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## **Understanding the Smith & Wesson M&P15 Semiautomatic Assault Rifle**



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*This report discusses the history and profit motive behind Smith & Wesson's introduction into the civilian market of its M&P15 semiautomatic assault rifles in 2006 as well as the company's financial support of the National Rifle Association (which in May 2013 was honored by the NRA at its annual meeting for donating at least a million dollars to the organization). It then explains the history, distinguishing features, and lethal capabilities of assault rifles like the M&P15.*

*“The entire M&P product line has been a tremendous success. These products were designed to across [sic] multiple markets including military, law enforcement, and consumer, and they’re hitting – they’re hitting their mark in a big way.”*

Mike Golden, President and CEO,  
Smith & Wesson Holding Corporation, June 12, 2008.<sup>1</sup>

*Smith & Wesson introduced its M&P15 rifle in 2006, the first of a highly profitable line of semiautomatic assault rifles that the company aggressively markets to civilians*

## The Smith & Wesson M&P15 Assault Rifle

The Smith & Wesson M&P15 assault rifle demonstrates the clear and present danger of a gun designed for war and ruthlessly marketed for profit to civilians.

In early 2006, Smith & Wesson announced that it had begun shipping the first of its M&P15 rifles. The M&P (Military & Police) “tactical rifle” was the first long gun produced by a company that had been long known as a handgun manufacturer.<sup>2</sup> According to *Shooting Industry*, the new rifle was “specifically engineered to meet the needs of global military and police personnel, as well as sporting shooters.”<sup>3</sup>



*Smith & Wesson's 2013 product catalog features a variety of M&P15 semiautomatic assault rifles*

The handgun company's turn to assault rifles was a stark example of the gun industry's relentless militarization of the civilian market. By 2006, military-style semiautomatic assault rifles had become one of the mainstays of the civilian gun market. Smith & Wesson did not make rifles. But it had successfully marketed a line of M&P semiautomatic handguns to military, police, and civilian customers. Its executives decided to introduce their own line of Military & Police assault rifles. Based on the AR-15/M-16 design, these “tactical rifles” would be heavily pitched to civilians.

“We believe the features of these tactical rifles make them strong contenders in the military and law enforcement markets,” said then-Smith & Wesson president and CEO Michael F. Golden. “We also believe that our M&P rifle series fills a tremendous gap in the marketplace by delivering high-quality, feature-rich tactical rifles that will be readily available in commercial channels.”<sup>4</sup>

The company’s marketing move won praise from the gun industry’s promotional voices. *Shooting Industry* magazine awarded it the title of “Manufacturer of the Year.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps more important to the company was the assault rifle’s contribution to the bottom line.

In June 2006, Golden told an investors earning conference call that “consumer response has been very strong” for the new assault rifle. He also noted that he “had the honor of attending the signing of the Protection of Lawful Commerce and [sic] Arms Act by President Bush, a great day for our industry and for me personally.” This federal law – for which the National Rifle Association (NRA) heavily lobbied – insulates the gun industry from liability for the criminal use of products like the M&P assault rifle.<sup>6</sup> (One hand washes the other in the gun lobby. In 2012 the NRA inducted Smith & Wesson into its “Golden Ring of Freedom,” which is “reserved for those who have given gifts of cash or assets to the NRA totaling one million dollars or more.” A May 23, 2012, NRA-ILA press release announcing Smith & Wesson’s financial gift noted that with all of its actions in support of the NRA, “Smith & Wesson’s support far exceeds one million dollars in cash.” In May 2013, current Smith & Wesson CEO James Debney was honored at the NRA’s annual meeting in Houston, Texas. In a promotional video on the NRA’s website, Debney tells viewers, “I think it’s important for everybody to step up and support the NRA. They are our voice.”<sup>7</sup>)

The money continued to roll in. On July 20, 2009, Golden stated in an interview that a “category that has been extremely hot is tactical rifles, AR style tactical rifles.”<sup>8</sup> On a June 2009 investors conference call, Golden enthused that “tactical rifles were up almost 200% versus the same period the year before. We have increased our capacity on that rifle.”<sup>9</sup> The company was doing so well with its assault rifles that it decided to introduce a new variant in 22 caliber because the ammunition is much cheaper than the military-style ammunition used in the M&P15. “We have an M&P15 that shoots .223 ammo that sells extremely well,” Golden said. “We have just launched an AR-style rifle that shoots .22 caliber rounds that we think will be extremely popular because of the price of ammo.”<sup>10</sup>



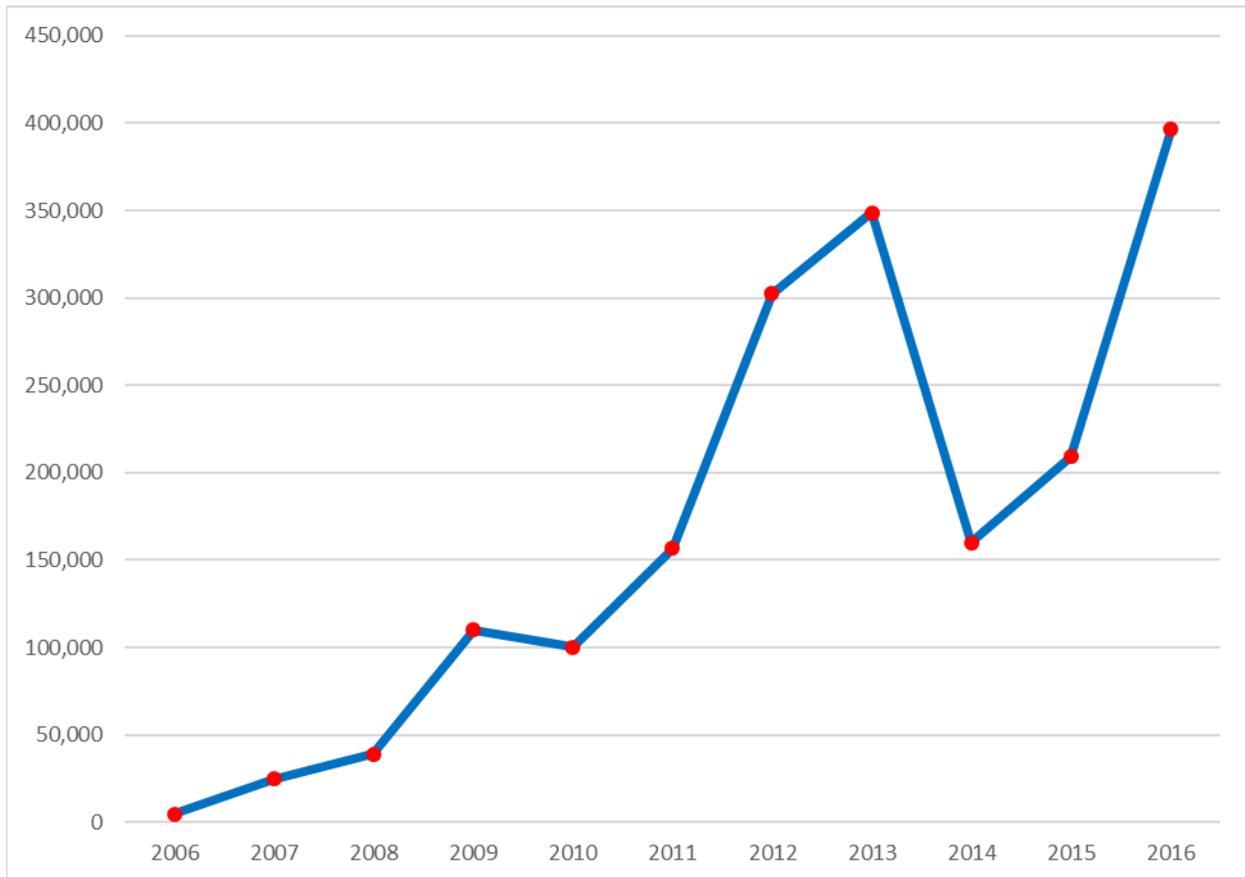
*Smith & Wesson introduced its M&P15-22 in 2009*

Golden informed investors during the June 2009 conference call that “at the SHOT [Shooting, Hunting, Outdoor Trade] Show, we showed, what we are calling the M&P15-22. And what that is, is a tactical rifle, it looks exactly like an M&P15 but it shoots .22 caliber ammo. And that's a big deal because of the price of ammo. The .22 ammo versus the 5.56, it's about 10% of the cost. So we think that will be a very big product because of the ammo. And again, it's another variant and it's actually a very fun rifle to shoot.”<sup>11</sup>

**Number of M&P15 Semiautomatic Assault Rifles  
Manufactured by Smith & Wesson, 2006-2016**

2006	4,650
2007	24,676
2008	38,732
2009	110,057
2010	100,051
2011	156,705
2012	302,343
2013	348,731
2014	159,807
2015	209,180
2016	396,710
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,851,642</b>

**Number of M&P15 Semiautomatic Assault Rifles  
Manufactured by Smith & Wesson, 2006-2016**



By March 2012, the M&P line had become for Smith & Wesson “both a brand and product platform,” according to current CEO James Debney. “It’s really about modern polymer pistols and Modern Sporting Rifles, also known as tactical rifles.”<sup>12</sup> In June 2012 the company reported that sales for the quarter “climbed 27.7 per cent...driven by strong revenue of M&P polymer pistols and modern sporting rifles.”<sup>13</sup> Said Debney, “Our objective in fiscal 2012 was to streamline the company and focus on our position as a leading, pure-play firearm company.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Smith & Wesson, “Our M&P branded modern sporting rifles are specifically designed to satisfy the functionality and reliability needs of global military, law enforcement, and security personnel. These rifles are also popular as sporting target rifles and are sold to consumers through our sporting good distributors, retailers, and dealers. We have a broad product portfolio of modern sporting rifles, which includes a lower price-point, sport model, a .22 caliber model, and a fully automatic model designed for the exclusive use of military and law enforcement agencies throughout the world.”

In annual filings with the federal Securities and Exchange Commission for fiscal year 2012, Smith & Wesson estimated the domestic non-military firearm market for modern sporting rifles at \$489 million. According to the company:

“The sale of modern sporting rifles accounted for \$75.1 million in net sales, or 18.2% of our net sales, for the fiscal year ended April 30, 2012, \$38.7 million in net sales, or 11.3% of our net sales, for the fiscal year ended April 30, 2011, and \$61.8 million in net sales, or 17.3% of our net sales, for the fiscal year ended April 30, 2010.”

In 2016, Smith & Wesson (now known as American Outdoor Brands Corp.) asserted, “The launch of our M&P branded modern sporting rifle in January 2006 has enabled us to capture what we estimate is the leading share of the modern sporting rifle market.” However, in 2016 and 2017 the company also reported declining demand for M&P assault rifles. In its most recent filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company said, “Revenue for our long guns decreased \$48.7 million, or 54.5%, from the prior year comparable period as a result of lower demand for our modern sporting rifles [the industry’s euphemism for assault rifles].”

## Key Points About Assault Weapons

- 1. Semiautomatic assault weapons like Smith & Wesson's M&P15 assault rifles 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. 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.
- 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*, also known as “hosing down” an area.
- 6. Civilian assault weapons keep the specific functional design features that make this deadly spray-firing 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 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 AK-47 and the M-16) 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,<sup>15</sup> 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*, also known as “hosing down” an area. 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.”<sup>16</sup>

***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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup>

***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.”<sup>19</sup> (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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup>

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.”<sup>23</sup>



*STG-44 on top, S&W M&P15 on bottom*

***Deadly designs.*** One thing leaps out from the pictures above: the remarkable similarity of the first assault rifle to the Smith & Wesson M&P15 and other assault rifles currently flooding America’s streets. This family resemblance is not a coincidence. From the STG-44 “storm gun” to the M&P15 “tactical rifle,” assault weapons have incorporated into their design *specific* features that enable shooters to spray (“hose down”) 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.”<sup>24</sup>
- **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.”<sup>25</sup> 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 “hosing down” of an area 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 NRA, 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.

In November 2009, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) announced that—“due to gun owners’ concerns over President-elect Obama and possible legislation regulating the Second Amendment rights of Americans”—it had placed on its website a “media resource...to help clear up much of the confusion and misinformation about so-called ‘assault weapons.’”<sup>26</sup>

This was the opening salvo in the industry’s meretricious campaign to “rebrand” semiautomatic assault weapons as “modern sporting rifles.”<sup>27</sup> 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 headlines “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle” as “‘Combat Customized’ From the Factory.”<sup>28</sup> Among other outbursts of naked candor in the enthusiastic article are 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 been [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.”

This spasm of candor is 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.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Golden, President and CEO, Smith & Wesson Holding Corporation, “Q4 2008 Smith & Wesson Hldg. Corp Earnings Conference Call – Final,” *FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire*, June 12, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Smith & Wesson produced a “revolving rifle,” which was essentially a handgun (revolver) with a detachable stock. The gun’s popularity was “limited.” Dean K. Boorman, *The History of Smith & Wesson Firearms* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2002), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> “Smith & Wesson enters long-gun market; Industry news,” *Shooting Industry*, February 1, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> “Smith & Wesson enters long-gun market; Industry news,” *Shooting Industry*, February 1, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> “Smith & Wesson Earns ‘Manufacturer of the Year’ Title and NRA Golden Bullseye Award,” *PR Newswire US*, May 23, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Golden, President and CEO Smith & Wesson Holding Corp., “Q4 2006 Smith & Wesson Hldg. Corp. Earnings Conference Call,” *FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire*, June 15, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> “Smith & Wesson to be Inducted into the NRA Golden Ring of Freedom,” <http://www.nraila.org/news-issues/news-from-nra-ila/2012/05/smith-wesson-to-be-inducted-into-the-nra-golden-ring-of-freedom.aspx>. For more information on gun industry financial support of the National Rifle Association, see the 2013 Violence Policy Center report *Blood Money II: How Gun Industry Dollars Fund the NRA* (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/bloodmoney2.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> “Smith & Wesson boss talks about guns and gun laws,” *Outdoors (Daily Oklahoman)*, July 20, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> “Q4 2009 Smith & Wesson Holding Corporation Earnings Conference Call – Final,” *FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire*, June 22, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> “Smith & Wesson boss talks about guns and gun laws,” *Outdoors (Daily Oklahoman)*, July 20, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> “Q4 2009 Smith & Wesson Holding Corporation Earnings Conference Call – Final,” *FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire*, June 22, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> “Smith & Wesson Hldg Corp at Roth Capital Partners OC Growth Stock Conference – Final,” *FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire*, March 14, 2012.

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<sup>13</sup> “Smith & Wesson Q4 profit up on sales and margin growth,” *Proactive Investors*, June 29, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> “Smith & Wesson Q4 profit up on sales and margin growth,” *Proactive Investors*, June 29, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> See, 18 U.S. Code, Section 922(o).

<sup>16</sup> Chris Bishop (ed.), *Guns in Combat* (Edison, N.J.: Chartwell Books, 1998): 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *Submachine Guns* (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001): 7.

<sup>18</sup> David Miller (ed.), *The Illustrated Book of Guns* (London: Salamander Books Ltd., 2000): 232.

<sup>19</sup> Peter R. Senich, *The German Assault Rifle, 1935-1945* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1987): 1.

<sup>20</sup> Peter R. Senich, *The German Assault Rifle, 1935-1945* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1987): 1.

<sup>21</sup> Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, Paladin Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1984): 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Hogg, *Jane’s Guns Recognition Guide* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000): 302.

<sup>24</sup> Chuck Taylor, *The Fighting Rifle: A Complete Study of the Rifle in Combat* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1984): 5.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan Long, *The Terrifying Three: Uzi, Ingram, and Intratec Weapons Families* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1989): 104.

<sup>26</sup> “NSSF Announces Media Resource on ‘Assault Weapons,’” *Shooting Wire*, November 29, 2009, [www.shootingwire.com/archived/2008-11-24\\_sw.html](http://www.shootingwire.com/archived/2008-11-24_sw.html).

<sup>27</sup> “Rebranding is the creation of a new name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them for an established brand with the intention of developing a differentiated (new) position in the mind of stakeholders and competitors.” “Rebranding,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebranding>.

<sup>28</sup> “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle,” *Gun World*, August 2010, p. 58.