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A Renewed Drive For Gun Controls

A PREDICTABLE AFTERMATH to the shooting of Gov. George C. Wallace has been renewed demand for enactment of really stringent federal gun control laws. He, ironically, has strongly opposed such measures.

In common with spokesmen for this nation's powerful gun lobby, Wallace has contended that stricter controls would merely further erode the constitutional right of law-abiding citizens to possess arms. Criminals would be undeterred.

There is a certain surface validity to this argument. Yet by facing up to the clear fact that guns are a major curse in our society, by plugging loopholes in existing laws, more right than wrong would be served.

If it were not so easy for anyone to buy a gun in this country, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers may never have occurred. And, significantly, the erratic young man accused in the Wallace shooting was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon last October — yet managed to buy his assault revolver only three months later.

Stricter gun control laws would not deprive responsible citizens of their rights. They would, however, deter the irresponsible and furthermore make illegal possession of firearms the grim criminal offense it is in most other developed countries in the world.

There is a social attitude involved here, and statistics prove that tough gun laws and their harsh enforcement do pay off. In 1970, for example, there was a shocking total of 9039 gun murders in the United States. In Britain there were only 29; Canada had 176; France had 475, and in super-tough Russia they were virtually nonexistent.

AFTER THE ASSASSINATION of Robert Kennedy in 1968, the Johnson Administration attempted to enact really meaningful federal gun controls. Opponents succeeded in watering them down in such a way that the country since has been flooded with imports of foreign gun components — especially those that can be assembled into the cheap, favorite handgun of stickup men, the "Saturday night special."

Under the Nixon Administration the policy has been to favor tougher penalties for gun-committed crimes, but to do little or nothing about further restrictions on the present trading in firearms and their ammunition.

A re-examination of this policy is long overdue.