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GUN CURB DEBATE OPENS IN SENATE

Amendments Are Criticized
as Lessening Control

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 12 —

The Senate opened debate today on gun control legislation so charged by Judiciary Committee amendments that the Justice and Treasury Departments were complaining it would be ineffective in controlling interstate sales of firearms and ammunition.

The bill, according to the committee report, would impose stringent Federal controls over interstate sales of rifles, shotguns and ammunition. Ostensibly, the bill, as originally proposed by the Administration, would prevent mail-order sales of rifles, shotguns and ammunition and prohibit over-the-counter sales to out-of-state residents.

Almost unmentioned in the committee report were several weakening amendments put into the bill by the committee as the price paid to Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina, for permitting the bill to reach the floor. Similar amendments were contained in a gun control bill passed by the House in July.

The amendments were incorporated into the bill as an act of political accommodation between Senator Thurmond and Senator Thomas J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, who for five years has been seeking to push gun control legislation through the Senate.

Senator Thurmond, according to committee sources, threatened to block any action on the Administration bill unless his amendments were accepted. Senator Dodd, who was anxious to have some gun bill passed bearing his name, finally accepted the amendments, asserting, according to sources, that they carried a Treasury Department endorsement.

A recent letter to Senator Joseph D. Tydings, Democrat of Maryland, from Sheldon S. Cohen, Director of Internal Revenue, said the amendments did not carry Treasury Department endorsement. Speaking on behalf of the Treasury Department, Mr. Cohen said the amendments would "seriously weaken" the Administration bill and result in "near chaos" in Federal controls over interstate sales.

In the debate over the next several days, gun control proponents will move to go beyond the Administration bill by incorporating requirements for registration of firearms and licensing of gun owners. But in view of the political opposition built up by the gun lobby, they concede they will be lucky if they can succeed only in eliminating the committee amendments.

In opening the debate, Senator Dodd made no mention of the committee amendments in a long speech. But he had harsh words for the gun lobby, which, he said, had "disseminated the crudest kind of misrepresentations and fallacious arguments" in its "bitter, last-kitch War" against the legislation.

While the committee amendments are seemingly technical in nature, the Justice Department was seeking to emphasize to Senators, most of whom were unaware of the technicalities, that the amendments would create wide loopholes in the proposed Federal controls over interstate sales of firearms and ammunition.

In a memorandum being circulated in the Senate, the Justice Department said the amendments would "substantially endanger" the effectiveness of the legislation. The memorandum particularly criticized the following four amendments:

The committee changed the definition of ammunition to exclude from interstate controls all ammunition for rifles and shotguns and all types of .22-caliber ammunition. The result, the memorandum pointed out, would be to exempt ammunition controls for approximately 90 per cent of all firearms and limit controls to ammunition for large caliber pistols or revolvers.

The criterion for a Federal gun dealer's license was changed by the committee to the single new requirement that an applicant have "premises from which he conducts business or from which he intends to conduct such business within a reasonable period of time." Under such a loose standard, the memorandum contended, persons who did not intend to enter commercial operations could obtain a dealer's license and thus circumvent the controls over interstate sales.

A collector's license, under the bill, could be issued to any person who acquires guns or ammunition "as curios or relics." The effect of such vague language, the memorandum said, could be to open a "loophole that may be exploited by great numbers of persons who are not legitimate collectors, but who wish to avoid the controls" of the legislation.

The memorandum noted that under a "contiguous state" amendment, over-the-counter sales would be permitted to citizens of adjoining states provided the contiguous states authorized such sales. This, it added, "would create significant enforcement problems," particularly since "a state would have no authority to investigate or regulate sales to its citizens by dealers in contiguous states."