



Key Points About Assault Weapons

- 1. Semiautomatic assault weapons are civilian versions of military assault weapons.** Even though the gun industry prefers to call semiautomatic assault weapons “modern sporting rifles,” there are no significant differences between them and military assault weapons.
- 2. Military assault weapons are selective-fire.** That is, they are capable of fully automatic fire—or three-shot bursts—as well as semiautomatic fire.
- 3. Civilian assault weapons are *not* machine guns.** They are semiautomatic weapons. (Since 1986 federal law has banned the sale to civilians of new machine guns.) The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon must be pulled separately for each round fired. A machine gun will continue to fire as long as the trigger is held down until the ammunition magazine is empty. It is a mistake to call civilian assault weapons “automatic weapons” or “machine guns.”
- 4. This is a distinction without a difference in terms of killing power.** Civilian semiautomatic assault weapons incorporate all of the functional design features that make assault weapons so deadly. They are arguably more deadly than military versions, because most experts agree that semiautomatic fire is more accurate than automatic fire. As the U.S. Army’s Rifle and Carbine Training Circular notes, “Automatic and burst fires drastically decrease the probability of hit due to the rapid succession of recoil impulses and the inability of the Soldier to maintain proper sight alignment and sight picture on the target.”
- 5. The distinctive “look” of assault weapons is not cosmetic. It is the visual result of specific functional design decisions.** Military assault weapons were designed and developed for a specific military purpose—laying down a high volume of fire over a wide killing zone.
- 6. Civilian assault weapons keep the specific functional design features that make this anti-personnel function easy.** These functional features also distinguish assault weapons from traditional sporting guns.
- 7. The most significant assault weapon functional design features are: (1) ability to accept a detachable high-capacity ammunition magazine, (2) a rear pistol or thumb-hole grip, and, (3) a forward grip or barrel shroud.** Taken together, these are the design features that make possible the deadly and indiscriminate “spray-firing” for which assault weapons are designed. None of them are features of true hunting or sporting guns.
- 8. Although the gun lobby today argues that there is no such thing as civilian assault weapons, the industry, the National Rifle Association, and gun magazines enthusiastically described these civilian versions as “assault rifles,” “assault pistols,” and “military assault” weapons to boost civilian sales throughout the 1980s.** The industry and its allies only began to use the semantic argument that a “true” assault weapon is a machine gun after civilian assault weapons turned up in large numbers in the hands of drug traffickers, criminal gangs, mass murderers, and other dangerous criminals.

What Is a Semiautomatic Assault Weapon?

Semiautomatic assault weapons are civilian versions of automatic military assault rifles (like the M-16 and AK-47) and automatic military assault pistols (like the UZI).

These guns look the same because they are virtually identical, save for one feature: military assault rifles are machine guns. A machine gun fires continuously as long as its trigger is held back—until it runs out of ammunition. Civilian assault rifles are *semi*-automatic weapons. The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon must be pulled back separately for each round fired.

Because federal law has banned the sale of new machine guns to civilians since 1986,¹² and heavily regulates sales to civilians of older model machine guns, there is virtually no civilian market for military assault weapons. The gun industry introduced semiautomatic versions of military assault weapons in order to create and exploit new civilian markets for these deadly weapons.

What's So Bad About Semiautomatic Assault Weapons?

Assault weapons did not “just happen.” They were developed to meet specific combat needs. All assault weapons—military and civilian alike—incorporate specific features that were designed to provide a specific military combat function. That military function is *laying down a high volume of fire over a wide killing zone*. Civilian assault weapons keep the specific design features that make this deadly spray-firing easy. These features also distinguish assault weapons from traditional sporting firearms.

The distinctive “look” of assault weapons is not merely “cosmetic,” as the gun lobby often argues—the assault weapon’s appearance is the result of the design of the gun following its function. A brief summary of how assault weapons came into being makes clear the reason for, and the nature of, their distinctive design features.

The problem of trench warfare. The roots of military assault weapons lie in the trench fighting of the First World War. The standard infantry weapon of that conflict was the long-range battle rifle. “Infantrymen in most armies were equipped with high-powered rifles: long, unwieldy, but accurate to ranges of 1,000 m (3,280 ft) or more. But a long weapon was a definite handicap in the close-quarter fighting of the trenches, and long-range capability was wasted when combat usually took place at ranges of tens of metres or less.”¹³

Submachine guns—the intermediate step. When armies bogged down in the World War I trenches, weapons designers looked for ways to break the bloody stalemate. Among them was the submachine gun, designed to be a “compact, fast-firing, short-range weapon” for use in the trenches and by highly mobile storm troops in new tactical formations.¹⁴ According to the *Illustrated Book of Guns*, “A submachine gun (SMG) is a close-range, automatic weapon, firing pistol cartridges (e.g., 9mm Parabellum), and is compact, easy to carry, and light enough to be fired from either the shoulder or the hip.”¹⁵

The final step—the first assault rifle. The last step in the evolution of the military assault rifle came during the Second World War. It grew out of the German military’s pre-war interest in “obtaining a relatively high-power intermediate or mid-range cartridge *and corresponding weapon* for infantry application.”¹⁶ (Emphasis added). German military thinkers realized that, “Since most infantry action took place at ranges under 400 meters, the long-range potential of the standard cartridge and service rifle were actually wasted.”¹⁷ There were also logistical problems in supplying armies in the field with different kinds of rounds of ammunition: the larger rifle cartridges for the battle rifle and the smaller pistol cartridges for the submachine guns.¹⁸ As one expert noted, “During their Operation Barbarossa (Russian) campaign and elsewhere, the Germans were continually reminded of the ever-increasing need for a rapid fire arm that was small enough to be convenient to hand carry, but at the same time possessed sufficient range and power to be adequate out to about 200 meters.”¹⁹

The result of German research and development was the STG (*Sturmgewehr*) (“storm gun”) 44, the “father of all assault rifles....After the war it was examined and dissected by almost every major gunmaking nation and led, in one way and another, to the present-day 5.56mm assault rifles.”²⁰



STG-44 on top, Sig Sauer MCX on bottom

Deadly designs. One thing leaps out from the pictures above: the remarkable similarity of the first assault rifle to the Sig Sauer MCX and other assault rifles currently being marketed by gunmakers. This family resemblance is not a coincidence. From the STG-44 “storm gun” to the MCX “true mission-adaptable weapon system,” assault weapons have incorporated into their design *specific* features that enable shooters to spray a large number of bullets over a broad killing zone, without having to aim at each individual target. These features not only give assault weapons a distinctive appearance, they make it easy to simply point the gun while rapidly pulling

the trigger—including firing from the hip, a procedure seldom used in hunting anything but human beings. The most important of these design features are:

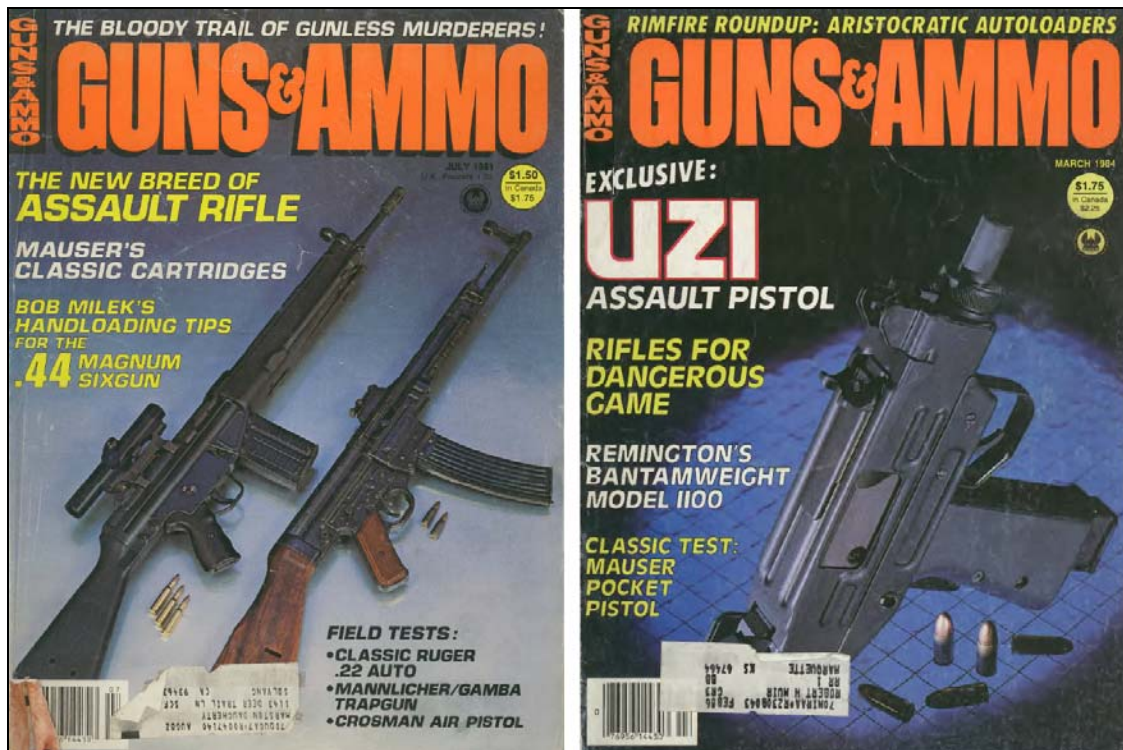
- **“High-capacity” detachable ammunition magazines** that hold as many as 100 rounds of ammunition. “This allows the high volume of fire critical to the ‘storm gun’ concept.”²¹
- **A rear pistol grip** (handle), including so-called “thumb-hole stocks” and magazines that function like pistol grips.
- **A forward grip or barrel shroud.** Forward grips (located under the barrel or the forward stock) “give a shooter greater control over a weapon during recoil.”²² Forward grips and barrel shrouds also make it possible to hold the gun with the non-trigger hand, even though the barrel gets extremely hot from firing multiple rounds.

These design features create the ability to quickly lay down a high volume of fire, making semiautomatic assault weapons a particularly dangerous addition to the civilian gun market. They explain why assault weapons are favored by terrorists, mass killers, and violent criminals, and they distinguish such weapons from true hunting and target guns.

Deliberate, aimed fire from the shoulder may be more accurate than the spray-firing for which assault weapons were designed. But mass murderers and other violent criminals drawn to assault weapons are not after marksmanship medals. They want to kill or maim as many people as possible in as short a time as possible—the exact job for which the semiautomatic assault weapon was designed.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation’s “Modern Sporting Rifle” Rebranding Campaign.

The National Rifle Association, the gun industry, the gun press, and other pro-gun “experts” today claim that there is no such thing as a civilian “assault weapon.” They prefer to call them “tactical rifles” or “modern sporting rifles.” But before these types of guns came under fire, these same experts enthusiastically described exactly these civilian versions as “assault rifles,” “assault pistols,” and “military assault” weapons as seen, in just one stark example, from the magazine covers on the next page.



In November 2008, *The Shooting Wire* reported that the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF)—“due to gun owners’ concerns over President-elect Obama and possible legislation regulating the Second Amendment rights of Americans”—had placed on its website a “media resource...to help clear up much of the confusion and misinformation about so-called ‘assault weapons.’”²³

This was the opening salvo in the industry’s meretricious campaign to “rebrand” semiautomatic assault weapons as “modern sporting rifles.” The point of the campaign—inspired by the pummeling the industry gets for selling killing machines—is apparently that semiautomatic assault rifles are really just another sporting gun, no different from an older generation of bolt-action and low-capacity rifles.

But some within the gun industry’s own ranks continue to call semiautomatic assault rifles what they are—*assault* rifles—and even write lurid prose promoting the worst features of these guns.

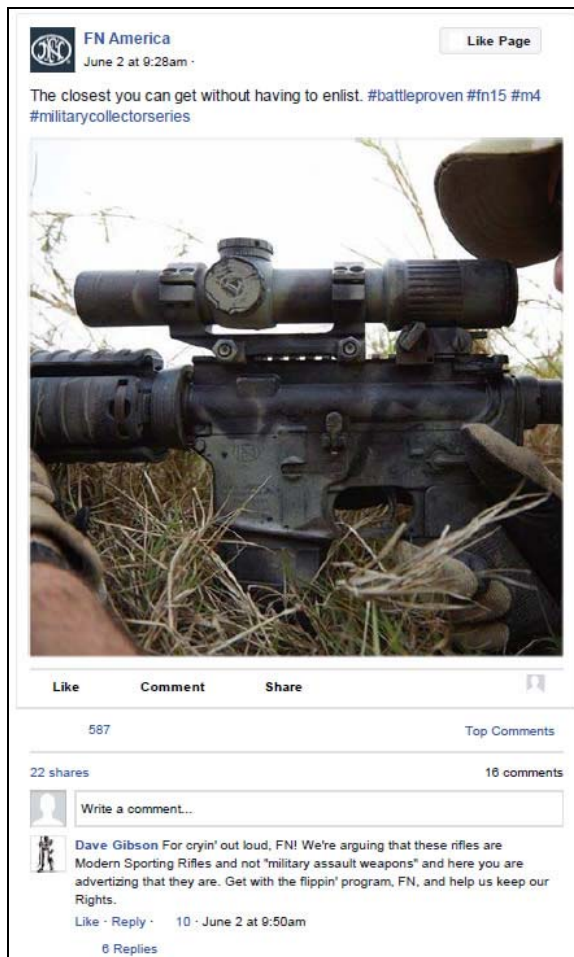
For example, the August 2010 edition of *Gun World* magazine heralded “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle” as “‘Combat Customized’ From the Factory.”²⁴ Among other outbursts of naked candor in the enthusiastic article were the following—

- “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle is a version of the well-established Mini-14 incorporating many of the assault rifle features that end users have being [sic] applying themselves for decades, this time straight from the factory.”

- “Being seen over the years as a sort of ‘poor man’s assault rifle’ the Mini-14 has spawned a huge array of after-market parts that may be applied to make it more ‘assault rifle-y.’ Recently Sturm, Ruger & Co. finally decided to get into the act themselves by producing their Mini-14 Tactical Rifles.”

More recently, in June 2016 on its Facebook page, assault weapon manufacturer FN America posted a picture of one of its assault rifles with the heading, “The closest you can get without having to enlist.” It was followed by the hash tags #battleproven, #fn15, #m4, and #militarycollectorseries. In reaction to the post, one commenter wrote:

For cryin’ out loud, FN! We’re arguing that these rifles are Modern Sporting Rifles and not “military assault weapons” and here you are advertizing [sic] that they are. Get with the flippin’ program, FN, and help us keep our Rights.



These spasms of candor are typical of the “wink and nod” game that the gun industry plays when it talks to itself and to its hard-core consumers.

But, call them what you will—“black rifles,” “tactical rifles,” or “modern sporting rifles”—military-style semiautomatic assault weapons are, plain and simply, killing machines.