the impact of any Department determination by simply importing weapons to the maximum amount allowed by their permits. The public health and safety require that the only firearms allowed into the United States are those that meet the criteria of the statute.

Accordingly, as we discussed, you will:

- 1) Conduct an immediate expedited review not to exceed 120 days in length to determine whether modified semiautomatic assault-type rifles are properly importable under the statutory sporting purposes test. The results of this review will govern action on pending and future applications for import permits, which shall not be acted upon until the completion of this review.

2) Suspend outstanding permits for importation of modified semiautomatic assault-type rifles for the duration of the 120-day review period. The temporary suspension does not constitute a permanent revocation of any license. Permits will be revoked only if and to the extent that you determine that a particular weapon does not satisfy the statutory test for importation, and only after an affected importer has an opportunity to make its case to the Department.

William J. Curran