



U.S. Department of Justice  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,  
Firearms, and Explosives

*Office of the Director*

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Washington, DC 20226

June 15, 2026

**ATF Ruling 2026-1**

Exemption of SS109/M855 Projectiles and Projectile Cores

<b>18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(B):</b>	<b>DEFINITIONS (AMMUNITION)</b>
<b>18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(C):</b>	<b>DEFINITIONS (AMMUNITION)</b>
<b>18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(7):</b>	<b>MANUFACTURE OF ARMOR PIERCING AMMUNITION</b>
<b>18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(8):</b>	<b>SALE OR DELIVERY OF ARMOR PIERCING AMMUNITION</b>
<b>27 CFR § 478.148:</b>	<b>ARMOR PIERCING AMMUNITION INTENDED FOR SPORTING OR INDUSTRIAL PURPOSES</b>

*The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) has determined that, based on the longstanding exemption of the SS109/M855 cartridges, the projectiles and projectile cores used to assemble these cartridges are exempt from the provision of the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA) regulating manufacturing, selling, and delivering armor-piercing ammunition. This ruling hereby supersedes previous determinations exempting only complete SS109/M855 cartridges.*

**Background**

In 1986, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) exempted SS109/M855 cartridges that use a projectile with a steel core penetrator from the definition of “armor-piercing ammunition” as defined in the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA), 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(B). ATF determined that these cartridges were “primarily intended to be used for sporting purposes” and therefore were exempt from the definition pursuant to section

921(a)(17)(C).<sup>1</sup> While the complete SS109/M855 cartridges were exempt, component projectiles or projectile cores that were not incorporated into complete SS109/M855 cartridges remained subject to regulations governing armor-piercing ammunition. *See* 18 U.S.C § 922(a)(7)–(8).

Consistent with the principles set out in Executive Order 14206 entitled, “Protecting Second Amendment Rights,” ATF has worked with the Department of Justice to conduct a thorough review of existing regulations and previous firearms and ammunition classifications to ensure consistency with the statutory provisions and the Second Amendment. After re-evaluation, ATF concludes that projectiles to be used in assembling complete SS109/M855 cartridges must be included in the longstanding exemption, for reasons described below. Therefore, they may be manufactured, sold, and delivered in accordance with the GCA provisions generally applicable to “ammunition” as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(A). This ruling hereby supersedes previous determinations exempting only complete SS109/M855 cartridges.<sup>2</sup>

### **Relevant statutes and regulations**

The GCA provisions defining and governing armor-piercing ammunition were enacted in the Law Enforcement Officers Protection Act of 1986 (LEOPA), Pub. L. 99–408 (1986). LEOPA imposed significant restrictions on manufacturing, importing, and distributing armor-piercing ammunition. As amended,<sup>3</sup> the definition of “armor piercing ammunition” in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(B) provides:

- (B) The term “armor piercing ammunition” means —
  - (i) a projectile or projectile core which may be used in a handgun and which is constructed entirely (excluding the presence of traces of other substances) from one or a combination of tungsten alloys, steel, iron, brass, bronze, beryllium copper or depleted uranium; or
  - (ii) a full jacketed projectile larger than .22 caliber designed and intended for use in a handgun and whose jacket has a weight of more than 25 percent of the total weight of the projectile.

Section 921(a)(17)(C) further provides that armor-piercing ammunition does not include “a projectile which the Attorney General finds is primarily intended to be used for sporting

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hansen Cartridge Company from ATF Deputy Director Drake (Oct. 31, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> A complete round of ammunition (or cartridge) consists of four primary components: the case, primer, propellant (powder), and projectile (bullet).

<sup>3</sup> LEOPA originally limited the term “armor-piercing ammunition” to projectiles and projectile cores constructed of particular metals. In 1994, section 921(a)(17), defining “armor piercing ammunition.” was renumbered and subsection (B)(ii) added to include certain jacketed ammunition. *See* Pub. L. 103-322. The sporting purposes exemption applicable to armor-piercing ammunition has been in effect since 1986.

purposes.” *See also* 27 CFR § 478.148 (authorizing the Director of ATF to exempt certain armor-piercing ammunition from the requirements of part 478 provided that the ammunition is primarily intended for sporting or industrial purposes).

The GCA restricts manufacturing, selling, delivering, and importing armor-piercing ammunition. Licensed manufacturers and importers of armor-piercing ammunition cannot sell or deliver armor-piercing ammunition unless the sale or delivery (1) is for the use of the United States, any department or agency of the United States, any state, or any department, agency, or political subdivision of a state; (2) is for the purpose of exporting; or (3) is for the purpose of testing or experimenting and has been authorized by the Attorney General. 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(8). The GCA does not allow a licensee to apply as a dealer in armor-piercing ammunition. *See* 18 U.S.C. § 923(a)(3). And a licensed dealer of firearms is subject to revocation proceedings for willfully transferring armor-piercing ammunition.<sup>4</sup> 18 U.S.C. § 923(e).

### **SS109/M855 ammunition background**

In 1986, ATF determined that the SS109/M855 ammunition met the definition of “armor-piercing ammunition” because it contained a projectile core consisting of a steel penetrator located forward of a lead core.<sup>5</sup> However, in exempting the cartridge, ATF noted that the cartridge was “to be the standard 5.56mm rifle cartridge for use in military and civilian rifle match competitions.” ATF also noted the increased accuracy and range of the cartridge, and that “major manufacturers had begun producing 5.56mm rifle barrels with a one-in-seven-inch twist specifically for the SS109/M855 cartridge.” As a result, ATF determined that SS109/M855 ball ammunition in caliber 5.56mm was primarily intended for sporting purposes and therefore exempt from the restrictions imposed on armor-piercing ammunition.

Since 1986, ATF has taken the position that the exemption applies only to complete SS109/M855 cartridges and that SS109/M855 projectiles and projectile cores not incorporated into complete rounds are regulated as armor-piercing ammunition and are subject to the statutory restrictions. Complete SS109/M855 cartridges are widely available in commerce as are the projectiles themselves which are often removed (i.e., “pulled”) from complete cartridges and offered for sale by vendors to hobbyists for purposes of reloading.

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<sup>4</sup> Armor-piercing ammunition received and maintained by a licensed dealer as business inventory prior to August 28, 1986, can be transferred to certain government entities. 27 CFR § 478.99(e).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in a letter to Representative Hughes discussing a similar definition, the Treasury Department advised that “certain recently developed military cartridges, such as the NATO 5.56x45mm cartridge, which utilize a hard metallic penetrator, would also be covered.” *Law Enforcement Officer’s Protection Act of 1985: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Crime of the H. Comm. on the Judiciary*, 99 Cong. 148 (1985).

## Analysis

The 1986 exemption of SS109/M855 cartridges remains valid, and the completed cartridges are regulated only as “ammunition” under the GCA. The popularity and use of this ammunition for sporting purposes has expanded greatly since ATF granted the exemption. Indeed AR-type firearms chambered for SS109/M855 ammunition are among the most popular sporting rifles in the country.

The definition of armor-piercing ammunition under section 921(a)(17)(B) requires ATF to determine whether a “projectile or projectile core” meets the definition of armor-piercing ammunition and whether, despite meeting that definition, the “projectile” is nevertheless “primarily intended to be used for sporting purposes.” The statute specifically requires that the sporting analysis be applied to “a projectile” and does not contemplate that the exemption be limited to a complete cartridge. ATF’s previous analysis, which limited the sporting purposes exemption to only complete cartridges, was inconsistent with the plain language of section 921(a)(17)(C).

ATF has re-examined the longstanding SS109/M855 exemption and determined that SS109/M855 projectiles, including projectile cores, must be included with the exemption, even if not assembled into complete cartridges.

*Held*, the SS109/M855 cartridges, projectiles, and projectile cores are not subject to the restrictions in 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(7)–(8), and may be manufactured, imported, and sold or delivered in accordance with the provisions of the GCA generally regulating manufacturing, importing, and possessing ammunition.

Date Approved: June 15, 2026

ROBERT  
CEKADA

Robert Cekada  
Director

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