



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 14, 2013

3-D Plastic Printing Technology May Make Gun Detection “Impossible”

With the imminent expiration of the Undetectable Firearms Act on December 9, the media and federal agencies are ramping up concerns about public safety and black market manufacture of weapons without serial numbers. *Huffington Post* [ran an article](#) warning that “plastic guns” could blow up in the hands of unskilled users and worrying that plastic 3-D printed guns “could evade metal detectors at courthouses, schools and other public places.” The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) [told the press](#) on Wednesday that even if the current law is extended or enhanced, it will remain nearly impossible to detect such guns using current tracking technology. Richard Marianos, a spokesman for the ATF, said that his agency’s concern isn’t with common street criminals making weapons in their basements or garages, but with sophisticated assassins:



[This enhanced technology] is something that we’ve never seen before. It can defeat metal detection, and that’s something we’re concerned about....

This is more for someone who wants to get into an area and perhaps be an assassin. Or they want to go to a courthouse and shoot a witness.

The Undetectable Firearms Act grew out of concerns in the early 1980s that Gaston Glock’s invention of polymer handguns could escape detection, despite substantial metal parts being used in their construction. Never unwilling to miss an opportunity to pass more legislation, congress considered and then passed the Act in October 1988, prohibiting the manufacture, possession, or transfer of firearms with less than 3.7 ounces of metal content. The National Rifle Association supported the bill as it didn’t affect existing handguns or their owners. Built into the law was a 10-year sunset clause but the law was renewed in 1998 for five years, and again for ten years in December 2003. That renewal expires on December 9, 2013.

When the ATF shut down [Cody Wilson’s website](#) last May, the cat was out of the bag as his 3-D printing software for his “Liberator .380” handgun had already been downloaded more than 100,000 times. Since then, mirror sites such as Pirate Bay have made those plans available for download.

One of those who downloaded Wilson’s plans enhanced them and [built a rifle](#), from which fired 14 rounds successfully. Solid Concepts of California [has gone even further](#), developing and manufacturing what it calls “The World’s First 3D Printed Metal Gun”, mimicking John Browning’s Colt .45, and firing



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it successfully 500 times without incident. Further enhancements are no doubt being developed elsewhere, outstripping federal attempts to regulate, much less eliminate, the burgeoning flow of 3-D weapons.

This is causing severe heartburn for legislators who see nothing but disaster and catastrophe resulting from such unbridled freedom, including Senators Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), along with Rep. Steve Israel (D-N.Y.). Said Schumer, "The expiration of this law, combined with advances in 3-D printing, make what was once a hypothetical threat into a terrifying reality. We are actively exploring all options to pass legislation that will eliminate the problem." Israel echoed Schumer: "Back then, in 1988, the notion of a 3-D plastic gun was science fiction. Now, a month away, it is reality." But Senator Nelson [made the case best](#) for total elimination of such fearsome weapons from the hands of the citizenry:

The fact that anyone with the right equipment can make a fully-functioning weapon from their own home with the click of a mouse is a truly frightening concept.

Weapons like these pose a serious threat to our national security and we need to do everything we can to keep them off the streets.

Back in May [a bulletin](#) issued by the Joint Regional Intelligence Center warned that these advances were coming, and that they would make it nearly impossible for new laws, or extensions or upgrades of old ones, to track the new 3-D weaponry:

Significant advances in three-dimensional (3D) printing capabilities, availability of free digital 3D printer files for firearms components, and difficulties regulating file sharing may present public safety risks from unqualified gun seekers who obtain or manufacture 3D printed guns....

Proposed legislation to ban 3D printing of weapons may deter, but cannot completely prevent, their production. Even if the practice is prohibited by new legislation, online distribution of these digital files will be as difficult to control as any other illegally traded music, movie or software files....

Limiting access may be impossible.

[That's the whole point](#), according to J.D. Tuccille, writing for *Reason* magazine:

The DIY [do-it-yourself] revolution that brings us easily produced homemade guns, and so much more, is [no longer] a goal confined to wishful thinking. That ... is the whole idea of developing and spreading the technology: to put its control beyond the practical reach of the control freaks.

As far as the legislation proposed by those "control freaks" — Schumer, Nelson and Israel — is concerned, its prospects [appear to be dim](#).

Photo of MakerBot "Replicator 2" 3-D printer

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