

Trump v. Bump: A Potentially Deadly Holiday Decision

On December 18, just in time for Christmas, the US Department of Justice announced a new 157-page rule banning “bump stocks.” The regulatory move comes 14 months after Stephen Paddock’s murder of 58 concert attendees in Las Vegas, Nevada made the devices notorious.

The new rule is a dumb and dangerous piece of political grandstanding, and there’s no doubt who’s behind it. “We are faithfully following President Trump’s leadership” said acting US Attorney General Matt Whitaker, “by making clear that bump stocks, which turn semi-automatics into machine guns, are illegal ...”

A couple of nitpicks:

First, both Whitaker’s claim and the definition in the rule itself (“a semiautomatic firearm to which a bump-stock-type device is attached is able to produce automatic fire with a single pull of the trigger”) are as inaccurate on the factual end as “bump firing” is where hitting targets is concerned. Bump firing requires one pull of a semi-automatic’s trigger per shot, merely allowing a shooter to pull the trigger faster, with a severe penalty to accuracy (if Paddock was a skilled marksman, his use of bump stocks probably saved lives).

Secondly, the rule is completely useless vis a vis its supposed goal. Bump firing is a technique that can be implemented using devices as simple as rubber bands, belt loops on pants, or even just one’s body. Commercial bump stocks are novelty items, not necessary tools for using the technique. The rule is the equivalent of banning pet rocks to reduce the incidence of rock-throwing.

That said, this rule has the potential to cost far more lives than Stephen Paddock took in Vegas.

The rule requires those possessing the banned devices to destroy them or turn them in to law enforcement within 90 days of its publication in the Federal Register (by right around Easter).

According to Matt Vasilogambros of the Pew Trust, the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives believes there are more than 500,000 commercial bump stocks in the hands of American gun owners.

When New Jersey’s politicians passed a similar law, the number of bump stocks turned in was ... wait for it ... zero. If the incidence of bump stock ownership in New Jersey tracks national population averages, that’s zero out of more than 13,000.

If ATF wants those bump stocks, it's going to have to start knocking on doors and forcibly taking them from hundreds of thousands of gun owners who have declined to voluntarily surrender them.

What could possibly go wrong?

The best possible outcome of this stunt is that it will simply be ignored both by its supposed enforcers and its prospective victims.

Otherwise, Trump's Christmas present to the anti-gun lobby may well turn into an Easter basket for America's trauma units and funeral homes.