

Our Fetish of the Gun

Pr. Hill
By Henry Fairlie

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“ONE OF THE GUNS in Whitman's arsenal was a .12-gauge shotgun bought on credit at Sears, Roebuck & Co. after 9:30 a.m. today, police said.”

That one sentence in The Washington Post Tuesday tells where the madness of a society lies. Not that Charles Joseph Whitman needed to make this last-minute purchase. If the first stories are true, he had worked all night assembling his arsenal in his home. He already had to hand a 6-mm Remington magnum rifle with a telescopic sight, a .35-caliber Remington pump rifle, a .30-caliber reconditioned Army carbine, a 9-mm Luger pistol and a .357 magnum pistol.

This—not the disturbed mind of one wretched individual—is what is shocking, and the world will look with fear at a country, with the peace of the world in its hands, which makes a private arsenal so accessible to its citizens.

There is no feature of American society that does more damage to its reputation abroad than the ease with which men and women and children can purchase—then carry—then use—firearms, whether rifles or shotguns, pistols or revolvers, or even cannons. “It is past time that we wipe this stain of violence from our land,” Sen. Robert

Rest of World Asks, Is U.S. Brave Enough To Take Legislative Aim at Uncurbed Purchase of Firearms?

F. Kennedy said last year, testifying before a Senate subcommittee. The stain is larger now, and those who count themselves friends of America can only gasp with dismay at an Administration and a Congress which, year by year, shirk their simplest duty.

World of Grim Fantasy

INCREDULOUS of the facts as he uncovers them, incredulous of what he sees with his own eyes, the outsider goes on searching for an explanation. Help has come to him—at this morbidly appropriate moment—with the publication of “The Right to Bear Arms” by Carl Bakal (McGraw-Hill; \$6.95). His book records, with cold but moving contempt, the current gun lore in America and the way in which it is fed and nourished by the manufacturers, the dealers and the gun lobby.

One feels, as one reads the book, in a world of the grimmest fantasy. Rifles and shotguns, revolvers and pistols, of course, can be bought in most states almost without restriction, or by mail order. But cannons can be bought, too, and muzzle-loaders, which leave those who fire them “black with powder and a little deaf.” Fantasy it may all be, but 17,000 persons die each year in America by gunshot.

“Halt! You'll speak with authority!” “Submachine Gun for Father's Day.” The advertisements speak all too clearly. “That deceptively cute little gun known as the derringer,” says one catalogue, was powerful enough to polish off “two of our country's Presidents, Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley”; and one salesman suggested to a woman customer a .22 automatic which “could run a hemstitch right up anybody's gut,” or a .25-caliber revolver “for slower but more accurate needlework.”

Fetishism and atavism; by quotation after quotation, each so monstrous that it is hard to believe them, Bakal shows how these are the principle motives why the gun still occupies such an obscene place in American society.

Leveler Not Equalizer

THE FOLKLORE of the Revolution—“what took the Minutemen from Lexington and Concord to Yorktown”—and the experience of the frontier; the craving to prove virility—“the privileges and rights of manhood”—and the belief that the gun is an equalizer (it would be more to the point to call it a leveler — the final one). In no other country in the world are such lunatic

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Associated Press

This is the Whitman arsenal found in the tower of the University of Texas after he was killed.

America's Fetish of the Gun

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reasons put forward for justifying the personal possession of firearms.

In no other country—it is this that an outsider, educated to love America and learning now how to love it, wants to drum home—in no other country is the gun taken to be a symbol of freedom and an insigne of virility.

But, of course, the question—the practical, immediate, urgent question—is a political one. Again and again, it has been shown in public opinion polls that the great majority of the American people would support legislation restricting the sale of firearms. But, again and again, as Bakal shows in a story which he tells with relentless impact, the gun lobby, “one of the Nation's most powerful yet least-known lobbies,” gets its way in Congress.

Out of his story, three points stand out; and if I seem innocently shocked by things which are taken for granted in this country, all I can answer is that one act of real political leadership could break the thrall of the gun in American life.

Linked With Conservation

FIRST, I AM shocked at the ramifications of the gun lobby, especially its close connection with, of all bodies, the National Wildlife Federation and the Wildlife Management Institute. Both of these bodies are creations of the arms industry, and the connection between them and the National Rifle Association is fully explored by Bakal. That the arms industry is allowed to protect itself behind the cover of conservation bodies is surely a proper matter for legislation.

Secondly, Bakal makes a deadly point when he reveals that the gunmen of the country are supported by the Federal Government at the cost of the taxpayer. “This partnership between the

Government and the NRA,” writes Bakal, “stems from a Defense Department program run by the Army's National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, which the NRA was instrumental in setting up back in 1903, admittedly to secure Government aid.”

The Government—the taxpayer—supplies ammunition, guns and other equipment, free to marksmen; and, as The Washington Post once asked, why not, then, to “hiking clubs (very good for the infantry), to polo teams (very good for the cavalry),” etc.

Thirdly, as one reads Bakal's account of how the recent attempts at legislation have been defeated by the gun lobby, one can only wonder at how craven the legislators—the solons, are they not called?—of a free country can be. There is no evidence, as far as I can see, of open corruption. There is evidence only that the Senators and the Representatives falter before the pressure of a “highly vocal and often downright vitriolic” lobby.

Default on Tragic Scale

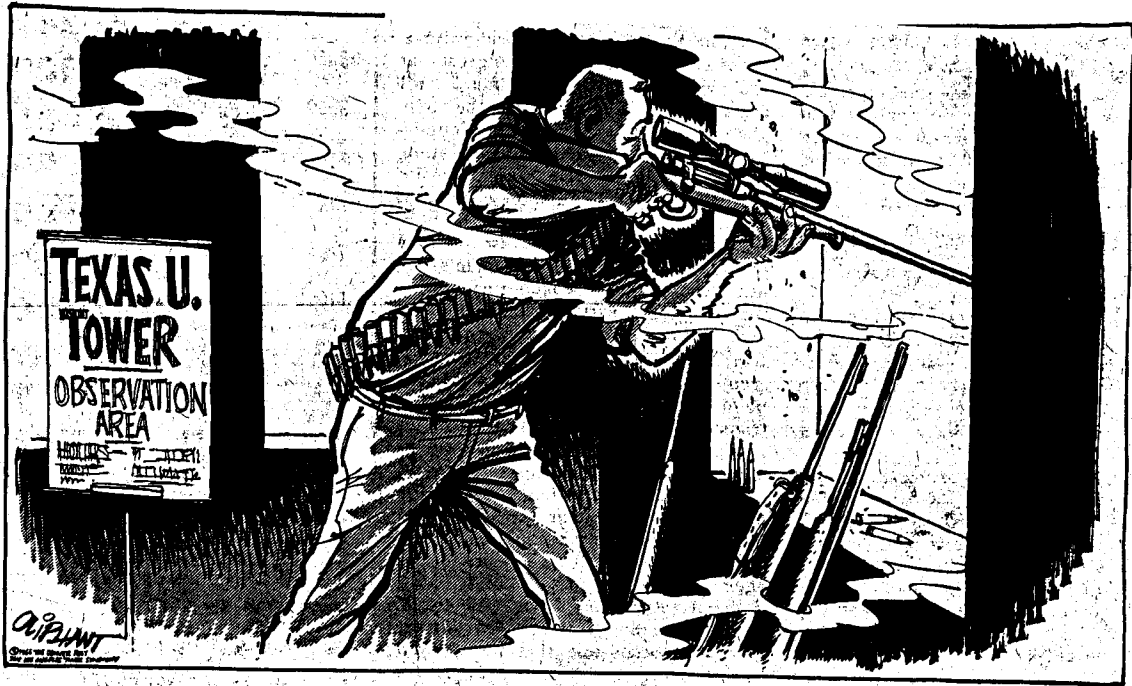
AGAIN AND AGAIN, as Bakal tells the story, one sees the members of a congressional committee (especially since President Kennedy's assassination) steeling themselves to the most humane task they could accomplish—and then surrendering.

Last year, Rep. Wilburn Mills told me that, in 1966, legislation to restrict the sale and purchase of guns would possibly be one of the measures to advance the Great Society. No bill has emerged.

This is default on a tragic—a mean—scale. There is an element of violence in American society which the outsider has to learn to comprehend. History and character cannot be reversed and changed overnight. But this is no excuse for allowing violence such an easy access to the weapons which it not only

needs, but which actually encourage it, tempt it, incite it. However much I may love and admire America, its gun laws come near to ruling it out of civilized society.

I will offer only one vision, and ask Americans to try to contemplate it. In a situation such as that at Austin, the British police would have made every effort to take Whitman *without themselves being armed*. Only when such an effort had failed, and perhaps not even then, would they have been allowed to use firearms against him. Six shots into a criminal are no answer to anything. Ramon Martinez was a brave policeman. A society needs to be braver and disarm itself.



To bear arms — his right?