

Churchmen Plead for Handgun Controls

Two recent attempts on the life of President Ford within a matter of days — involving the use of handguns —

A News Analysis

have triggered new demands from church groups, legislators, and private citizens for stiffer Federal gun laws.

But few there are, even among proponents of Federal gun control legislation, who believe that new, more stringent firearms regulations will be enacted by Congress in the foreseeable future.

As Rep. Robert D. Drinan (D-Mass.) has noted: "Of the many vital issues facing the Congress, few generate more controversy, more intensive lobbying, and more diametrically opposed points of view than the issue of Federal gun control."

Nonetheless, a significant number of representatives of the nation's religious community have given strong endorsement to effective congressional action.

The recent House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Portland, Me., urged in a formal resolution that "the Congress of the United States adopt effective handgun legislation as promptly as possible," and expressed support for "state and local legislation aimed at controlling the sale and use of handguns."

A similar appeal was made by the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. In a letter to President Ford and the majority and minority leaders of the Senate and House, the commission declared:

"The second Presidential assassination attempt underscores a grim reality: the United States needs immediate and effective legislation to control the abuse of handguns. We plead with you to give priority to this legislation. Please do not wait to act until tragedy strikes again."

The 29-member bishops' Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference also has called for a "national firearms policy" that is responsive to the public interest and individual rights and will lead to the "eventual elimination of handguns from our society."

"The unlimited freedom to possess and use handguns must give way to the rights of all people to safety and protection," the bishops said.

Last July, the American Jewish Congress urged passage of a Federal gun control law that would ban the manufacture, importation, sale, and ownership of all types of handguns and handgun ammunition "except for use by law enforcement officers."

In a statement submitted to the U.S. House Subcommittee on Crime of the House Judiciary Committee, the Jewish agency insisted that the country's "appalling high rate of violent death and injury caused by firearms cannot be effectively dealt with by state laws alone."

A few months earlier, religious agencies, including some affiliated with the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Church of the Brethren, United Presbyterian Church, Unitarian-Universalist Association, and some Quaker and Jewish bodies, formed a National Coalition to Ban Handguns.

At least two citizens' anti-gun organizations have been formed: the Chicago-based Committee for Handgun Control, and, more recently, the New York-based DISARM organization, headed by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark.

"Congress," said a DISARM statement, "must enact laws banning the manufacture, sale, and private possession of all handguns," and providing for "the registration of rifles and shotguns and the licensing of those who bear them."

As of October 1975, there were over 130 gun control proposals up for consideration by the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, headed by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.). These bills range from the Administration's, which would prohibit the import and manufacture of "Saturday night specials," short-barreled, cheaply made weapons that sell for \$25 or so, to Conyer's own proposal to outlaw the sale, ownership, or possession of all handguns by private citizens.

Conyers, who has remarked that it would be "hypocritical" to push legislation that "will not deal with the problem," has said, however, that he does not expect his bill to gain the approval of the House. (It was reflected last Thursday in committee.)

Senator Birch Bayh (D-Ind.), who heads a Senate committee that is studying gun control, is similarly pessimistic. "Despite two recent assassination attempts on President Ford," he said, "it is unlikely that any effective

(Federal) gun control legislation will be passed in the near future."

"The trouble," said Bayh, "is that the gun lobby is too strong for most members of Congress to take it on."

According to Senator Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.), the failure of the Congress in the past to act on strong gun control legislation has been due in large part to "an extraordinarily intense" lobbying effort by the National Rifle Association (NRA), which "has created in Congress a distorted and totally inaccurate impression of American public opinion on this question."

A Gallup Poll, published last June, revealed that 67 per cent of the U.S. adult population favored registration of all firearms. (President Ford, in his recommendations to Congress on fighting crime, said he was still "unalterably opposed" to registering either guns or owners of guns.)

The same poll also showed that 55 per cent of Americans were opposed to the banning of possession of handguns by private citizens.

The NRA, with 1,050,000 members and an annual budget of \$10 million, is widely regarded as one of the most powerful lobbies in the nation. It has long been the effective spokesman for Americans who oppose legal restriction on private ownership of firearms.

Gun control opponents argue that the Second Amendment of the Constitution guarantees them the right to own guns. The amendment says: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and to bear arms shall not be infringed."

Some pro-gun advocates, like the newly-formed National Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, have argued that if guns are taken away from citizens, "only criminals will have guns," and people will be victims of attack.

There are also economic reasons for opposing gun control: Handgun sales reached \$91 million in fiscal year 1974, Internal Revenue figures show.

Americans favoring gun control laws offer counter arguments. They point to the 1939 Supreme Court decision in U.S. v. Miller that the Second Amendment insures states the right to maintain a national guard, not individuals the right to own guns.

Most proponents of gun control claim that there is "a domestic arms race" going on in the U.S. The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which is charged with enforcing Federal firearms laws, estimates that there are at least 135 million firearms in the hands of private citizens — and that 40 million are handguns.

In the past few years, handguns have proliferated at the rate of 2.5 million per year.

FBI crime reports show that about 10,000 of the 17,000 murders committed in 1973 were by handguns, another 1,200 were by rifles and shotguns.

Police officials around the country have pointed out that handguns purchased to protect families from intruders are more likely to be used to harm a friend or family member in an argument or accident.

The nation's present Federal gun control law, passed in 1968, grew out of public reaction to the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

There is mounting evidence that it has been a dismal failure, riddled as it is with loopholes. It banned the import of cheap handguns from abroad, but not the parts needed to make such guns. It also required all gun dealers to hold Federal licenses. But the licenses are so cheap (\$10) and so easy to get that 160,000 entrepreneurs now hold them. In some states, guns can legally be sold in many supermarkets.

civilized nation cannot be sustained until effective and enforceable gun control laws are passed."

The priests' words were an echo of those uttered seven years ago by the late President Lyndon B. Johnson:


"Today the nation cries out to the conscience of Congress. Surely this must be clear beyond question. The hour has come for Congress to enact a strong and effective gun control law governing the full range of lethal weapons."

The assassination attempts on President Ford, many feel, have given a special urgency to his predecessor's plea.

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Roche (left), John J. Reed, associate administrator of St. Joseph's and Hulsey.

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Harlen E. Hulsey, Service Planning Representative of In-

ternational Business Machines, presented the gift which will be used in the ongoing rehabilitation program as its directors determine.

Joseph F. Roche, assistant coordinator of the STARS program, accepted the gift.