

# The gun and the sanctity of human life; or The bullet as pathogen

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**T**houghtful clinicians and researchers are constantly on the alert for pathogens, whatever their nature, acting on the premise that identification of harmful environmental agents will lead to the introduction of measures to eliminate or control them.

In this presentation I discuss the bullet as a pathogen in our "peace-time" American society, a designation often considered a tragic joke by those of us who function professionally in metropolitan coroners' or medical examiners' offices, where we deal with violent death daily and, all too frequently, several times daily. I shall also mention briefly the epidemiology of gunshot incidents inasmuch as epidemiology may point to etiology.

Fatal and nonfatal gunshot incidents, whether they be attempted or successful homicides and suicides, accidents, or of undetermined origin, have multifaceted causations involving more than the presence of a potentially deadly firearm; but all too often a gun escalates the degree of violence to irreversible lethality. ("Wife, son 9, see man slain after minor car crash."<sup>1</sup> The victim was shot in the head.)

Human personality, intellectual capacity, emotional stability, our national historical heritage, community custom, popular entertainment (television, motion pictures, radio, and "comic" books), alcohol and other psychoactive drugs, and our legal system with its ramifications play roles in these tragedies. Although a gun is involved in most American homicides, it alone does not explain this blotch on our national face.

Discussion of firearms traumata possesses a relevance matched by comparatively few other remediable (an important qualification) life-and-death phenomena on the current American scene. The past decade witnessed a horrifying increase in homicidal and nonfatal gunshot crimes in our country. I do not call this a "wave" of homicides. Waves come, break, and recede. Rather, this dismal aspect of our society may be likened to a flood,

with the water line (or blood line) constantly rising. ("Homicides are up 47% from '78's 1st quarter."<sup>2</sup>)

## The Sanctity of Human Life

Before presenting some factual aspects of firearms incidents, I offer a few words about the moral aspect of this complicated subject.

The term, *sanctity of human life*, is not a trite phrase or a banal cliché. We physicians know it to be an article of deep professional and personal faith. All human life is sacred, and it is only the exigencies of war, excusable killings or justifiable homicides, and capital punishment (There, too, is an endlessly debatable subject.) that justify the deliberate termination of a human life.

Death is truly democratic, and we who deal with it in our autopsy and consulting rooms, and courtrooms know full well that regardless of race, religion, ethnic background, or life style of the homicide victim, the blood is always equally red, and the tears shed for the death of a loved one are equally salty.

Because most gunshot incidents arise from criminal acts with their sequelae of arrests and other steps of the law enforcement-judicial process, we must constantly bear in mind the thesis that justice exists only when those who have *not* been injured by a crime are as indignant as those who have been harmed by an unlawful act.

In a consideration of gunshot incidents, we deal with more than matters of life and death and more than simply medical or legal facts. We are concerned also with the quality of life. The news media inform the community about how many people have been done to death, whether by firearms, motor vehicles, or other traumatizing modalities. Unless the victim is a public figure such as Governor George Wallace, comparatively little attention is paid to nonfatal incidents, which range in gravity from minor to serious totally disabling injuries. Many nameless George Wallaces live out their shortened lives as paraplegics or worse because a missile transected their spinal cords. And there are those condemned to a vegetative existence as a consequence of a cerebral bullet injury.

Even when the gunshot victim recovers completely physically, how can one assess the degree of emotional trauma endured by the wounded subject, his family, and his friends? How in these days of double-digit inflation does one calculate the cost in dollars and cents of hospital care (operating room and what goes with it, blood bank, intensive care unit, special duty nurses, X rays),

<sup>1</sup>This article, which appeared in *The Pharos* (Summer 1980), is reprinted here in its entirety. Copyright ©1980 by Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, reprinted by permission from *The Pharos*, Summer 1980.

<sup>2</sup>The author (AOA, Tufts University, 1940) was formerly professor of forensic pathology at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, Cleveland, Ohio, and Chief Deputy Coroner at the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Coroner's Office. The penetrating concepts embodied in this seminal contribution are as operative today as they were in 1980.—*The Editor*.

days lost from work by the human bullet target, police investigation, courtroom procedures, and all the rest? Where will this human and financial disaster end?

Gunshot fatalities are the visible tip of this iceberg of injury. Nonfatal wounds are more numerous and in many ways as or more important than those in which the victim was dead on or after arrival at the hospital. Thanks to advances in medical care made over the past several decades, many gunshot patients survive today who formerly would have succumbed quickly or slowly and agonizingly. A chilling thought presents itself: What would today's gunshot homicide toll be if we had our current assault rate combined with the medical skills and techniques that were available in the days before World War II and in the 1950s? What a mass disaster we would face if medical progress had *not* kept pace with the mounting level of violence!

The spectrum of physically and emotionally traumatic human behavior in contemporary American society is deeply disturbing. There is no humor in death, no happiness in disability, and no joy in suffering. These are the bitter fruits of the tree of violence, and the availability of handguns fertilizes the soil for the growth of this malignant phenomenon.

In all fairness we must acknowledge that firearms can be and indeed are used occasionally to protect the lives of innocent people, to safe-guard the privacy of one's home and the safety of one's belongings, over and above the fascination they hold for gun collectors and the fun they provide for hobby shooters.

Legally justifiable gunshot homicides are yet another aspect of the violence around us, whether the weapon was fired by a civilian or a police officer. Many law-abiding citizens are vociferous in their claim to their right (some consider it an obligation) to keep a loaded gun in their homes or on their persons to protect them from those who would harm or rob them. Their views, whether expressed individually or through such organizations as the National Rifle Association (NRA), must be kept in mind when we consider what can be done about firearms control.

Many of our fellow physicians, as learned and dedicated healers as the rest of us, I am sure, are quick to condemn any attempt at gun control. An editorial reprint entitled "Approved Therapy for Handgun Menace: 'Get the Bullet'" appeared in the *American Medical News*.<sup>3</sup> It evoked a spate of letters from physicians with communications headed by such phrases as "Get the criminal, not the bullet," "Passing a law is shooting from the hip," and "MD opposes handgun curbs."<sup>4</sup>

#### A Hard Look at Guns in Twentieth-Century U.S.A.

If we are to discuss the complex subject of gun control, we must do so on the basis of solid information, not emotion and prejudice. What are the *facts* about guns in our country today?

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tells us that more than 20,000 homicides (culpable murders, manslaughters, and justifiable killings) occur annually in the United States. Put differently, every twenty-six minutes, a man, woman, or child is slaughtered in our nation by one means or another.<sup>5</sup> (These figures do *not* include fatal auto accidents classified as "vehicular homicides.") In 1976, homicide ranked as the twelfth most common "cause of death" in the United States, surpassing such

serious "medical" entities as congenital anomalies, nephritis, nephrosis, and septicemia.<sup>6</sup> (Strictly speaking, homicide is not a *cause* but rather a *manner* of death. The *cause* of death is the responsible disease or injury. The *manner* of death is the fashion in which the *cause* arose.)

The weapon used most frequently with homicidal intent in America is a firearm, whether it be a handgun, shoulder gun, submachine gun, or some type of home-made lethal hardware, called a "zip" gun. Current national figures indicate that the number of homicides and attempted homicides perpetrated with firearms exceeds the number of homicides committed by all other forms of violence combined.<sup>7</sup> Handguns comprise the majority of firearms.

Firearms are used in three of four major crimes causing injury and death—homicide, aggravated assault, and armed robbery. They are the favorite weapon of the airplane hijacker. Since 1967, the number of firearms homicides in the United States has increased by 48 percent. During this same interval, homicides committed with other weapons increased by 10 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Of all weapons, firearms are the most deadly and the most versatile. They permit attacks at greater range and from positions of better concealment than do other lethal instrumentalities by persons physically or psychologically unable to overpower their intended victims through personal contact.

Since the start of this century, more than 850,000 American *civilians* have been killed by bullets. This number exceeds the total military casualties suffered by our armed forces in all the "big" and "little" wars we have fought from the War of Independence through Vietnam. This is a record no other industrialized nation can approach.<sup>5</sup> To make this matter more timely, more Americans were slain at home during the first four years of the 1970s than were killed in combat during the entire span of the Vietnam hostilities. This gruesome statistic supports the contention that our nation is in the midst of a murder "epidemic" unparalleled in our history. Indeed, murder now ranks as major "cause" of death in some age-race portions of our society.<sup>9</sup> The killers are "typical Americans," 70 percent of their victims are friends or relatives, and only 2 percent of the assailants are judged "criminally insane."<sup>10</sup>

#### Bullet Fatalities—A Personal Statement

My association with the Coroner's Office of Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Cleveland and its suburbs) spans three decades. Thus I am familiar with the urban handgun-homicide complex on the basis of almost daily personal experience. When I started to work in this governmental agency, the annual county homicide toll was less than 100, of which 50 to 60 percent involved guns. Starting in the mid-sixties, the homicide incidence and rate rose sharply. Now nearly 80 percent of these bloody episodes are gun-dependent. Of these, the weapons in approximately 80 percent of cases are handguns.

In my community, guns, especially handguns, account for roughly four times as many homicides as all other forms of lethal, criminal violence combined.<sup>9,11</sup>

If there were in excess of 200 deaths annually in my county from typhoid fever, as there are from criminally caused gunshot fatalities, there would be mass hysteria. Yet these murders and manslaughters are accepted by the

majority of our citizens as a reasonable price to pay for living in "the best location in the nation."

### A Brief Glance at Geography and History

Where strict gun control laws are enforced, homicides in general and assassinations occur infrequently. There were 189 murders in Tokyo in 1974 compared with more than 1500 in New York City. Only one in Tokyo involved a gun. During that same year there were 1708 murders in all of Japan of which only 72 (4 percent) were gun-caused, and firearms were utilized in less than 2 percent of armed robberies.<sup>12</sup>

Data from Western European nations are similar. Great Britain, with its population in excess of 50 million, has fewer annual killings than the borough of Manhattan with its 1.7 million inhabitants. In short, the United States averages *fifty* times as many gun homicides as the combined populations of England, Germany, and Japan.<sup>13</sup>

One author puts this aspect of our society in the following words:

To foreign observers, nothing is more astonishing than our casual recourse to violence in personal disputes, unless it is our failure to restrain it by law—in particular, our failure to control the indiscriminate sale and use of guns, which in recent years has lain at the heart of the controversy and at the same time has made it politically insoluble.<sup>14</sup>

It is more than coincidence that all four American presidents killed in office in the century that elapsed between Lincoln's murder at Ford's theater in 1865 and Kennedy's assassination in Dealey Plaza in 1963 involved firearms. Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley were shot with handguns. Kennedy was killed with an Italian military rifle. In this same context, attempted and, fortunately, unsuccessful assassinations of our nation's chief executives and of candidates for that high office all involved guns. (Recall the recent failed misdeeds of Sara Jane Moore and Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme.) Governor Wallace was crippled by Arthur Bremer in 1972, and Senator Robert Kennedy was killed in Los Angeles in 1968 during his campaign to win California's votes for the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Guns!! Guns!! Guns!! I recall no other industrialized North American or Western European nation that has had such a high, violent mortality in its top government leaders during the past century.

### The Psychology and Psychopathology of the Shooter

The most reasonable explanation for the use of firearms in the majority of culpable homicides is that a gun, illegally used, is a coward's weapon. This is true whether the killing is committed in connection with a family argument, political terrorism, an armed robbery, a drunken quarrel between friends, or a skulking assassination. With its peculiar lethality, a gun converts a spat into a slaying and a quarrel into a killing. A handgun is effective at a distance of many feet, a shotgun kills or seriously injures at a muzzle-target distance of many yards, and a rifle is effective at hundreds of yards. (Remember what Lee Harvey Oswald, lurking in the Texas School Book Depository, did to his unsuspecting victim in a moving vehicle several hundred yards away, to comprehend the potential lethality of this weapon.)

The corollary of this unique firearms feature is that a slayer can kill with emotional impunity. Konrad Lorenz points out:

The deep, emotional layers of our personality simply do not register the fact that the crooking of the forefinger to release a shot tears the entrails of another man. No sane man would even go rabbit hunting for pleasure if the necessity of killing his prey with his natural weapons brought home to him the full, emotional realization of what he is actually doing.<sup>15</sup>

Reams have been written about the psychiatric significance of the gun. Some observers consider the gun to be a sex symbol of male chauvinism with its ability to make the weakest man the peer of the strongest. ("God made man, but Colt made all men equal.") Some analysts state that the attitude of at least part of the masculine portion of the progun faction to the "threat" of gun control springs from a castration complex, or even worse. Certainly a gun can flatter the ego of a man who has nothing else to be vain about.

There appears to be a deep psychological drive motivating those who keep guns in their homes, stores, or auto glove compartments. For good or ill, man has always wanted to control his environment and the men around him. A gun gives him this "magical" power.

The gun (and the use of a gun) haunts American speech. Would it be going off half-cocked to suggest that, just as a shot in the dark, nothing penetrated the American idiom as deeply as the gun? The idea is not too wide off the mark. The gun has given the American tongue the big shot who is quick on the trigger, the straight shooter, the flash in the pan, and the dud.<sup>16</sup>

Guns create feelings of self-esteem, permitting even the least potent to join "The Superman Club." As part of its "magical" power, a firearm is "a key which can unlock any door."<sup>17</sup> With it, the misguided possessor believes that he can go anywhere and have everything he wants. No other weapon gives this feeling of mastery. On the basis of interviews with men convicted of armed robbery, a nationally syndicated psychiatrist concluded that in many instances the most important element in the crime was not the acquisition of money or jewels but rather the brief interval during which these armed individuals could force someone to do as they commanded. The firearm becomes a mechanism by which to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and represents a dangerous outlet for aggressive impulses.<sup>17</sup>

A gun is the favorite weapon of the political assassin. Other than for poisoning homicides, extremely rare today, the use of bombs (correctly termed "infernal machines"), and arson, practically every other attempt at man slaying requires that the assailant either come within arm's length or actual grips with his intended victim. Fatal injuries by knives thrown at rather than manually plunged into the victim are rare in the real world despite their comparative frequency in the "reel" world of Hollywood.

Facile access to firearms by their legal purchase, leaving aside for the moment their availability by their being borrowed or stolen, is an invitation to their wrongful use by the neurotic, the psychotic, and the socially maladjusted. Who can forget the multihomicides carried out by Charles Whitman in Austin, Texas (sixteen victims killed and thirty wounded, all but two by guns) and by Howard Unruh, who fatally shot thirteen neighbors and strangers within ten minutes in Camden, New Jersey?<sup>5</sup>

### Shot and Killed on Duty

A firearm is the lethal instrumentality in virtually every homicide of a law enforcement officer killed in line of

duty. During the past half-century, guns were responsible for over 90 percent of such fatalities, with pistols and revolvers constituting 95 percent of the fatal armament. Homicides involving "peace officers" occur throughout the United States at an average number of 100 yearly. In 1976, 110 law enforcement officers died as a consequence of criminal action, 93 by firearms.<sup>18</sup>

These sorry statistics become more impressive when they are compared with their counterparts in the British Isles. A recent study revealed that "over the past 10 years, *one or two* [emphasis added] British police officers have been killed on duty each year."<sup>19</sup>

### Guns in America

The United States is the only industrialized nation that does not *effectively* regulate private ownership of firearms. The consequence of this sad fact is that our civilian population is the most heavily armed in history.<sup>20</sup> Approximately 100 million firearms of all types are in American civilian possession, and half of American homes have one or more firearms.<sup>8</sup> Sales of handguns and long guns have increased during the recent past, and we manufacture and sell more than 2.5 million handguns each year. Thus a new firearm is purchased every 13.5 seconds.<sup>21</sup>

Are we "hung up" on guns because of our frontier heritage? Canada, with the same frontier tradition as we, has only a fraction of our homicide rate.<sup>5,22</sup> Australia, historically much closed to a frontier tradition than we and with a similar melting-pot makeup, has one-seventh the proportionate private handgun ownership as we, thanks to an efficient system of law enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

Although only one-fourth of our firearms are handguns, they account for almost three-quarters of firearms homicides. The criminal's primary weapon is a handgun, and the ready availability of handguns makes it easy for extremist groups and misdirected individuals to obtain them. Put succinctly, where there are more firearms, there is more firearm violence. Conversely, where there are fewer firearms, there is a decrease in this modality of injury and death.

### Accidental Firearms Casualties

The inevitable result of guns in the hands of those who misuse them is a depressing list of fatal and nonfatal *accidental* shootings. By accidental shootings, I mean incidents wherein persons are shot by mischance or misadventure, whether the responsible person was the victim "playing" with or cleaning a loaded gun, or some other person who unintentionally precipitated the traumatizing event. A typical group of such frightening events is made up of the following headlines: "3-year old boy shoots his mother to death";<sup>23</sup> "4-year old shot, killed by playmate";<sup>24</sup> "Boy 3, kills sister with parent's gun";<sup>25</sup> "6-year old is shot to death in 'find gun for \$1' scheme."<sup>26</sup> It is evident that these tragedies would not have occurred had a loaded gun not been conveniently nearby.<sup>27</sup>

Approximately three thousand Americans die each year from accidental firearms injuries. Another twenty thousand are shot and survive.<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as an accidental firearm death represents as premature a wastage of human life as that taken by a sadistic or psychotic killer, this facet of the gun problem deserves a moment's attention.

Like homicides, firearms accidents parallel the pattern of firearms ownership. The fallacy that a gun in the home represents protection for its residents is rebutted by data

that prove that such household weapons are more likely to cause harm and death to those who own them, their children, and their friends than they prove to be an effective defense or reliable deterrent to those who would enter these homes, bent on robbery, burglary, or rape. Indeed, household weapons more often provide successful burglars and robbers with a ready arsenal than they prevent these marauders from carrying out their foul deeds.<sup>28</sup>

### The Dispute

Any discussion of gun control requires that those who favor controlling firearms concede the inescapable fact that non-availability of guns will *not* eliminate homicide or nonfatal assaults. People killed each other and themselves long before the Chinese invented gunpowder.

The logic-destructive arguments of both sides in the current gun control debate are equally self-destructive.

Every side has a sizable amount of good sense and logic to depend on; but instead of simply saying they want to have a good time with their guns—something not frowned on even in Puritan America—the hunters have concocted all sorts of weird Constitutional and conservation arguments to defend their position. Instead of saying that they want to make as much money as they possibly can—which has never been considered as a sin in America—the gun merchants also throw up great cloudbanks of patriotic fluff. And the antigun people, who could effectively restrict their arguments to showing that guns are not an absolute necessity for the American way of life, have instead clobbered the senses with distorted statistics, hysterically interpreted.<sup>22</sup>

Many concerned people believe that a substantial portion of our murders and manslaughters would not have occurred had a firearm not been readily at hand. The man who puts a Saturday Night Special into his pocket before he visits his neighborhood poolroom or the woman who puts a pistol into her purse before she goes shopping are not the same persons they would have been were they not "toting" these items.

A critical feature related to the number of firearms in the community is the life span of a gun. If a "shooting iron" is properly looked after (that is, cleaned and oiled regularly), its life expectancy is many years. Many firearms used to commit crimes in our country are several decades old.<sup>8</sup> If we manufacture, import, or assemble no additional guns in this country for the next twenty or thirty years, we have currently on hand (and *in hand*?) a sufficient number of these weapons to decimate the population. Firearms longevity provides a rebuttal to the slogan, "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." The response to this statement is "Guns don't die. People die."

A second sloganeering argument promulgated by our progun fellow-citizens is, "When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." Ergo, it follows logically that the law-obeying majority should have guns to protect themselves from the depredations of the habitual law breakers, who seemingly abound in our society.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the professional criminal is always able to get a gun, whether he buys, steals, borrows, or smuggles it across our international borders, and he will *not* register it, regardless of any law that requires public recording of gun possession. The majority of American homicides, however, are committed by law-abiding people who know and frequently "love" each other, and who express aggression in this explosive manner.

Said differently, although the confirmed criminal will

not register his gun, many people *become* criminals only after they have misused the weapon. The accessibility of a firearm permits the instantaneous metamorphosis of a law-abiding (hot-headed?) person into a murderer. The public has the misconception that most murders are perpetrated by criminals who kill to achieve profit and power, the Godfather image. Psychiatric studies reveal the opposite to be true. Most homicides are not associated with other felonies and are not perpetrated as the result of Mafia-type contracts.<sup>28</sup>

Consideration of the foregoing facts and arguments raises the question, How much longer must we wait and how many more lives must be lost to firearms before effective measures are forthcoming that will exert meaningful control over these presently all-too-readily accessible, death-dealing weapons? The current American approach to firearms—practically a *laissez-faire* attitude—is bankrupt.

One argument put forth by opponents of attempts at firearms control by state or federal legislative action is that it is their constitutional “right . . . to keep and bear arms.” Taken out of context this phrase reverses the meaning of the constitutional intent, as has been demonstrated repeatedly by judicial interpretations.

The Second Amendment to the Constitution, which states, “A *well-regulated Militia* [emphasis added], being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed,” was enacted in the eighteenth century, when its provisions were essential for the survival of a struggling, infant nation, beset on all sides by actual and potential enemies. Moreover, the citizen did not then enjoy the protection we have today, when help is available at practically a moment’s notice, thanks to modern communications and police mobility. Consequently, a citizen required some means to protect the privacy of his home and the personal safety of himself and his family.

These provisions are invoked today by many persons to justify their keeping a loaded firearm in their homes when the need for a “well-regulated Militia,” in the sense intended by the Second Amendment, disappeared long ago. The “well-regulated Militia” of the eighteenth century is today’s National Guard, and the “right to bear arms” is not synonymous with a citizen’s putting a “piece” into his pocket or into her purse.

In talking about constitutional rights, we should recall that the Preamble to this governmental bulwark states that one of the purposes for its enactment is to “insure domestic Tranquility.” Domestic tranquility means that one is safe in one’s home, at one’s place of work, and on the streets of one’s community. The guns now used to kill and cripple make a mockery of these words.

Putting legalities aside for the moment, we must not overlook the right that supersedes and antedates all constitutional rights, and that is the right *not* to be killed by a fool, a maniac, or a robber who would use a gun with deadly purpose. No occupant of a premature grave who died as a result of the wrongful use of a firearm enjoys *any* constitutional rights.

### The Legislative Approach to Firearms Control

Several contrasting concepts must be kept in mind when we come to grips with “passing a law” to reduce the slaughter by firearms. Enacting a law often does not

guarantee an effective solution to a simple, let alone a complex, emotionally laden issue.<sup>29</sup> Bad laws are the worst form of tyranny, because they legalize governmental activities that are oppressive or unjust. A good law must be enforceable and enforced; otherwise the legislative process is a farce.

When legislation that could lead to a decrease in homicidal violence is discussed, we are confronted by doctrines of defeat and discouragement. Antigun control proponents iterate the proposition that firearms surveillance is a waste of time, money, and energy that could be more fruitfully expended for other purposes.<sup>30</sup>

There is no denying that an effective gun law, however one defines it, will not (repeat *not*) prevent gunshot incidents, fatal or nonfatal. But such a law should reduce their number. If the law does not cure, let it mitigate the multifold misery. The law need not prohibit. Let it regulate. If we can not eliminate the problem, let us attempt to control it.

Current American federal, state, and municipal gun laws fill a printed volume of 389 pages, which is a legislative crazy quilt.<sup>31</sup> A recent Associated Press dispatch carried the lead, “Guns across the line—Local firearms control laws don’t halt crime, U.S. says.”<sup>32</sup> This not surprising item tells us that a federal study concluded that *strict, local* gun control laws are not effective in keeping handguns away from lawbreakers. The study also established that many of the weapons were Saturday Night Specials, frequently obtained in lawful fashion.

Guns and what goes with them (ammunition, hunting gear, et cetera) are a multimillion dollar, legitimate business.<sup>33</sup> The progun lobby, financed primarily by arms manufacturers and spearheaded by the NRA, is a major objector to change in statutory approaches to firearms. Gun control advocates should proceed with respect for the concerns that motivate opposition to gun regulation.

The approach of gun confiscation is neither wise nor workable. What we need is a sound *federal* law that is clear, uniform, and precise. Such a law should regulate the sale and ownership of guns *and* ammunition, thus permitting the institution of some type of prophylaxis. We physicians are aware of the superiority of prevention over treatment of potentially fatal diseases.

A recent nation-wide poll of 1500 adults revealed that 84 percent favor regulation of newly purchased handguns, and 70 percent support an outright ban on Saturday Night Specials. (This label is a misnomer. These weapons, which “draw heavily on the emotions and lightly on the purse,”<sup>22</sup> are effective every day of the week, morning, noon, *and* night.) Moreover, 70 percent of those interviewed said that a stand on gun control could affect their votes for a specific candidate.<sup>34</sup> A recent Harris survey indicates that most Americans favor a law that requires that privately owned guns be registered with federal authorities.<sup>35</sup>

The need for a nationwide effort dedicated to this life-and-death matter is self-evident. In a democracy the populace gets the type of government it chooses. This is especially true if we elect a Congress shaking in mortal fear of the NRA, which threatens to ensure the defeat of any officeholder who votes for a federal gun-regulation law.<sup>14</sup> Despite the results of the polls cited earlier, a recent attempt to regulate handguns was defeated in the House of Representatives by a four-to-one margin, thus sustaining the potential criminal’s right to “bear arms” (that is, to purchase, import, assemble, and ultimately to use arms

unlawfully).<sup>36</sup> Dr. Milton Eisenhower, head of the National Commission on Violence, declared that the United States held "the distinction of being the clear leader in violent crime among modern, stable nations," as well as having the highest gun-to-population ratio in the world, other than for Switzerland. He said, further, "I continue to be perplexed by the blind, emotional resistance that greets any proposal to bring this senseless excess under control."<sup>29</sup>

We should be able to reduce the number of handguns used for malicious purposes without interfering with legitimate gun sports. A compromise should be worked out through wise leadership. But unless our public officials have the voters' support, they will not dare to incur the wrath of the NRA.

But any law, even a well-administered, "good" law, is too blunt an instrument to control the gun problem by itself. We need education and indoctrination in our schools, homes, and houses of worship, and we need constant reminding by the responsible segment of our news media that the basis of a decent society is respect and regard for the sanctity of all human life.

### L'Envoi

Here are three summing-up statements.

By . . . our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim; by allowing our movie and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing . . . we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes. —*Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., November 1963*.<sup>8, p.v</sup> (Dr. King was fatally shot in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.)

We have a responsibility to the victims of crime and violence . . . It is a responsibility to put away childish things—to make the possession and use of firearms a matter undertaken only by serious people who will use them with the restraint and maturity that their dangerous nature deserves—and demands. —*Senator Robert F. Kennedy, July 11, 1967*.<sup>8, p.v</sup> (Senator Kennedy was fatally shot on June 5, 1968 in Los Angeles, California.)

The current banality is that, like the weather, violence is what everybody discusses and does nothing about. For the violated and for everybody else in danger of being violated, violence is not banal.

There is of course no single manifestation of this social disease, no single causative mechanism, no single cure. There are, however, "small steps" that can be taken by the federal government, steps capable of being administered and enforced, which can save no small number of lives and retard the frightening escalation of this evil: (1) the restriction of the manufacture, distribution and sale of cheap handguns (the so-called Saturday night specials), and (2) the registration of all handguns.

Implementation of legislation of these two measures, were it to save a single life, would warrant such action by the federal government.

How large a holocaust must we have to bestir us to act?—*Editor Naomi M. Kanof, 1975*.<sup>37</sup>

How many "shocks to the national conscience" do we need before we do something positive? The medical profession, charged with and sworn to the maintenance and restoration of health, the preservation of life, and the pre-

vention of death, should speak out responsibly and responsibly in the debate about this danger until effective measures for handgun control are properly implemented.

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