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Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, H.R. 1036, 108th Congress: Legal Analysis

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Summary

The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, H.R. 1036, 108th Congress, as passed by the House on April 9, 2003, would prohibit lawsuits, except in specified circumstances, against a manufacturer or seller of a firearm or ammunition, or a trade association, for damages resulting from the criminal or unlawful misuse of a firearm or ammunition.

This report examines H.R. 1036, 108th Congress, as ordered to be reported by the House Committee on the Judiciary on April 3, 2003, and passed by the House without amendment on April 9, 2003. H.R. 1036, titled the "Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act," would prohibit lawsuits, except in specified circumstances, against a manufacturer or seller of a firearm or ammunition, or a trade association, for damages resulting from the criminal or unlawful misuse of a firearm or ammunition. The bill would also require that pending lawsuits brought by shooting victims and municipalities be dismissed. Among the circumstances when the bill would permit a lawsuit to be brought or to continue would be when the defendant violated 18 U.S.C. § 924(h) by transferring a firearm, knowing that it would be used to commit a crime of violence or a drug trafficking crime.

The bill's findings state that it is "an abuse of the legal system" to hold defendants "liable for harm caused by those who criminally or unlawfully misuse firearm products or ammunition products that function as designed and intended." A cosponsor of the bill said, "We're trying to stop making public policy through the courts with these nuisance suits."[1] Opponents of H.R. 1036 "have denounced the proposed legislation as an unfair favor to an industry and a federal usurpation of states' rights," and have said that it "would bring progress toward safer guns to a screaming halt and make it more difficult for gun violence victims to recover damages. . . . It would prevent cities from collecting

[1] John Tierney, "A New Push to Grant Gun Industry Immunity From Suits," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 2003, p. A10.

damages against gun manufacturers who maintain a distribution system which they know ensures the continual supply of guns to the illegal market."[2]

H.R. 1036 would prohibit a "qualified civil liability action" from being brought in any federal or state court, and would require the dismissal of any such action that is pending on the date of enactment of the bill. The bill defines a "qualified civil liability action" as, with five exceptions, "a civil action brought by any person against a manufacturer or seller of a qualified product, or a trade association, for damages or injunctive relief resulting from the criminal or unlawful misuse of a qualified product by the person or a third party." It defines a "qualified product" as a firearm (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(3)(A) or (B)), an antique firearm (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(16)), ammunition (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)), or a component part of a firearm or ammunition.

H.R. 1036 defines "trade association," used in the definition of "qualified civil liability action" quoted above, as "any association or business organization (whether or not incorporated under Federal or State law) that is not operated for profit, and 2 or more members of which are manufacturers or sellers of a qualified product."

H.R. 1036 defines "manufacturer" to limit it to manufacturers who are licensed under chapter 44 of title 18, U.S. Code. It defines "seller" to include an "importer" (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(9)), a "dealer" (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(11)), and a "person engaged in the business of selling ammunition" (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)). An "importer" and a "dealer" would have to be licensed under chapter 44 of title 18, U.S. Code, to be a "seller" under the bill.

The first of the five types of lawsuits that would not be a "qualified civil liability action," and that therefore would not be barred by the bill, would be: "(i) an action brought against a transferor convicted under section 924(h) of title 18, United States Code, or a comparable or identical State felony law, by a party directly harmed by the conduct of which the transferee is so convicted." Section 924(h) makes it a crime to "knowingly transfer[ ] a firearm, knowing that such firearm will be used to commit a crime of violence . . . or a drug trafficking crime." The "transferor" who may be sued is a person who has been convicted of violating section 924(h) or a comparable or identical law.

The phrase "is so convicted" appears unclear. Does it require that the transferee (*i.e.*, the person who bought the firearm from the transferor and who shoots the plaintiff with it) be convicted? If so, of what? It would not be of section 924(h), because section 924(h) makes it a crime to transfer a firearm, not to receive one or to fire one. In addition, there would be no apparent reason for Congress to create an exception to exception (i) and prohibit lawsuits against transferors who violate section 924(h) merely because the transferee had not been convicted. The transferee, after all, may not have been convicted because he had been killed in self-defense by the plaintiff whom he shot, and this would

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[2] *Id.* For background information, see CRS Report RS20126, *Gun Industry Liability: Lawsuits and Legislation* (updated Mar. 30, 1999).

not seem relevant to the transferor's culpability for the harm he indirectly caused by violating section 924(h).[3]

The second type of lawsuit that would not be a "qualified civil liability action," and therefore would not be barred by the bill, would be: "(ii) an action brought against a seller for negligent entrustment or negligence per se." The bill defines "negligent entrustment" as "the supplying of a qualified product by a seller for use by another person when the seller knows or should know the person to whom the product is supplied is likely to use the product, and in fact does use the product, in a manner involving unreasonable risk of physical injury to the person and others." This would seem to cover supplying a firearm or ammunition to a person who, because of age, mental disability, or violent propensity, seems likely to use the product in a dangerous manner.

The bill does not define "negligence per se." The term means "[n]egligence established as a matter of law, so that breach of the duty is not a jury question."[4] This means that, once a defendant's conduct is determined to have violated a relevant statute, the defendant is automatically deemed negligent, and the jury is not asked to determine whether the defendant acted in a reasonable manner. This is apparently the rule in "probably a majority of the courts."[5] "Some courts appear to have limited the 'per se' rule to situations where there has been a violation of a *specific* requirement of a law, etc. – legislation that expresses rules of conduct in specific and concrete terms as opposed to general or abstract principles. In some few states – at least in older cases not apparently disapproved – a distinction has been drawn as to ordinances, and violation of an *ordinance*, rather than violation of a statute, has been ruled to constitute, at most, *evidence* of negligence."[6]

Thus, whether a violation of a statute constitutes negligence per se is a question of state law, unless a federal statute provides that one who violates it shall be strictly liable in a civil action. One could therefore interpret this provision of H.R. 1036 to mean that, if a plaintiff alleges that the defendant violated a statute, and the statute is a federal statute that provides that one who violates it shall be strictly liable in a civil action, or the applicable state law provides that one who violates a statute or ordinance of the sort violated shall be strictly liable, then the plaintiff may proceed. If, however, applicable state law allows the question of negligence to go to the jury even when the defendant has violated a statute – *i.e.*, if there is no negligence per se rule – then H.R. 1036 would preclude a lawsuit, unless one of its other five exceptions in the definition of "qualified civil liability action" applied.

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[3] Is "transferee" actually meant to be "transferor"? This seems unlikely because exception (i) speaks of the plaintiff's having been "directly harmed by the conduct" of the transferee, and the plaintiff *would* be directly harmed by the conduct of the transferee. He would be only indirectly harmed by the conduct of the transferor.

[4] BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY (7th ed.1999) at 1057.

[5] W. Page Keeton, PROSSER AND KEETON ON THE LAW OF TORTS (5th ed. 1984) at 230. "The courts of many states" follow this rule. Stuart M. Speiser, Charles F. Krause, Alfred W. Gans, 2 THE AMERICAN LAW OF TORTS (1985, cum. supp. 1998) at 1029.

[6] Stuart M. Speiser, Charles F. Krause, Alfred W. Gans, 2 THE AMERICAN LAW OF TORTS (1985, cum. supp. 1998) at 1034-1035 (emphasis in original).

The other three exceptions in the definition of "qualified civil liability action" – *i.e.*, the other three types of actions that H.R. 1036 would not bar – are:

> (iii) an action in which a manufacturer or seller of a qualified product knowingly and willfully violated a State or Federal statute applicable to the sale or marketing of the product, and the violation was a proximate cause of the harm for which relief is sought;
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> (iv) an action for breach of contract or warranty in connection with the purchase of the product; or
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> (v) an action for physical injuries or property damage resulting directly from a defect in design or manufacture of the product, when used as intended.

In sum, with the five exceptions noted, H.R. 1036 would prohibit civil actions "for damages or injunctive relief resulting from the criminal or unlawful misuse of a" firearm or ammunition as defined in the bill. It is not apparent, in this context, that "unlawful" misuses would refer to any misuses that are not "criminal," or that "misuse" would mean anything different from "use."