

The Cheap Handgun Problem

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 11—Another policeman was shot to death in New York Monday night, leading Police Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy to call for handgun control "on a national scale." In Baltimore, on the same day, Dr. Milton S. Eisenhower, who was chairman of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, declared in a lecture that no American should be allowed to own a handgun unless he can prove a need for it.

As it happens, there is pending in the House Judiciary Committee a bill by Representative Ab Mikva of Illinois that would prohibit any future manufacture or distribution of handguns in America. It would not prohibit ownership but would offer incentives to citizens to turn in those handguns already in their possession. No one expects this measure to go anywhere.

Commissioner Murphy apparently envisioned uniform state laws and possibly a Federal law on the order of the New York legislation which makes possession of a handgun illegal unless the owner is licensed by local police. Mr. Eisenhower suggested that the New York law be adopted nationwide, that all unlicensed handguns then be confiscated, and that the mere possession of one without a license should be grounds for conviction of a crime.

Aside from the practicality of administering and enforcing such laws, the political prospects for passing them, or anything like them, is dim indeed. Gun control is demonstrably one of the most volatile political issues in America; remarkably enough, the crime wave has apparently increased the number of Americans determined to have a weapon for self-defense, rather than suggested to them that the proliferation of weapons is itself a factor in the incidence of crime.

Mr. Eisenhower's commission esti-

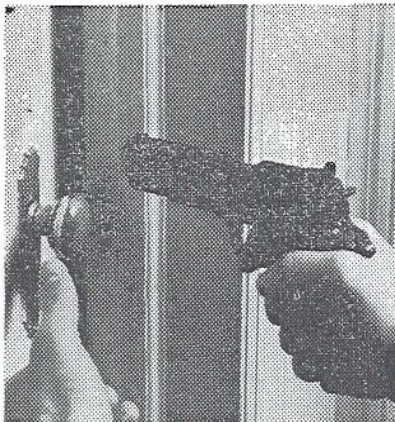
IN THE NATION

imated that there are ninety million firearms in private possession in America; other authorities put the figure as high as 200 million. Perhaps a third to a fifth of these are handguns, mostly concealable. Mr. Eisenhower estimated that "about half of all American homes have a firearm, and many have a good many."

The dimension of the problem is therefore immense, even if everyone were agreed on what to do about it, which is by no means the case. Even one of the few remedies on which political figures have generally agreed now is being circumvented.

The Gun Control Act of 1968, passed after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, barred the importation of cheap, concealable handguns that could not qualify under a factoring system as a sporting weapon. Prior to that act, the importation of handguns into the United States had risen from 41,350 in 1951 to 747,012 in 1968.

Unfortunately, the law allowed the parts of such guns to be imported as long as the frame is manufactured in this country. As a result, as was noted



by Neil Sheehan in this newspaper as early as April 30, 1969, a number of companies geared up to import the parts, then mass produce cheap handguns legally. This is generally the kind of gun that no sportsman and few law officers would want, meeting only the sketchiest of standards, retailing for \$15 to \$30, and easily available for resale for less than that on many street corners in almost any city. About as many of these handguns as once were imported—perhaps 700,000—probably are being manufactured in the United States every year.

This suggests that a further step in gun control might be taken that would not provoke the intense controversy that surrounds more sweeping proposals. If handguns that could not meet standards for importation could not be manufactured in this country either, or sold, one ready source of weapons for criminals, potential criminals and perpetrators of violence could be largely closed off.

This would be, at best, a limited remedy to a massive problem. In view of the huge number of gun thefts and private transfers, as well as the difficulty of keeping track of hardware items that last for many years, there is no way to prove what proportion of gun crimes are committed with the kind of cheap handguns that would be prohibited; it is only a good assumption that it is a large proportion. It would not be easy to set manufacturing standards that could not be evaded or met by subterfuge. Even some "quality" domestic handgun production might be affected, thus arousing opposition from that quarter.

The Justice Department is said to be negotiating with standard arms manufacturers on these and other problems. On the premise that nothing more dramatic seems likely to be done anytime soon, perhaps elimination of the cheap handgun can become the next step—small but useful—in this sensitive area.