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Gun-control advocate: Quiz candidates on assault weapons

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Created: 12/7/2007 12:25:10 PM
Updated: 12/7/2007 12:26:40 PM

Voters should press presidential candidates for their views on assault weapons in light of Wednesday's shopping-mall massacre in Omaha, a national gun-control advocate said Thursday.



Most Democratic candidates support reinstating a federal assault-weapons ban that expired in 2004.

Most Republican candidates oppose reinstating the ban, saying it was ineffective.

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Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, said Thursday that the 30-round ammunition clips Robert Hawkins reportedly used in Wednesday's shootings in Omaha would have been illegal to purchase under the assault-weapons ban.

He said it was not yet clear if the gun itself, described as an AK-47 style assault rifle, would have been covered by the ban. But it should be illegal, he said.

"If this is something that can take a 30-round clip and fire them off quickly, it should be banned. This is a weapon of mass murder," he said.

Hawkins used the rifle to kill eight people and wound five more before killing himself, police said. He reportedly stole the gun from his stepfather.

The assault-weapons ban was passed in 1994 and allowed to lapse a decade later. It covered purchases of specific models of guns and certain accessories, including clips that held more than 10 rounds of ammunition.

Helmke said voters should demand responses from the campaigning presidential candidates. He said they should ask why Americans are allowed to buy guns designed for the military.

"Basically, should the public be able to get the types of guns we use in Iraq?" he asked.

Iowa Rep. Clel Baudler, a Republican from Greenfield who is a board member of the National Rifle Association, urged people not to rush to judgment while police investigate the Omaha shootings.

Baudler said every time such a tragedy happens, NRA supporters expect to hear calls to toughen gun-control laws. But he contended that if the killers didn't have guns, they would use another type of weapon.

"When you have a lunatic that's bent on becoming famous and wants to be remembered, you're going to have problems, whether it's a gasoline bomb or any type of device. It comes back to the lunatic," he said.

Baudler added that the 30-round clips reportedly used in Omaha take less than two seconds to replace, so a smaller capacity clip would not have slowed the shooter much.

Earlier this fall, The Des Moines Register surveyed presidential candidates about their stances on gun control.

Democrats Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, Dennis Kucinich and Barack Obama said they would support reinstating the assault-weapons ban.

Democrat Bill Richardson and Republicans Mike Huckabee, John McCain, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo and Fred Thompson said they would not support reinstating the ban.

Several said they opposed the ban because they thought it was ineffective.

Republican Rudy Giuliani's campaign declined to specifically answer the question, but he supported the ban when it was enacted in 1994.

Helmke, the gun-control advocate, said the Republican candidates appear to have more differences over the issue than their Democratic counterparts.

Although they do not talk much about it as candidates, he said, Romney and Giuliani were relatively supportive of gun control in their previous jobs as governor of Massachusetts and mayor of New York City. McCain also has been relatively moderate on some gun-control issues, Helmke added.

Helmke said it was not yet clear whether other restrictions, such as bans on sales of guns to mentally ill people, would have affected the outcome of Wednesday's shooting.

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