

The Gun Control Question

By Religious News Service

Every five or six seconds, experts figure, another new handgun is sold somewhere in the United States.

Grim statistics show that this kind of gun, which constitutes about one-third of the estimated 200,000,000 privately owned firearms in this country, is nine times as likely as shotgun and rifle to be involved in crime.

Again, it is a matter of record that guns of all sorts are involved in a quarter of a million violent episodes each year in the U.S.

The bloody reality symbolized by these bloodless figures gives rise to sporadic flurries of demands for effective gun control legislation.

In March, for example, Cardinal John Cody of Chicago, chairman of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Pro-Life Committee, urged that "stringent firearm controls" become "a federal priority."

"There is a greater awareness on the part of all citizens today," he said, "that the right (of private citizens) to arm is an anachronism in the 20th Century."

"Vigorous public support is needed to establish realistic gun controls," the prelate declared. "To the tearful questions asked after each tragic murder by gun: 'Are they going to outlaw guns?' we need to answer 'Yes,' and we need to do it now."

Whether the cardinal's plea will prove effective, however, is doubtful on the basis of the record.

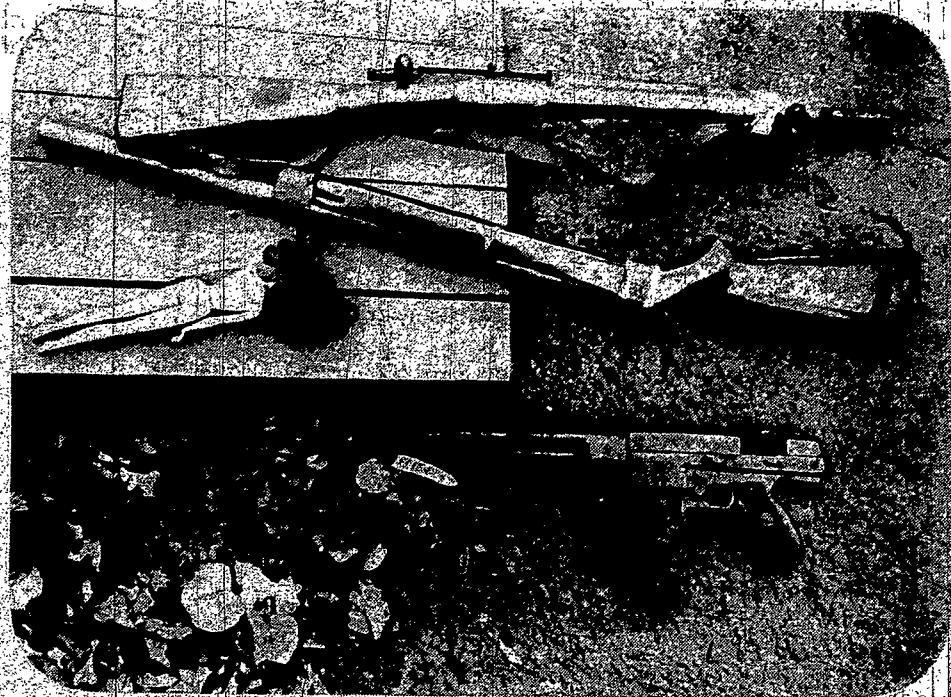
Says Father Paul J. Weber, SJ, a political scientist at Marquette University in Milwaukee:

"In a nation that has witnessed 41 recorded assassination attempts on Presidents, governors, and congressmen (not to mention those other figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, George Lincoln Rockwell), it chills the soul to know that in the three years after John F. Kennedy was gunned down state legislatures considered 589 firearms bills, and passed only one (in New Jersey)."

Robert Sherrill, author of a new book, *The Saturday Night Special and Other Guns With Which Americans Won the West, Protected Bootleg Franchises, Slew Wildlife, Robbed Countless Banks, Shot Husbands Purposely and by Mistake, and Killed Presidents — Together With the Debate Over Continuing Same*, places the most direct responsibility for weak firearms control on the lobbying efforts of "vested interests."

Sherrill marshals facts and

Church Leaders Loading Up For Another Showdown



RNS photo by Ray Carlson

figures to bolster his charge that the "chumminess" of gun manufacturers, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the government (Congressmen, the military, and policemen) has so far managed to sidetrack all would-be reform efforts and "made a mockery" of very attempt to pass effective gun legislation.

After all, he points out, guns mean big business. Target shooters, hunters, collectors, protection seekers, and criminals spent \$581.6 million for guns and ammunition in 1972 — "and that represents only the recorded transactions."

Father Weber, in the March 23 issue of *America*, the Jesuit weekly review, has harsh words for the National Rifle Association (NRA).

"Most of the major gun and ammunition manufacturers have officials on the board of directors (of the one million-member) NRA, which, next to the Mafia, surely ranks as the most dangerously irresponsible organization in the country."

"The NRA," he adds, "has been so effective in blocking responsible gun legislation that one political science textbook (*The People, Maybe*) uses it as a model of the single-issue interest group."

A number of "myths" or misconceptions have sprung up in the thicket of the more-or-less continuing national debate over gun control, in the opinion of Franklin E. Zimring, law professor at the University of Chicago and associate director of the university's Center for Studies in Criminal Justice.

One of these "myths," he lists in a *Christian Science Monitor* article, is that "We have a crime problem, not a gun problem."

"This refrain," he observes, "often heard from anti-gun control groups is true to the extent that (200,000,000) guns would pose no problem in this country if nobody fired one."

"The problem is that robbers, angry husbands, and barroom debaters use them hundreds of thousands of times each year. We have both a crime problem and a gun problem."

As former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark points out in *Crime in America*, the majority of murders are not preplanned, but are crimes of passion — often helped along by alcohol — committed when guns just happen to be handy.

Leonard Berkowitz, a University of Wisconsin psychologist, in his book *Roots of Aggression*, presents findings of an experiment showing that the mere presence of guns increases aggressive actions of participants.

Another "myth" cited by Dr. Zimring is that "The handgun is a useful tool of household self-defense."

Dr. Zimring, who served as director of research for the 1968-69 task force on firearms of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, says that about 25 per cent of all households have acquired handguns in the belief that they provide an effective defense against the criminal intruder.

"Yet," he notes, "the homeowner's gun rarely protects him against burglars, who seek to elude him, or the occasional robber, who counts on surprise and a weapon of his own to render the homeowner helpless."

"In fact," he adds, "the loaded handgun (in the home) is much more likely to accidentally kill someone in the family than to save his life."

"There is no indication," says political scientist Weber "that a family possessing a gun is more 'safe' or 'protected' than a family without one."

"Only the myth says it is so. The time has come to challenge the myth and get guns out of homes."

How to do so — and how to stem the tidal wave of guns that all pro-gun control groups and individuals describe as "inundating" the country — is the problem.

Parties interested in gun control legislation readily admit that effective laws are difficult to get. Local ordinances are next to impossible to enforce as long as people who want guns can order them by mail, buy them from acquaintances, or simply drive to a nearby city.

Individual states cannot curb interstate commerce, and — as various studies show — state legislators are vulnerable to gun lobby pressures.

Advocates of gun control believe, therefore, that gun traffic is of such a volume and nature that it can be controlled only by comprehensive national legislation.

In his call for federal legislation, Cardinal Cody conceded that effective laws would inconvenience bona fide sportsmen and collectors, but insisted that "a luxury of the few" must "give way to the natural rights of all people to safety and public protection from those who misuse such weapons."

Opponents of gun controls, on the other hand, point to the American experience with prohibition of alcoholic beverages as strong indication that new laws, federal or local, will not be any guarantee of significant social change.

Then too, as Dr. Zimring notes, "it is difficult for legitimate gun owners to see themselves as any part of the problem, since, they say, 99 per cent of all our guns are used responsibly, and everyone sees himself as part of the 99 per cent. It is thus difficult to convince him that there should be gun laws that inconvenience him."

Nonetheless, polls conducted periodically since 1938 indicate that almost 80 per cent of the American public wants effective gun legislation.

For those who want tough federal gun control laws, it then becomes a matter of mobilizing this majority opinion to provide what John Kenneth Galbraith has called "countervailing power" to offset the proven effectiveness of the anti-gun control interest groups.

Father Weber believes that potential countervailing power groups are at hand, such as Common Cause, the Nader organizations, and "especially broad-based," religiously-motivated groups, like the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference.

"One wonders what it will take to get them involved," he muses. "One hundred thousand homicides? Another assassination? Or both?"