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Progress Against Guns

HAIL to New Jersey. Under the leadership of new Governor Jim Florio, Jersey lawmakers have just enacted the United States's toughest law against assault rifles. These military-style weapons have almost no sporting use, but their deadly fire power – a simple modification allows them to spew forth a stream of bullets with a single squeeze of the trigger – has won favor among drug dealers.

In New Jersey it is now illegal to buy an assault rifle and even to own one except under a few carefully regulated conditions. Thus the law is even stiffer than the California act passed last year, which prohibits purchases of assault weapons but permitted current owners to keep their AR-15s and AK-47s. The New Jersey lawmakers bravely withstood a furious lobbying effort by the National Rifle Association.

Across the country, the gun-control movement appears to be gathering some steam. Next January California will extend its 15-day waiting-period requirement, now applicable just to purchases of handguns, to recreational rifles and shotguns. Connecticut has taken a similar step.

Nonetheless, only 12 states have waiting periods for gun purchases. While other states require gun buyers to register the weapons, such regulations do little to keep guns out of the hands even of known criminals. This patchwork of state laws regulating guns – used in 12,000 homicides in the US each year – militates for enactment of federal gun-control laws.

Congress should start by passing two bills before it. The Brady bill (after Jim Brady, who was crippled in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Reagan) would impose a seven-day waiting period on all purchases of handguns. And a bill sponsored by Rep. William Hughes (D) of New Jersey would bar possession of US-manufactured assault weapons, like imported ones.

The aim shouldn't be to "disarm" America. But it should be to keep guns out of the hands of the lawless or unqualified, and to keep out of all hands guns whose only purpose is mayhem.