

SFO Chronicle

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Charles McCabe

Himself

Gun Controls

IT IS NOW nearly 12 years since President John F. Kennedy was slain in the streets of Dallas by a bullet from a rifle in a crime so bizarre that millions of Americans are convinced there was much more to it than they have been told.

President Kennedy might not have been killed if it had been more difficult to put hands on cheap rifles and cheaper handguns. The same is true of his brother Robert and of Martin Luther King and of hundreds of others who have been murdered by guns since 1963.

The tragic thing is that it is just about as easy to get a gun, these days as it was then, and there are millions more of them around. It is estimated that there are 35 million *handguns* in the hands of private citizens in this year of Our Lord.

Before the assassination of Mr. Kennedy I was speaking out hot and heavy against the promiscuous distribution of guns in this country. I urged that guns should be registered just as automobiles, another lethal weapon, are.

For this relatively harmless view, I drew down the anger of the famous National Rifle Association, the gun lobby, and hundreds of members of this same outfit individually. I concluded there was something irrational, and decidedly sexual, about the love of the Yankee man for his piece, as the enthusiasts tend to call their guns.

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SO VIOLENT was this reaction that I decided, sometime after the Kennedy slaying, not to write



any more about what I called the gun nuts and the NRA. I was beginning to feel that something as rational as gun registration (which is translated by the NRA as "confiscation") was a suggestion which might have dangerous consequences among the more rabid of the gun nuts.

In 12 years, as I have said, nothing substantive has been done about gun control. Most people questioned in polls favor stronger controls; but Congress, as per usual, would rather listen to a strong lobby, which can certainly deliver X number of votes, than to anything so fluid and unorganized as the ordinary public, which they are supposed to represent.

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ONE OF THE reasons why nothing has been done is that the gun business is truly big business these days. The Treasury Department has revealed that in fiscal 1974 American gun makers turned out 1,705,989 handguns.

Most of these guns were sold in this country, though a few were exported. Also, American gun sellers imported 652,044 foreign handguns of high quality. They were, in addition, authorized by the Treasury to import foreign-made parts for the construction of 687,000 cheap handguns. That, my friends, is properly big business.

Most of the recent indignation about guns has been directed against the cheap handgun, the "Saturday Night Special" that goes for \$12.50 or so, but which can kill any man living at close range. This is the gun used by the poor, the black and the brown gunman, which accounts in no small part for the middle-class indignation about it.

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IN FACT, as *The New York Times* has revealed, between 70 and 75 per cent of gun crimes are committed with high-price guns of high quality. Going after these guns means going after the "nice" folk with whom Congressmen play bridge and golf, and after the large and respectable gun firms like Smith and Wesson and Colt.

There is a point beyond which you cannot go in controlling guns in this country. I think registration, and the prohibition of imported parts for cheap handguns, is just about as far as can be gone. Confiscation is out, at this time and perhaps any time. But most experts are of the view that this session of Congress, like those since 1963, will NOT pass any strong laws against guns and the men who use them to kill people.