

Legislation by Stealth

The legislative procedure Congress is using to weaken the Gun Control Act is as objectionable as the thoroughly bad change being made in the law.

The ancient but never honorable device of the "rider" is one that Congressional reformers should long since have abolished. The gun law itself was passed last year by a large margin in both houses. If those Senators who are intent on emasculating it by easing restrictions on the sale of ammunition for long guns were to make an open attempt to amend the law, no one could question their right to do so. But they would have their work cut out for them. Hearings would have to be held, interested groups on both sides would swing into action, and there would be no assurance whatever that they would have their way.

Not willing to take that chance, the Senators resorted to one of the least defensible devices in their parliamentary bag of tricks—one that has for decades been a sore spot in relations between the two houses. Under the Senate's rules any bill, including measures already passed by the House, may be saddled with amendments that have nothing whatever to do with it but are in fact legislation on some totally unrelated subject. The purpose is either to slip in the added legislation, unobtrusively and without hearings, or to kill the main bill. A proposal to put up a new American embassy was defeated on one occasion by a rider calling for equal rights for women, and the late Senator Langer tried to kill a bill repealing a tax on oleomargarine by loading it with an anti-lynching amendment.

The Senate's proposed amendment to the gun control law has been tacked on to a bill to extend the interest equalization tax through March 31, 1971. Rather than endanger that measure—and in the hope of quietly mollifying the gun lobbies—the House has voted to send the combined bill to conference, where it will surely be passed unless there is a public hue and cry. The demonstration of how a few Senators can coerce the lower chamber by yoking unrelated

bills has once again outraged some members of the House, which forbids this particular subterfuge. It should outrage the public as well.