

The Shadow of the Gunman

Last Thursday, Allard Lowenstein offered this urgent advice to Senator Kennedy's New York campaign aides: Don't forget gun laws; be sure that one of the Senator's taped commercials includes a plea for Federal control of handgun sales. On Friday, the former New York Congressman was fatally shot in his office. The man accused of the killing had bought a pistol in a Connecticut gunshop, using a driver's license for identification. The purchase was perfectly legal, even though the purchaser had been committed to a mental institution in the same state.

"Guns don't kill people. People kill people." That bumper-sticker slogan of the gun lobby is nonsense. Many impulsive murders would never occur if the attackers lacked easy access to handguns. America is the only industrial society without effective national controls on the sale of firearms. The distinction would end if Congress passed Senator Kennedy's handgun control bill. One provision would authorize the police to block the sale of handguns to persons with a history of mental disorder. It would have prevented the man charged

with murdering Mr. Lowenstein from buying a Spanish-made weapon with \$120 and a driver's license.

A sound Federal gun law alone would not keep felons or the deranged from acquiring firearms. But the absence of such a law also undercuts the gun-control measures of states like New York, whose neighbors persist in lax standards. In thwarting the desire of a majority of Americans, as expressed in a multitude of polls, the firearms zealots ignore the shadow of the gunman on American life.

Al Lowenstein was a gallant crusader for a hundred causes, some of them lost, but none ignoble. He was that rare character, the impassioned but moderate liberal. His single term in Congress, despite many tries, was insufficient measure of his influence on his chosen constituency, the young. Like his hero, Norman Thomas, he was an agent of ferment. His death by violence is the more scarring because the only weapon he ever used was the sharp language of debate.