

The Gun Menace

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The criminal assault on Governor Wallace has once again spotlighted the nation's hideous crime against itself—its refusal to take effective measures to control the manufacture, sale and ownership of guns. The depressing aspect of recurrent flurries of public interest and Congressional response is that these all quickly evaporate in surrender to the gun lobby's powerful propaganda machine.

After each new outrage, the misguided defenders of the right to bear arms as a mark of free American manhood dust off their fatuous cliché that "people, not guns, kill people." It would be as logical to defend the uncontrolled and unregistered use of automobiles by arguing that "drivers, not cars, kill people."

The near-tragedy in Maryland speaks for itself. Police there made much of the fact that the Gun Control Act of 1968 enabled them to identify the source of the alleged assailant's gun within hours of the shooting. This small comfort merely points up what might have been accomplished had an effective control law been in force. In its absence, the suspect was able to buy a gun with no more difficulty than ordering a ham sandwich—even though he had recently been arrested on a concealed-weapons charge.

Entirely apart from the spreading terror of political assassination, the facts concerning the abuse of guns in the United States are appalling. During this century, civilian gunfire has killed over 800,000 Americans—more than all the military fatalities in all wars from the Revolutionary War through Vietnam. About 20,000 Americans are killed in this fashion annually; guns each year are used in over 120,000 robberies.

According to a study of "Aggression in Man and Animals" soon to be published by Dr. Roger N. Johnson, the rate of homicides committed with guns in the United States is 35 times higher than the rate in England and Germany. In 1970 hand guns killed only three persons in Tokyo, where strict gun control is in effect; during

the same period over 500 persons were shot to death in New York City.

There is simply no rational excuse for continued failure to pass effective Federal gun-control legislation. The move started yesterday by a Senate Judiciary subcommittee to clamp down on the sale of hand guns must become the jumping-off point for a sustained conclusive effort. Every day's delay adds to the proliferation of dangerous weapons. The answer to those who say that determined criminals will get guns, in violation of even strict controls, is that the easy availability of guns actually triggers criminal instincts, arms temporarily demented passions and increases the risk of accidents. Guns are used because they are there. Tragic experience calls for placing them out of reach—now.