

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Feds Want to Go into the Matchmaking Business

Forty Million MMA Fans May See Mixed Martial Arts Federalized

By John Fund — December 7, 2016

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a great American success story. Almost unknown 15 years ago, it is now the fastest growing sport in America. Fans love seeing a full-contact combat sport in which fighters use martial arts techniques, but no weapons. MMA has grown to nearly rival tennis or golf in the value of its sponsorships and now has an audience of some 40 million people, mostly on pay-per-view.

But like all successful startups it has now attracted the unwanted attention of Washington D.C., where some in Congress would like to regulate the sport and impose federal control over it. A hearing on the subject will be held on the issue tomorrow morning in the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Markwayne Mullin, who was once a part-time MMA fighter, is now a Republican member of the House from Oklahoma. He has taken upon himself to sponsor legislation he says will combat widespread abuse of MMA fighters, some of whom he says are victims of exploitation and matches that have rigged outcomes.

But his cure is likely to be worse than the ills he purports to fight. The bill would enlist government bureaucrats to rank fighters and conduct the matchmaking that is now done by the private sector.

Lawrence Epstein is the Chief Operating Officer of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the promoting organization that now dominates MMA. He says “we don’t oppose thoughtful federal regulation if it’s going to improve the health and safety of MMA athletes and strengthen the sport. The Mullin bill does neither.” Right now UFC dominates the field with 523 fighters under its umbrella along with Viacom-owned Bellator, which has about 120 fighters. Both companies point out they are currently regulated by state boxing commissions on health and safety issues.

Most of Rep. Mullin’s conservative colleagues in Congress and outside conservative groups believe he is seeking a federal solution for what should remain a state and industry concern.

“Regulators throughout the U.S. have adopted unified rules of MMA which ensures fair fights, as well as predictable, transparent and fair regulatory treatment,” reads a letter sent to members of Congress earlier this year by the heads of 20 major conservative groups, including Morton Blackwell of the Leadership Institute and Matt Schlapp of the American Conservative Union.

Tomorrow’s hearing is largely a vanity project for its legislative promoters because the legislation has no chance of being adopted by Congress before it closes its business later this month. As for the next Congress, the odds of its becoming law look bleak. Dana White, the president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, is an avid supporter of Donald Trump and was even invited to speak by The Donald to the Republican convention in Cleveland this year.

Given Donald Trump’s vow to kill or scale back burdensome regulations it would be passing strange for him to sign a bill making the federal government a partner in deciding how MMA matches are organized. This is one set of fights the federal government should stay out of. The Mullin bill looks like it’s headed for a smackdown.