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President Clinton Seeks Money for Law Enforcement

While visiting Boston on January 18, 2000, President Clinton announced his intent to set aside \$280 million of his 2001 budget in an effort to bolster federal, state, and local prosecution of gun-law violations.¹ The announcement is apparently a response by President Clinton to critics, like the National Rifle Association ("NRA"), who accuse him of enacting new laws instead of enforcing those currently in effect.² Apparently, President Clinton also wants to add the proposal to his legacy of gun laws, which includes the Brady Bill and prohibitions on the sale of assault weapon.³ Though the proposal is primarily designed to boost law enforcement, the budgetary provisions could also affect consumers' quality of life by decreasing crime.⁴

Initially, President Clinton's budget will furnish enough money to hire 1000 new state and local prosecutors, 100 new federal prosecutors, and 500 additional employees at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms ("ATF").⁵ The plan will also provide money to expand gun-tracing or "fingerprinting" capabilities to 250 additional jurisdictions nationwide.⁶ President Clinton has vowed to set aside \$10 million for developing "smart gun" technology, which will prevent anyone but a gun's legal owner from firing it, and another \$10 million for anti-violence advertising.⁷

Robert Walker, president of Handgun Control, Inc., said President Clinton's plan to increase funding and staffing at the ATF should have a large impact on crime rates.⁸ According to Walker, "[i]n the 1980s, ATF suffered a major setback when the National Rifle Association started a campaign to eviscerate the agency."⁹ The ATF should regain some of its capabilities, however, with the additional employees promised by

President Clinton. The proposal, which will institute the largest ATF staffing increase ever, calls for 300 new agents, who conduct traditional criminal investigations, and 200 new inspectors, who ensure gun dealers comply with existing laws.¹⁰

Primarily due to opposition from groups like the NRA, President Clinton has had trouble passing many of the gun-control laws on his agenda. For instance, President Clinton has been unable to extend Brady-type background checks to weapons purchasers at gun shows, to pass a law requiring trigger locks on handguns, and to ban the importation of large capacity ammunition clips.¹¹ The new proposal, on the other hand, will test the sincerity of the NRA, which has long espoused a belief that the key to decreasing gun crimes is to enforce existing laws rather than pass new ones.¹²

So far, the NRA has sent mixed signals regarding President Clinton's proposal. Realizing it has long advocated tougher enforcement as the proper solution, NRA executive vice president Wayne LaPierre stated that the NRA welcomes any plan purporting to fund additional prosecutors.¹³ At the same time, LaPierre failed to completely abandon his adversarial view of the Clinton administration by voicing his skepticism about the President's willingness to follow through on the proposal.¹⁴ LaPierre vowed to keep tabs on the administration, stating that he expected "a 100, 200, 300 percent increase in prosecutions" before the proposal could be considered effective.¹⁵

At this point, the exact impact the proposal will have on consumers is unclear. Certainly, there is a feeling among some gun-control advocates, like the Washington-based Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, that President Clinton's plan will help decrease crime.¹⁶ Decreased crime rates directly impact a community's quality of life, which can have a positive, if indirect, effect on consumer confidence and spending.¹⁷ Accordingly, a possibility exists that consumers and merchants could receive an

indirect economic benefit along with a corresponding decrease in criminal activity if President Clinton's plan is successfully implemented. Though it is difficult to find empirical evidence to support this inference, it does not seem overly tenuous.

One thing that is clear, however, is that President Clinton's plan to increase current law enforcement efforts should face less resistance in Congress due to the NRA's conditional approval of the plan. President Clinton's budget will allow federal, state and local law enforcement officials to step up their efforts to prosecute gun-based crimes. Hopefully, the President's injection of funds into federal, state and local law enforcement agencies will lead to continued decreases in nationwide crime rates and will positively affect the quality of life experienced by many who live in high-crime areas.

Endnotes

1. See Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Robert L. Jackson, *Clinton Details Firearm Initiative*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 19, 2000, at A8 [hereinafter *Details*].
2. See *Gun Crimes Giving the NRA Theory a Try*, STAR TRIB., Jan. 21, 2000, at 20A [hereinafter *Gun Crimes*].
3. See Francine Kiefer, *Clinton to Put a Priority on Enforcing US Gun Laws*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 18, 2000, at 2.
4. See Erica Groshen et al., *Summary of Observations and Recommendations*, ECON. POL'Y REV., Sept. 1, 1999, at 3 (pointing out that crime rates are "another measure of well-being").
5. See Naftali Bendavid, *Clinton Turns Attention to Gun-Law Enforcement*, CHI. TRIB., Jan. 18, 2000, at 3.
6. See Kiefer, *supra* note 3.
7. See Bendavid, *supra* note 5.

8. *See id.*
9. *Id.*
10. *See id.*
11. *See Gun Crimes, supra* note 2.
12. *See id.*
13. *See Kiefer, supra* note 3.
14. *See id.*
15. *See Bendavid, supra* note 5.
16. *See Details, supra* note 1.
17. *See Groshen et al., supra* note 4, at 3.

