



Tragedy in Lewiston

Analysis and reaction from the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine Institute for Legislative Action (SAM-ILA)

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PART 2 – THE AR-15

Will we be blaming the gun again, and not the shooter?

“Assault Weapon” is an Invented Political Term

by David Trahan, SAM-ILA Executive Director

Call it what it is—a semi-automatic firearm that looks frightening to those who do not understand the difference between “military-grade” firearms and civilian-owned firearms designed for hunting and personal defense.

Years ago, the gun control lobby figured out their “gun control” messaging was a failure. They needed a fresh new message and words that duped the uneducated while appealing to those who did not want to own firearms. And so emerged new terms like “assault weapon” and “gun safety” replacing failed terms like semi-automatic and gun control.

What is an “assault weapon?” In their headlong rush to ban them, lawyers, and

politicians (most recently by Maine’s own Senator Angus King) have struggled to answer that question. There is a good reason why they struggle—civilian assault weapons do not exist! “Assault weapon” is nothing more than a political term meant to create the illusion that bad guys can own military guns, and to deceive the public into thinking they are banning machine guns. The term is meant to evoke carnage and death, and to create fear: i.e., images of war. Truth is, any inanimate object—including a carpenter’s hammer used in a violent manner—can be an assault weapon.

Ownership of automatic firearms has been illegal in the US since 1934. In addition, no American can collect or own a

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fully automatic firearm imported or manufactured since 1986. You might also be surprised to learn that since 1934, there have only been four incidents in which a fully automatic firearm was used in crimes where someone was killed. Two involved police officers who illegally used automatic firearms. That is it.

So, what is the difference between automatic and semi-automatic firearms?

An **automatic firearm (or machine gun)** is defined as, “an autoloading firearm that continuously chambers **and fires** rounds when the trigger mechanism is actuated.” The excess energy released from the previous discharge loads the next round while also igniting it. In 1884, a Maine inventor, Hiram Maxim, built the first machine gun. There are 741,000 automatic guns registered in the U.S.

A **semi-automatic firearm** is defined as, “a firearm which automatically loads the next round, **but will only fire one round per trigger pull.**” Ferdinand Ritter designed the first semi-automatic rifle in 1885, 139 years ago. It is very difficult to estimate exactly, but conservative estimates are there are now well over 100 million semi-automatic firearms of various types

in the U.S., of which just under 25 million are AR-style semi-automatic rifles. Incidentally, “AR” stands for “Armalite Rifle,” not assault rifle or Army rifle. It is named after the company that first designed these rifles in the 1950s, using lightweight aircraft metals instead of wooden stocks.

Contrary to what gun control groups would have you believe, Armalite Rifles in the .223 caliber, (AR-15s) are used for target shooting and hunting predators like coyote,

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fox, and bobcat as well as varmints such as woodchucks, gophers, and prairie dogs. The AR-15’s small caliber bullet is accurate and flat shooting at long distances (200 to 300 yards), and it preserves valuable hides because of their minimal damage on animals weighing less than 40 lbs.

The AR platform is also versatile; it can accommodate a wide range of optics and accessories which are easily customized. AR-15s are simple to use and come in several calibers, including .22 rimfire. They are cost-effective for practice at the range, and they make a formidable home defense firearm. In addition, their stocks are adjustable and can be easily fitted for all body sizes.

The Armalite Rifle chambered in .308 caliber, (the AR-10) is a large game caliber

used by many hunters. The AR-10 has all the same design advantages as the AR-15, but its heavier caliber is more suitable for hunting deer, moose, black bear, caribou, and elk.

Civilians do NOT own “Assault Weapons.” That is a political term concocted by gun control advocates.

Let us take a closer look at these two words: **assault** and **weapon**. Weapon means “something (such as a club, knife, or gun) used to injure, defeat, or destroy,” for example: a nuclear weapon. And an assault is, “a violent physical or verbal attack, a

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military attack usually involving direct combat with enemy forces.”

Labeling a whole class of civilian firearms as “assault weapons” implies that the U.S. citizens who purchased them did so with the intent to inflict harm or death on

fellow humans. That definition and term is only appropriate for military grade automatic firearms (weapons of war), which are already illegal for the general population to own. It is **not** an appropriate term for the semi-automatic firearms built for and sold to law-abiding Americans for hunting, recreational shooting, and if necessary, self-defense.

Defining the AR and other semi-automatic firearms as “assault weapons,” as gun control advocates do, is a deliberate attempt to confuse and frighten Americans who are less familiar with the true nature of these sporting arms.

What types of firearms are used to commit murders?

Gun control advocates would have you believe that there is an epidemic of gun violence sweeping the nation involving semi-automatic rifles. They imply that if we just ban AR-style rifles, there will be no more mass shootings. Gun control advocates are wrong on both. This quote from the Joslyn Law Firm says it best.

“Using FBI homicide statistics from the 2019 Crime in the United States report, the insights team at the Joslyn Law Firm charted out how often different types of weapons were used in homicides in the U.S.. Of the 16,425 homicides that occurred in 2019, the FBI was able to collect supplemental data for 13,922 of them, which is what our data is based on. The weapon types are broken down into the different types of firearms: handguns, rifles, shotguns, and a category for homicides in which the type of firearm was unknown. It also compares the number of homicides that were committed by non-firearm weapons such as knives or cutting instruments as well as bodily weapons, which include people’s hands, fists, and feet. Non-firearm weapons were used for one-quarter of all homicides in the United States.

Would a ban on AR-style rifles help to curb the violence? With rifles being a relatively uncommon type of weapon used in homicides in the United States, a ban on AR-type rifles may not make much difference when it comes to the number of murders that occur. Homicides are overwhelmingly committed using handguns; they were found to be the most common mur-

der weapon for nearly half of all homicides in the United States in 2019. Even hands, fists, and feet are used to commit homicide almost twice as often as a rifle is. An NIH study that investigated the levels of criminal activity committed with AR rifles or other high-capacity semiautomatics also found that these types of weapons are only being used in a small percentage of crimes: “Assault weapons (primarily assault-type rifles) account for 2-12% of guns used in crime in general (most estimates suggest less than 7%).” [Note the misuse of the term “assault weapon” to describe the AR rifle and other semi-automatic rifles, which is so pervasive in the US today.] Wouldn’t all the time, money, and resources being used to push for an AR rifle ban be better used elsewhere, such as creating a better mental health-care system that is accessible to those who need it most?

To understand how homicides compare to other preventable deaths in America, last year 109,680 people died from drug overdoses.

Each of these deaths is tragic and they all warrant our commitment to prevent them to the degree practicable. Based on

the above statistics, rifles, including the AR platform, are used far less often to commit homicide than other firearms or other non-firearm means. Yet, the strategy by gun control advocates is always the same: blame the guns instead of the person committing the crime.

What happened in Lewiston was a horrible and preventable tragedy and this event will undoubtedly lead to attempts to change firearm policy, both in Maine and nationally. But will policy makers again target the firearm used, or will they pursue the much more difficult path of dealing with individuals who reach for a weapon of one form or another when in crisis?

Unfortunately, a lone wolf shooter knows in the end either he, or the police will likely take his life. For reasons known only to them, this type of shooter’s intent is to inflict maximum carnage against innocent civilians. In a sense, they are often mentally ill or suicidal terrorists. Would a lone wolf shooter suddenly decide not to kill if we made a whole class of firearms illegal for law abiding citizens? Not likely. They would just choose another lethal means. Or they will acquire these firearms illegally.

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Preventing future Lewiston type tragedies is nearly impossible when you ask the wrong questions.

“Many mass shooters are suicidal prior to going into those attacks, and these mass shootings are a spectacle of violence. They want the world to see the pain that they are enduring. And so, if we can understand the despair that drives them, we can hopefully do something to prevent tragedies from occurring.” Minnesota Public Radio News, 4/6/23

This short paragraph in the MPR story titled, “How re-framing mass shootings as suicide could help prevent them,” by Tom Crann and Megan Burks, April 6, 2023, reveals a completely different approach to shootings like the Lewiston tragedy. Unfortunately, the knee-jerk response from the gun control groups and the press are all too predictable. Within hours, before any facts or details become available, inevitably my phone rings. And the question is always the same: “What gun control laws need to change?”

Gun control groups like to lump all firearm-related deaths into one category, which inflates the numbers to foster a sense of crisis. Gun suicides and homicides lumped together with a lone wolf shooting like Lewiston support the narrative that “too many guns are the problem,” not the individuals committing the act. This approach has been politically successful, but it has not ended mass shootings. That is a critical difference.

Treating all violent crimes involving firearms, (drug related murders, suicides, and premeditated mass casualty shootings etc.) in the same way may be expedient politics, but it is bad policy. Each violent crime category is distinctly different and each warrants different approaches to prevention. Minnesota Public Radio did an eye-opening piece (quoted above) that revealed a much different way to prevent premeditated shootings targeting random victims. It involves treating the perpetrator like an individual, and identifying what is driving their hate and despair, instead of focusing on their weapon of choice.

The following excerpts from that piece are also relevant. Following each, I will explain how the Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine, Institute for Legislative Action

(SAM-ILA), drafted and, working with the Governor and Congress, passed meaningful policy changes. None of these policies impacted our Second Amendment rights, and they were passed with bipartisan support.

Excerpts from the MPR story: *“Well, a great example of this is around safe storage of firearms. In the vast majority of K-12 school shooting cases, perpetrators are themselves school children, and how they get access to firearms is that they have not been secured safely in the home. So that is something that in many ways doesn’t need an act of Congress or is not particularly controversial.”*

The SAM-ILA, working with then-state representative and now SAM-ILA board member Patrick Corey, introduced legislation to exempt gun safes, lock boxes and

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other safe storage devices from state sales taxes. Rep. Corey also agreed to introduce legislation creating the Maine School Safety Center at the Department of Education: In addition to recommending physical security in all Maine schools, the Safety Center works to resolve all issues nega-

tively impacting young people in a school setting.

Working with state Senator Deschambault and Governor Mills, we introduced Safe Homes legislation to create an educational and awareness program on the importance of safely storing dangerous weapons and prescription drugs. In addition, the legislation created a new grant program to assist groups, such as veterans and our youth who may present higher risks of suicide, with safe options for firearm storage and use.

Quoting again from the MPR story: *“We’ve also seen in our data, a real increase in the use of AR-15-style assault weapons [There are those word choices again!]. And many people point to the utility of that weapon, that it is dangerous and so on. But I think what is more interesting from our research is that there is a copycat phenomenon involved with these shootings. And if you want your shooting to conform with the sort of genre conventions of a mass shooting in America, you follow the template of the shooters who have come before you and sometimes that means using the very same weapons.”*

This quote is very important. The logic of the authors and researchers is spot-on: outlawing the gun will not change or prevent the outcome of the attack in a significant way. It just changes the weapon of choice.

Again, from the MPR story: *“The thing about mass shooters is this: before they ever pulled the trigger, every mass shooter was*

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somebody's son, somebody's brother, somebody's classmate, somebody's colleague, somebody's neighbor. And if we recognize them as the human beings that they were before they pulled the trigger, perhaps they would have never done it in the first place."

Tragically, this quote perfectly describes the events leading up to the Lewiston shooting. Robert Card was somebody's father, husband, son, brother, and a military reservist. He was once a hero and a typical American. Unfortunately, he showed obvious signs of deteriorating mental health resulting in escalating paranoia and a growing penchant for violence.

The laws and systems were in place to identify his risk to himself and society, and to get him the care he obviously needed. Unfortunately, these systems were not implemented. Nowhere has it been shown that another gun control law or banning certain types of firearms would have prevented this tragedy. Just the opposite: all evidence points to human failures, not the need for more laws.

The overwhelming majority of American gun owners would never contemplate or justify killing innocent people. We live in a civilized society, and we believe in the rule of law. In a sense, gun control activ-

ists are demanding that the millions of firearms owners who are law-abiding citizens, and who pose no risk to anyone, give up their personal liberties and safety, so that anti-gun activists can pretend to feel safer. The gun control lobby's demand to disarm the American populace is based on misguided emotion, not fact. Accordingly, such an act would fail to prevent future mass shootings. Instead, gun bans just make it less safe for all of us, while empowering criminals who can acquire firearms illegally.