

Excerpts From the Firearms Statement

WASHINGTON, July 28—Following are excerpts from the statement on firearms and violence issued today by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence:

Whether guns cause violence, contribute to it, or are merely coincidental to it has long been debated. After extensive study we find that the availability of guns contributes substantially to violence in American society. Firearms, particularly handguns, facilitate the commission and increase the danger of the most violent crimes—assassination, murder, robbery, and assault. The widespread availability of guns can also increase the level of violence associated with civil disorder. Firearms accidents, while they account for only a small percentage of all accidents, cause thousands of deaths and injuries each year.

This relationship between firearms and violence tends to obscure two other important facts bearing on the firearms question. First, the vast majority of gun owners do not misuse firearms. Millions of Americans are hunters, target shooters and collectors, who use their guns safely and responsibly and who, perhaps more than many of their fellow citizens, deplore the criminal use of firearms. Second, in attending to the firearms problem, we must not forget that the root causes of American violence go much deeper than widespread gun ownership. Firearms generally facilitate, rather than cause, violence.

The challenge for this commission—and for the nation as a whole—is to find ways to cope with illegitimate uses of guns without at the same time placing undue restrictions on legitimate uses. We believe this is possible if both the advocates and the opponents of gun control legislation will put aside their suspicions and preconceptions, accept the fact of a common danger without exaggerating its dimensions, and act for the common good.

1. The Domestic Arms Buildup

Our task force on firearms estimates that there are now about 90 million firearms in the United States. Half of the nation's 60 million households possess at least one gun, and the number of guns owned by private citizens is rising rapidly.

During the first half of this century, about 10 million firearms were added to the civilian firearms supply in each decade. In the decade since 1958, however, nearly 30 million guns have been added to the civilian stockpile. Moreover, the sharpest increases have occurred in the last five years—a period of urban riots and sharply rising crime rates. Annual rifle and shotgun sales have doubled since 1963. Annual handgun sales have quadrupled.

Some of the increased gun sales in recent years have resulted from an increase in hunting and sport shooting, a fact consistent with the rising amount of money being spent on leisure time activities. But these predictable in-

creases in sales of sporting arms cannot explain the much larger increases in the sales of handguns. With a few scattered exceptions, handguns are not sporting guns.

A substantial part of the rapidly increasing gun sales, particularly handgun sales, must be attributed to the rising fear of violence that the United States has recently experienced. Studies by our task force on firearms, as well as by the Stanford Research Institute and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, show that gun sales in a particular area tend to increase sharply during and after a period of disorder. After the 1967 Detroit riot, for example, gun sales skyrocketed: Detroit issued four times as many handgun permits in 1968 as it did in 1965, and a nearby, predominantly white suburb issued five times as many permits.

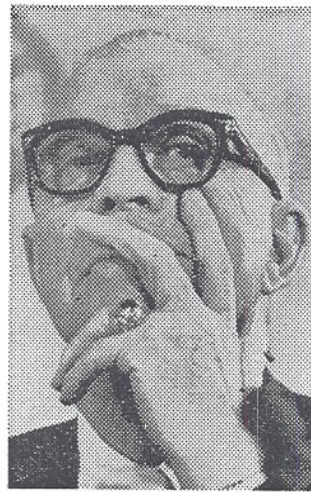
Lending impetus to the arms buildup are the exhortations of extremist groups, both black and white. In their speeches and publications, leaders of these groups urge their members to buy firearms and be prepared to use them against "the enemy." Neighborhood protective associations have proliferated and have sometimes come to share the fears of the right-wing paramilitary groups, with the result that firearms are now being stockpiled in homes as well as "in the hills." A new wave of American vigilantism could result from these activities. Further, black extremist organizations urge their members to obtain firearms for neighborhood and home defense, and sometimes for guerrilla warfare and terrorist activities as well. Ironically, extremist groups, regardless of race are remarkably alike in their attitudes toward firearms and their opposition to firearms control.

2. Firearms and Violent Crime

Many Americans are alarmed by the rise of violent crime in the United States, and not without reason. Personal injury and death from crime occur more often in the United States than in any other industrial nation of the world.

Firearms are a primary instrument of injury and death in American crime. Two out of every three homicides are committed with guns. Since 1963 the number of homicides involving firearms has increased 48 per cent in the United States while the number of homicides committed with other weapons has risen only 10 per cent.

Guns also play an increasingly deadly role in aggravated assault and robbery. In 1968, 23 per cent of all aggravated assaults were committed with guns, as opposed to only 13 per cent in 1963. One out of every three robberies (two out of every three



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Dr. Milton S. Eisenhower at news session yesterday.

armed robberies) is committed with a gun, and the fatality rate for victims of firearms robberies is almost four times as great as for victims of other armed robberies.

In all these violent crimes, handguns are the weapon predominantly used. Although only slightly more than one-fourth (or 24 million) of the firearms in the nation are handguns, they account for about half of all homicides and three-fourths of all firearms homicides. When firearms are involved in aggravated assaults and robberies in large cities, the handgun is almost invariably the weapon used.

3. Firearms and Self-Defense

What are the householder's chances of successfully defending himself with a gun? In only a relatively small number of instances do home robberies or burglaries result in the death of the victim. Examination shows that in the great majority of cases, the householder had no warning and thus no chance to arm himself with a gun. Studies in Los Angeles and Detroit indicate that only about 2 per cent of home robberies, and two tenths of 1 per cent of home burglaries, result in the firearms death or injury of the intruder at the hands of the householder. Moreover, in considering the value of handguns, or firearms generally, for self-defense in the home, one must also take into account the risks associated with home possession of a gun. A substantial number of the 23,000 annual firearms accidents occur in the home. Of the 8,000 annual firearms homicides, a large percentage occur among family members or acquaintances, and many of these also occur in the home.

From the standpoint of the individual householder, then, the self-defense firearm appears to be a dangerous investment.

Research to date does not permit us to draw firm conclusions as to the net usefulness of self-defense firearms possessed by store owners and other businessmen. We do know, however, that business self-defense firearms do not cause the great number of accidents caused by home firearms or involve the same

risk of homicide to family members and friends. Thus, the home and the business establishment must be clearly distinguished from each other when considering the usefulness of firearms for self-defense.

4. Firearms Control in the United States

Our lack of an effective national firearms policy is primarily the result of our culture's casual attitude toward firearms and its heritage of the armed, self-reliant citizen. These are the factors that have prevented passage of effective gun regulation legislation in the United States. Guns are routinely carried in pockets and left in closets, corners, and bureau drawers. In many parts of the country, they are standard equipment in pickup trucks and small businesses. Nearly 15 million licensed hunters make extensive use of firearms for sporting purposes. The hero of American movies and television is the man with a gun—the soldier, cowboy, spy, sheriff, or criminal—and our children accumulate an arsenal of toy guns. Accustomed to firearms, convinced that they are household necessities, entertained by fiction and drama that portray the gun as a glamorous instrument of personal justice, many Americans underestimate the consequences of widespread firearms availability.

Some argue that with 90 million firearms in our country, no system of control will prevent persons from obtaining guns and using them illegally. The criminal, they declare, can always get a gun. The argument is not without merit, for it points the way to the steps which must be taken.

Our studies have convinced us that the heart of any effective national firearms policy for the United States must be to reduce the availability of the firearm that contributes the most to violence. This means restrictive licensing of the handgun. We believe, on the basis of all the evidence before us, that reducing the availability of the handgun will reduce firearms violence.

5. Recommendations for a National Firearms Policy

The commission offers the following recommendations to reduce the role which firearms play in violence in the United States.

LEGISLATION

We conclude that the rising tide of firearms violence in this country merits further legislative action at the present time.

It is the ready availability of the handgun, so often a weapon of crime and so infrequently a sporting arm that is the most serious part of the current firearms problem in this country. The time has come to bring the handgun under reasonable control.

A restrictive licensing system for handguns is needed. State governments should be given the first opportunity to establish such systems

by the National Commission on Violence

conformity with minimum Federal standards that afford considerable discretion to each state to adopt a system suitable to its own needs accordingly—

We recommend Federal legislation to encourage the establishment of state licensing systems for handguns. The Federal legislation would introduce a Federal system of handgun licensing, applicable only to those states which within a four-year period fail to enact a state law that (1) establishes a standard for determining an individual's need for a handgun and for the licensing of an individual who shows such a need and (2) prohibits all others from possessing handguns or buying handgun ammunition.

We propose that the states be permitted to determine for themselves what constitutes "need" to own a handgun. For the Federal system applicable to states which fail to enact their own licensing systems, we recommend that determinations of need be limited to police officers and security guards, small business in high crime areas, and others with a special need for self-protection. At least in major metropolitan areas, the Federal system should not consider normal household self-protection a sufficient showing of need to have a handgun.

System of Review

We also recommend that a system of Federal administrative or judicial review be established to assure that each state system is administered fairly and does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, national origin, or other unconstitutional grounds.

We note that it will be necessary to compensate those handgun owners who are required to give up previously lawful firearms; this cost, which should be borne by the Federal Government, could amount to \$500-million.

Finally, we emphasize that laws controlling handguns should provide serious penalties for the possession of such guns by unlicensed persons. The apprehension of such persons should in time greatly reduce the rate of violent crime in the United States.

Shotguns and rifles are far less of a threat than handguns, particularly in the area of violent crime. At the same time, legitimate use of the long gun is widespread. The significant differences between handguns and longs call for substantially different control strategies. We

can make substantial inroads on firearms violence without imposing major inconveniences on hunters and skeet and trap shooters, and without impeding other legitimate activities of million of long gun owners. Accordingly—

We recommend Federal legislation to establish minimum standards for state regulation of long guns under which (1) an identification card would be required for long gun owners and purchasers of long gun ammunition (a system similar to that recommended by gun manufacturers) and (2) any person 18 and over would be entitled to such a card, except certain classes of criminals and adjudicated incompetents. For states which do not adopt such regulations within four years, a Federal regulatory system would be established.

We do not recommend Federal legislation to require nationwide registration of existing long guns. Substantially the same benefits could be obtained from less costly and burdensome control strategies.

We do recommend that persons who transfer long guns be required to fill out a single card giving the serial number, type, make, and model of the

weapon, the transferee's Social Security and firearms identification card numbers, the transferor's name and Social Security number, and the date of the transaction.

6. Conclusion

An effective national firearms policy would help to reduce gun violence in the United States. It would also

have a significance beyond the question of firearms. In comparison with most of the causes of violence in America, the firearms problem is concrete and manageable. But it is also complex and emotion-laden. For the United States to move effectively toward its solution would signify a new ability to transcend our violent past.