

After the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the author of "The Death of a President" voluntarily turned in his gun. Now, in an eloquent plea, he urges others to follow his example

An act of conscience

by William Manchester

In 1917, a gallant young English officer flung his Military Cross into the sea and wrote:

*... Pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and
laughter go.*

Siegfried Sassoon's one-man mutiny didn't shorten the horror of World War I by a single day, and for years I wondered why he bothered. Now I know: in a time of mindless violence, all people of conscience must make some gesture, however futile, against the savage tide menacing everything they love.

My own gesture against today's guns of fear, made last summer, was that sort of token protest—the isolated dissent of a private citizen in mourning for an assassinated friend, troubled over the safety of the American home, and shocked by the transformation of his country's households into do-it-yourself arsenals which inflict 120,000 casualties a year.

That grim toll may seem reason enough for concern. Certainly most people think so. But then, they always have; for over a third of a century the Gallup Poll has consistently reported that four out of five Americans want tight control of firearms. Yet Congress, like Nero, prefers

the fiddle to the fire extinguisher. After the death of President John F. Kennedy, eighteen measures to regulate weapons were introduced in Congress. The firearms industry's tax-exempt, multi-million-dollar lobby managed to spike them all. And, after Senator Robert F. Kennedy's murder, the gun law which *did* pass was a mockery of the tough bill he had believed in.

If the public is scorned, a single individual, obviously, can do very little. Nothing is left to him except the symbolic act. Still, the power of symbols sometimes grows, and those who have stared into the face of violent death may be moved by an

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urgency they had never felt before.

Like Siegfried Sassoon, I am one of them. Between 1942 and 1945 I was a Marine Corps infantryman. Wounded on Okinawa, I was discharged after a long series of operations, and nearly a year later a peculiar memento of the Pacific was returned to me. That keepsake was ultimately to become my instrument of protest, for it was a privately owned pistol.

It had become mine through chance. My GI .45-caliber Colt automatic had been stolen on Guadalcanal. My regiment was about to go into combat—and I had no weapon. At the last moment I bought another Colt from a rear-echelon soldier for thirty-five dollars, thus becoming, so far as I know, the only World War II Marine who paid for his own gun.

Like most war souvenirs, this one quickly passed from a conversation piece to an attic dust-catcher. For over twenty years it lay unloaded on a back shelf. I forgot about it. And then I was reminded.

The first reminder came on November 22, 1963. Although guns were no longer available on Guadalcanal, it seemed, they were for sale to anyone in the United States with a grudge and a money order. The ease with which Americans could obtain firearms appalled me. In the aftermath of the Dallas tragedy, for example, an enterprising New Jersey reporter filled out a coupon, mailed it off with a check signed "L. H. Oswald"—and got his rifle by return mail.

"Guns don't kill people," the firearms lobby replied to critics; "people kill people." That was cheap sophistry. People *with guns* kill people, and it is a sad comment on the mood of the nation since President Kennedy's murder that never in human history have so many people in the United States owned so many firearms.

The consequences have been as grim as they were inevitable. An omen appeared even as the first Kennedy funeral cortege was approaching Arlington. Two teenaged Brooklyn sisters had been watching the military escort on television. Fascinated by the soldiers' manual of arms, they decided to practice it with the family rifle. Within a few minutes their rehearsal was over: the older girl lay dead, and her thir-

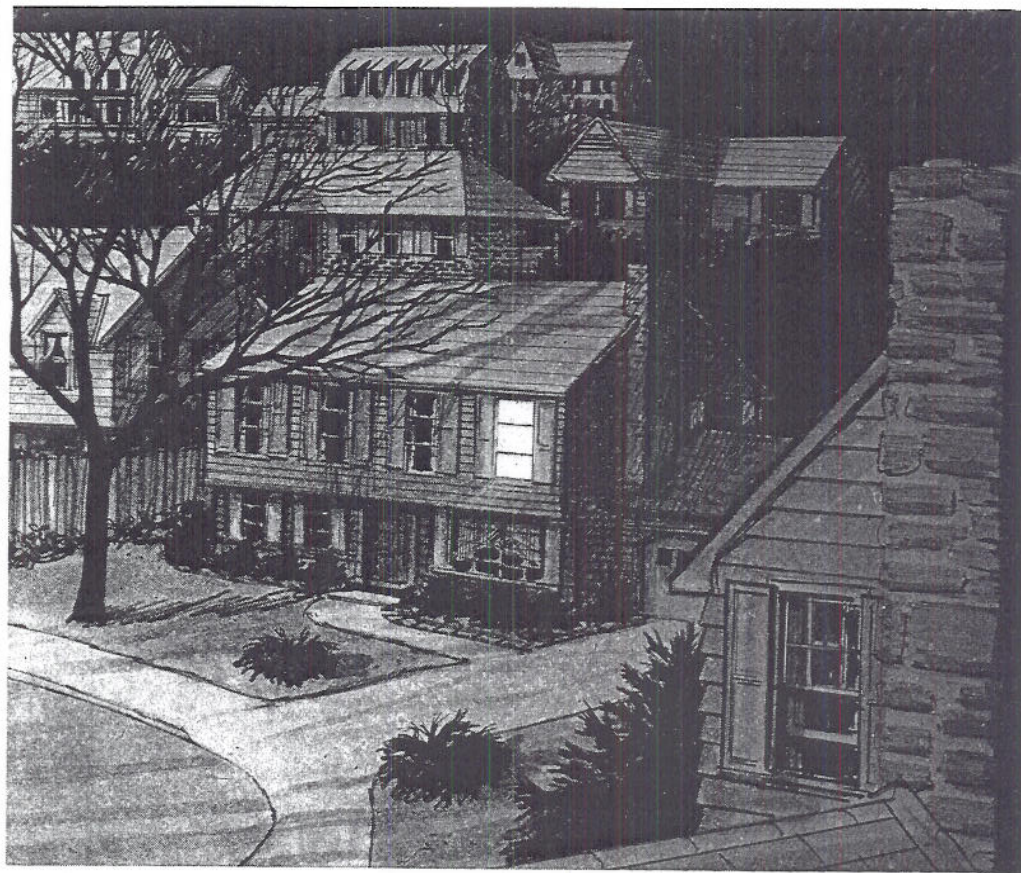
teen-year-old sister was being held for manslaughter.

To be sure, that was an accident. So was the shooting of two preschool New Yorkers by their eighteen-month-old brother; so were the lethal blunders of three fathers, in Detroit, Chicago, and Santa Monica. The first, awakened by a sudden footstep in the night, snatched up his revolver and shot his three-year-old daughter through the head. The second, while practicing a "fast draw," killed his year-old son. The third, the most incredible of all, put a tangerine on his five-year-old daughter's head, aimed at it, and drilled her between the eyes. He said he had been playing William Tell and "I guess I fouled up."

But the accidental killing of one's child is more than a foul up. That little girl—and the 3,000 other children who have died at the hands of careless parents or playmates since the crime in Dallas—would be alive today if the

weapons hadn't been *there*. Because the U.S. is the only civilized country which permits private ownership of firearms, Americans may, in Lyndon Johnson's phrase, buy them as casually "as baskets of fruit or cartons of cigarettes." The price we pay for this folly is staggering: seventy-seven homicides for every one in Japan, England, and Wales combined. Indeed, more people have died at the muzzles of private guns in the twentieth century than in all U.S. wars, beginning with the Revolution.

The past two years have been marked by a giddy new pace in the buildup of home armories. Collectively, Americans now own somewhere between fifty and two hundred million rifles and pistols, and every day 15,000 additional ones cross the counters in 100,000 retail outlets. Illinois eight-year-olds have been arrested carrying revolvers; Oklahoma police have searched for armed murderers as young as ten; Los Angeles citi-



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zens, with three million privately owned guns, are more heavily armed than those in Saigon.

Much of this panic buying has been inspired by riots, much can be traced to extremist fringe groups, and some can be put down as the irresponsible work of such public servants as the mayor of Dearborn, Michigan, who has urged the women of his community to pack pistols. Yet the real answer lies deeper. It is rooted in what writer Carl Bakal has called the "firearms mystique," that distinctly American phenomenon which has given us Wyatt Earp television, Bonnie and Clyde films, Mickey Spillane paperbacks, realistic toys of death, and, presiding over all, the Man with the Golden Gun.

Explanations for these grotesqueries are various: a yearning for the image of power in an age of mass frustration; the need for aggressive outlets; a longing to enhance virility; loyalty to the myth of a romantic Old West which never existed. Significantly, the phenomenon is almost exclusively masculine. Little girls, sensibly, play with dolls. Little boys, senselessly, start with cap pistols (Bang! Bang! You're dead!), graduate to BB guns (a greater cause of the loss of eyesight, according to state medical societies, than fireworks), and frequently wind up as life members of the National Rifle Association.

Here American women have a superb opportunity: by reasoning with their husbands, they may liberate themselves from the dark threats lurking in gun closets and bedside pistol drawers. They should do it, if only for their own sakes. Consider a few figures. According to FBI reports, eight out of ten homicide victims are relatives, friends, or neighbors of the killer. Three in ten are members of his immediate family, and of these cases, over half involve "spouse killing spouse, and twenty percent parents killing children." Once every three hours around the clock, somewhere in the United States, a sacred relationship with a loved one ends in murder. And most of the murderers are men.

Few of these are acting upon premeditation, but in the gentlest household there are moments of overpowering anger. And that is all it takes—a moment. Unsupported by the weapon in that gun closet or that pistol drawer, the irrational flash of temper might have been dissipated harmlessly, or comparatively so. Firearms, on the

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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

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—Lane Olinghouse

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AN ACT OF CONSCIENCE

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other hand, translate unreasoning wrath into an irreversible final solution which, an instant later, may be inexplicable to the murderer himself. The FBI has traced over half of all household homicides to "impulse rage" arising from "arguments over a cigarette, ice cream, noise, etc." Over noise? It happens. In Chicago, one blind spouse, firing at the sound of a voice, actually committed murder in a quarrel over the tapping of a white cane.

Those who have merely read of homicide may think a fatal shooting is something which happens to other people. But the country's domestic armory is now so large that no one is really safe. When a President of the United States can be picked off on a sunlit street and a senator gunned down in a hotel corridor—while rooftop snipers are lining up policemen in their sights—we are all at the mercy of gunmen. Having turned the home of the free into the land of fear, gunmen are now writing our history. For, however you felt about the Kennedy brothers, the fact remains that today and tomorrow would be different if they were alive.

After the death of the second Kennedy, I realized that the enemies of sanity had, in effect, declared war upon society; and that, I suppose, is why I made the connection with that other, long ago war and with the pistol in my attic.

Obviously, I should have made it much earlier. We all tend to judge issues in personal terms, however. And to me the second Kennedy assassination was, if anything, a greater blow than the first. Two years earlier Bob Kennedy and I had been estranged by a hideous misunderstanding, but that rift had been closed long before he fell mortally wounded in Los Angeles. I was leading a New England citizen's movement supporting his presidential candidacy, and at the time of his death, as Jacqueline Kennedy told me after his funeral, he was writing a letter to me acknowledging the Kennedy Library's receipt of \$750,000—the profits from my book, *The Death of a President*.

Bob Kennedy had often talked to me of the hatred and violence which mar our society. He called them "a stain," which they certainly are. Only those who knew him were aware of how deeply he felt about this. Like Jefferson, he had "sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," and, in the end, it was this tyranny of violence which took his life.

After the graveside services, after the eternal flame had been left to shine upon the twin unending scars, I was left with the feeling that nothing made sense now, that no tribute could be adequate, that thoughts were best left unformed and words unspoken.

Yet a man must do something.

I went for my gun.

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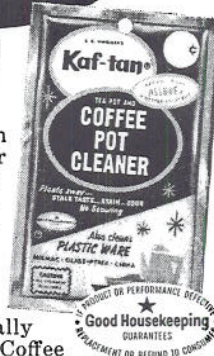
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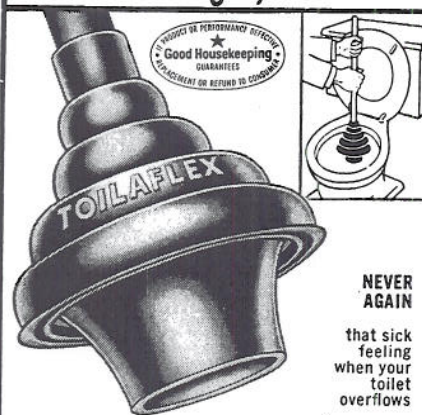
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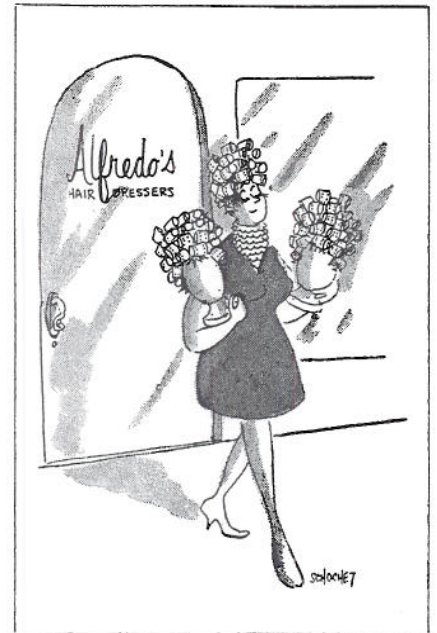
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matic, serial number 1075455, with a checkered Coltwood stock and a blue finish. It was now worth ninety-four dollars and wasn't for sale. I cleaned it and took it to the nearest police station.

The lieutenant looked startled. No one in our city had ever surrendered a weapon before; procedures were rather hazy. However, after explanations, the lieutenant agreed that my pistol would go to the bottom of the Connecticut River. He slid it down the desk to a sergeant. It went along quietly.



Perhaps I should have felt a trace of sentiment; after all, it had saved my life once. But that was a quarter-century ago, and it seemed to me that the savage values of that time were as irrelevant to today's America as those of Wyatt Earp. Having lived on battlefields, I did not want to see my country become one.

So now my old sidearm lies rusting among fish. The story of its watery fate has appeared in the press, and since then my mail has been divided between soaring encomiums and thundering denunciations. Depending upon which batch of letters I read first, turning in a pistol is either magnificent or subversive. None of my correspondents seems to have reflected that I may have been moved by simple common sense. That is how it was, though. I reached the conclusion that private disarmament is the most obvious solution to today's unrest. I say, let's turn in our guns! Indeed, I don't see how you can make a case against it.

Of course, I did have one other motive, the most personal of all. To others it may seem a very small thing. But I rest better knowing that there is one American household from which the instrument of terror has been removed, one home where violence will remain a stranger, and one family which is free—to borrow a phrase from a man who was a loving father—from the enemy within. ♦