

GUN CONTROL

A Necessity ... or Anti-American?

By Religious News Service

Back in 1968 — the year in which Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy were shot dead in separate attacks — President Lyndon B. Johnson noted bitterly that in the United States, firearms—handguns, rifles and shotguns—were as easy to obtain as “baskets of fruit or cartons of cigarettes.”

Almost four years and thousand of gun killings later, the situation remains pretty much the same.

Last May 15, for example — the day Alabama Gov. George Wallace was shot down by a would be assassin—was a “typical” day as far as shootings go.

On that day, among other incidents, a husband shot and killed his wife, a man shot another man after an argument “about some girl,” a lover was shot and killed by a former girl friend, and an Air Force Captain and a retired postal worker killed themselves.

According to the Wall Street Journal, which made a nationwide survey of gunshot killings on May 15, an average of 57 people are killed daily in the U.S. as a result of gunfire.

The situation prompted the 184th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, meeting in Denver, Colorado, to call upon Congress to enact tight gun control legislation.

Specifically, the Assembly asked Congress to prohibit the manufacture, sale, ownership and possession of concealable weapons that are not designed and registered for sporting use or law enforcement.

“The majority of Americans (by three to one) want controls,” says the Christian Science Monitor. “The logic and statistics on the issue argue inescapably for greater control.”

Surveys disclose an enormous disparity between the low rate of gun crimes in countries where gun control laws are stringent — and ownership of firearms is considered a privilege rather than a right — and the high rate in the U.S. where such laws are lax.

Figures for 1970 — the latest available — indicate the sharp contrast between these countries and the U.S.:

In Britain, there were only 29 killings from all firearms. And total indictable firearms offenses numbered 1,359 in that country of 50 million people.

In France (population: 50,775,000), an estimated 475 persons were killed with handguns and an estimated 625 other crimes were perpetrated with guns.

Italy counted up 741 homicides with weapons of all types and had 3,112 armed robberies. Italy has a population of 53,670,000.

Among Canada's population of 21,406,000 there were 430 murders. Of these, only 176 were committed with guns.

Over-all figures for Japan are not available, but in Tokyo, which has a population of over 9 million, there were only 16 cases of violent crime involving guns.

On the other hand, the United States had 9,039 murders by guns and a further estimated 100,000 other crimes committed with firearms.

Admittedly, comparisons with the U.S. — with its “melting pot” population of 203,184,000 — are difficult to assess. The other countries mentioned have more homogeneous populations with relatively little racial or ethnic conflict. And none of these countries has Americas Wild West gun-slitting every-man-for-himself, right-to-bear arms traditions, which persist in some parts of the United States.

But many officials in these comparison countries are persuaded that tough gun-control laws have tended to keep down the number of guns in circulation. Consequently, they say, there is less chance of their being used accidentally, or in the heat of arguments, or by irresponsible persons.

At present in the U.S., apart from a federal gun-control bill enacted in 1968 limiting the interstate sale of rifles and shotguns, gun control is almost entirely in the hands of city and state authorities. Regulations on the sale of guns vary considerably from one state to another and persons in states with relatively strict laws have often been able to circumvent them by traveling to a neighboring state with more lenient laws.

But Congress now has what it needs, in the form of legislation already introduced, to end the proliferation of handguns — particularly the cheap or concealable variety, which, according to police records, are causing so much havoc.

The Senate has four major pieces of gun-control legislation: Michigan Senator Phillip A. Hart's bill would prohibit possession of all handguns after 180 days following enactment; Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy's bill would require the licensing of owners and registration of all guns; Indiana Senator Birch Bayh's bill would end the proliferation of cheap handguns by setting quality and size regulations, and Illinois Senator Adlai E. Stevenson III's bill would set federal licensing and registration standards for handguns.

In the House, there are three important handgun bills: New York Representative John M. Murphy's bill bans the manufacture and sale of “Saturday night specials” (cheap handgun weapons); Illinois Representative Abner J. Mikva's bill prohibits the manufacture, sale,



import of handguns or bearing them outside one's home, and New York Representative Emanuel Celler's bill, which combines Sen. Kennedy's proposal to require the licensing and registration of long guns and Rep. Mikva's proposal on handguns.

But in various parts of the country, there is great resistance to anti-gun legislation, a good deal of which is rooted in distrust of the federal government.

“It's the old question of confidence in government,” says David Steinberg, executive director of the National Council for a Responsible Firearms Policy. “Many gun owners already are concerned about big government and they don't like it.”

“They don't trust government. Sure, they say, suppose you pass a licensing system (to license all gun owners), which will involve licensing fees. They can see the possibility that over a period of time these fees will be increased to the point where ownership costs have become prohibitive, so indirectly you have achieved confiscation.”

Many gun owners, “Independent, largely self-sufficient men from rural states,” Steinberg adds, “are especially distrustful of that distant federal government” — a fear of many he points out, since the founding of the United States.

Improving of public confidence in government, among gun owners, is clearly a long-term process. Meanwhile, the National Council for a Responsible Firearms Policy is strongly recommending that legislatures, on both federal and state level enact effective gun-control laws that would embody the following proposals:

- Registration of all guns.
- Licensing of gun owners.
- Establishment by the states of codes of conduct that gun owners must adhere to, under penalty of losing their gun licenses.

Whether tough, realistic gun-control legislation will shortly come to pass in the U.S. is problematical.

But there are many citizens who would agree that such enactments “would save Hundreds of lives in this country and spare thousands of families all across this land the grief and the heartbreak that may come from the loss of a husband, a son, a brother or a friend.”

These words were spoken in the Senate by Senator Robert Kennedy on May 16, 1968. Less than one month later he lay fatally wounded, one more victim of a murderer's bullet.



Demonstration Broken Up

Using clubs, police charge at a group of South African students, breaking up a demonstration outside St. Mary's Anglican Cathedral in Johannesburg. The students were staging one of a series of peaceful protests against apartheid (racial segregation) in education. Several of the demonstrators have been dispersed by police action, leading to charges of brutality. (RNS)

Rockefellers Criticized For Abortion Stand

Huntington, Ind. (RNS) — The editor of a national Roman Catholic newsweekly here castigated the Rockefellers, charging that the family has hired the “best brains in the country to control the poor in the interests of the wealthy” and now has acted to assure that New York remains the world's “abortion capital.”

Father Albert J. Nevins, editor of Our Sunday Visitor, said in a June 11 editorial that the veto by Gov. Rockefeller of New York's abortion repeal bill constituted the latest example of the Rockefellers' pro-abortion posture.

The editor said the closeness of the Rockefellers to abortion advocates can be documented, pointing out that Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Rockefeller Foundation made major contributions for population control.

He noted that John D. Rockefeller III heads President Nixon's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future which has taken a position favoring liberalized abortion, a stance that President Nixon opposes, and has received two awards from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Also criticizing Gov. Rockefeller's financial interest in Latin

America as destructive and monopolizing, Father Nevins ticked off a long list of worldwide investments and holdings which, he intimated, were exploitative and hypocritical.

The priest denied that the philanthropic image of the Rockefellers presented to the American public by the “best” public relations firms is valid.

“Now Nelson Rockefeller shows his love of the poor again and his fearless defense of human life by vetoing the abortion reform law which would have ended New York as the abortion capital of America,” said Father Nevins.

Both houses of the New York Legislature passed the bill repealing the liberalized abortion law passed in 1970 which has already accounted for more than 300,000 abortions.

Father Nevins said the governor tried a last-minute ploy by stating he would sign a bill changing the time of abortions from 24 to 18 weeks.

“But murder is murder even at one week, and the Legislature called his bluff,” he observed. “The tragedy is that the governor was not bluffing.”