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Shooting People: American Disease

By Karl E. Meyer

LONDON—Not all the gold in Moscow and Peking could have purchased more wretched publicity for the United States than Charles Whitman's salvo of bullets in Austin. In Britain, at least, the effect was to confirm popular suspicion that mayhem is part of the American way of death.

All London newspapers carried extensive reports on the day of carnage on the campus, and most mass-circulation papers carried shocked appraisals of America's laws—or rather, lack of laws—concerning the purchase of arms.

"More Americans are shot in peace than war," ran a headline in the *Daily Express*. "Mail-order murder," blazoned a streamer in the *Evening News*. Cassandra, the influential columnist in the *Daily Mirror*, began his piece: "On Monday, an American citizen, exercising his much-vaunted right to bear arms, shot and killed 13 people and wounded 32 others in Austin, state capital of Texas."

A perversely peaceful people, the British simply cannot understand why the Constitution of the United States is invoked to guarantee that every lunatic, would-be assassin and law-breaker should be able to buy a gun from his friendly neighborhood firearm dealer.

AN ARTICLE about guns in the *Economist* began on Friday by noting that in July more homicides were recorded in Chicago than in any previous month—72 in all. This can be compared with a total of 36 murders for the entire year of 1965 in London, which has twice as many inhabitants as Chicago.

Figures like this are read with perplexity by Britons, and the total effect is to suggest that America is a country deeply stained by violence. The Austin shootings were seen in the disquieting context of killings past—President Kennedy's assassination, recent violence in Negro slums, the murder of eight nurses in Chicago charged to a suspect who has "born to raise hell" tattooed on his arm.

The New York correspondent of the *Daily Express*, Henry Lowrie, struck the common mood:

"I have lived here for 20 years and found friendship and neighborliness the like of which would be hard to discover in Britain or any European country. And yet the unease of living in a so-

ciety where barely concealed violence is always beneath the surface has never left me."

Writing from Washington, Henry Fairlie commented in the *Evening News*: "In no other country in the world is the gun so widely regarded as a symbol of freedom and an insignia of virility."

In the British press, the Austin tragedy was invariably related to the ease with which firearms may be bought in America. Referring to Mr. Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, the *Daily Sketch* wrote: The cases of Oswald and Whitman are similar in one vital respect: Both bought guns as easily as toffee."

IN BRITAIN, police permits are required for buying weapons, and they are granted only for restricted use by sportsmen or in exceptional cases when authorities are convinced that possession of a gun is warranted.

Absence of easy access to guns is not, of itself, the explanation for the lack of violence in Britain. But it is surely an important factor. The British, for example, do not make a national habit of murdering their political leaders. The only Prime Minister ever assassinated was Spencer Perceval in 1812.

Unfortunately, the rash of violence in the United States merely tends to reinforce popular belief that Americans are trigger-happy. Doubly unfortunately, the Austin massacre coincides with renewed British misgivings about the Kennedy assassination due to news reports about *Inquest*, the book by Edward Jay Epstein questioning the official verdict reached by the Warren Commission.

All of this is tied up with Texas, and a Texan happens to be President of the United States. Even Britons sympathetic to American purposes in Vietnam express the concern that Mr. Johnson, as a Texan, brings the quality of impulsive violence to his conduct of the war.

It is a matter for wonder in Britain that America has not long ago passed the very mild legislation controlling sale of firearms proposed after Mr. Kennedy's death. It is of course generally understood that an archaic clause in the Constitution guarantees the right to bear arms.

But Cassandra is not alone in asking whether this "holy and deadly writ" means that the American male, when he "feels he wants to express his strong manly personality" should be free "to drill holes in 45 fellow citizens at high noon in the blazing Texas sun."