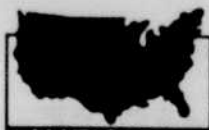


Former presidents support weapons ban



NATIONAL

WASHINGTON (AP) — House proponents of a ban on 19 types of assault-style weapons drew almost even with opponents Wednesday, a day before the vote on the hotly contested issue. And they got help from three former presidents.

"We urge you to listen to the American public and to the law enforcement community and support a ban on the further manufacture of these weapons," former Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan wrote to all members of the House.

The only former president who did not sign the letter was George Bush.

President Clinton pushed the legislation in phone calls to House members. Joining that effort were Vice President Al Gore, Attorney General Janet Reno and Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen.

Rep. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., the legislation's chief sponsor, predicted Thursday's vote would go down to the wire.

"For those of you who go to the Kentucky Derby this weekend, the finish will be closer on the floor of the house tomorrow," he said.

By Wednesday afternoon, Schumer said proponents were "five down and closing," reflecting a large increase in support from last week when he had said 15 to 20 more votes were needed.

More converts emerged Wednesday, including two Texas Democrats and a Pennsylvania Repub-

lican who had opposed a ban on assault-style weapons in 1991.

Rep. Ron Coleman, D-Texas, who has never voted against a position taken by the National Rifle Association, said he made his decision after talking to his local police chief and sheriff.

"Ultimately, I think you have to defer to law enforcement leaders in your community," said Coleman, who got a call from Clinton on Wednesday. "When the chief of police and the sheriff both say they support banning these deadly weapons, then I have to stand up and take notice."

Virtually all the major law enforcement organizations support the ban.

"If it is a political offense that costs me my job ... then so be it," Coleman said.

Rep. Michael Andrews, D-Texas, a lifelong hunter who is leaving the House, asked, "Who can, in good conscience, defend such weapons as appropriate for hunters or sportsmen? Anyone that needs a 20-round clip of high-velocity ammunition to fell a duck or kill a deer needs to look into taking up golf."

An opponent of the ban, Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., said he believed the former presidents' letter would have little impact on the vote.

"I think that the position of Jimmy Carter has been well known for a long time, and I think the position of Mr. Reagan is understood and accepted by most Republicans and Democrats as part of his close-relationship with Jim and Sarah Brady," Hunter said.

'Unity summit' will link black leaders

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black leaders will gather in Baltimore for a "unity" summit bringing together diverse black groups, but it was unclear Wednesday if Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan would be included.

The NAACP, which is sponsoring the event, had said in February that Farrakhan would be involved.

But when asked Wednesday if Farrakhan was still included in plans, NAACP executive director Ben Chavis said "we would rather not respond to that question."

The Baltimore meeting grew out of a "unity" pledge taken last fall by Chavis, Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif. and Congressional Black Caucus chairman

Kweisi Mfume, a Democrat from Baltimore.

But some of the leaders, particularly Chavis and Mfume, have been under pressure to distance themselves from Farrakhan after one of his aides, Khallid Abdul Muhammad, made anti-Semitic statements in a speech before college students last November.

Chavis also drew heat from the NAACP's board of directors for an April meeting in Detroit with about 40 nationalists, Pan-Africanists and others, to discuss "a pro-active, independent African agenda," apparently without the board's knowledge.

That meeting fanned a philosophical dispute between Chavis and the board over which issues the civil rights

organization should emphasize as it reinvigorates itself.

Chavis said Wednesday "there was no significant opposition within the NAACP" to holding the summit.

"The planning and sponsorship of the summit has been an internal process within the NAACP over the last nine months," he said. "It's not a Ben Chavis summit. It's an NAACP summit."

The civil rights group was considering five cities as possible sites, but settled on Baltimore because that is where the NAACP's headquarters is located, Chavis said.

A news conference is scheduled Thursday to discuss the "categories of leadership" that will be represented at the conference.




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