



A Day in a Gun Store

BY PETER ANDREWS

Rifles and shotguns, secured with silvery chains running through the trigger housings, are stacked on counters along the walls. Glass cases display forty-eight different models of handguns, from used derringers to brand-new .375 police specials. On the wall there is a fake-wood plaque bearing the words of the Second Amendment in white letters:

A WELL-REGULATED MILITIA BEING NECESSARY TO THE SECURITY OF A FREE STATE, THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE TO KEEP AND BEAR ARMS SHALL NOT BE ABRIDGED.

I have come to the Atlas Sports Store here in Washington, D.C., because I wanted to find a "good" gun store—not the sleazy sort frequented by truck drivers with phony ID cards who come this way to pick up "junk guns" costing \$15 or \$20 apiece, which they then resell in Harlem for three times the price. No, I wanted to spend a day in a store that sticks to the letter of the Federal Gun Control Act of 1968, to see who comes and goes, to discover what they seem to be looking for, and what they buy—and what their motives are. I wanted to find out how convenient our laws make it for someone who has a mind to buy the tool to make a mockery of American political life.

The Atlas Sports Store was a fine choice. The local police, I was told, purchase their guns here. Indeed, the store is just around the corner from the U.S. Department of Justice! Although busi-

ness here is scrupulously legal, this is, of course, as good a place as any to purchase what Senator Birch Bayh has called "these vicious weapons which have no legitimate use." He was referring, of course, to snub-nosed or readily concealable revolvers such as the Charter Arms .38 with which Arthur Bremer is alleged to have shot Governor George C. Wallace and three other persons.

At the Atlas Sports Store you start by choosing your weapon. Then you fill out a simple form at the counter. You have to put down a deposit, and your gun is reserved for you while the local police verify the declarations on your application. They fingerprint you and then check to see that you are over twenty-one and a legal resident of Washington, D.C., that you have not been dishonorably discharged from the service, are not a fugitive, a dope addict, or an illegal alien, that you have not been convicted of a felony or are under indictment for one, and that you are not certifiably crazy. It takes about four weeks.

Customers have been coming in all morning, about one every fifteen minutes. Most of them approach the counters with the quiet, somewhat formal air teen-agers used to adopt when buying prophylactics.

A middle-aged businessman in a gray Glen-plaid suit, with a belly just starting to show under his belt, comes in shortly after ten in the morning. He plays at old army talk with one of the clerks for a while. They agree that the M-1 was a very good weapon whereas the M-16 the army is using these days is a piece of junk. The old carbine couldn't hit much, but it was light, and you didn't have to break your back lugging it around. The .45 automatic put out a slug that went end over end and

was only good for blowing your foot off.

This is all standard stuff that veterans talk about when they meet at a bar and can't think of anything else to say but want to prove they were there. The clerk has heard it all before and waits for the businessman to get to the point. The man peers into the glass counter, saying he's looking "for something to use around the house." He points to a nickel-plated .22 revolver. He says he is worried about intruders.

"That's too small," says the clerk. "You don't want to play games with an intruder."

"What about that one?" asks the businessman, pointing to a huge, black revolver with a six-and-a-half-inch barrel.

"That's a .357."

"My God, it's an ugly-looking thing."

"That depends on how you feel about guns. It's a great sporting weapon."

"What do you hunt with it?"

"Anything you want. This piece has brought down every kind of game there is in North America. You could stop a grizzly bear with this one."

"I don't know . . . That would scare the hell out of my wife. I want something she can use, too."

"Oh, then, that's too big for a woman to handle. You want a .32."

"Where are those?"

"Here's one we kiddingly call a Saturday Night Special," says the clerk picking out a short-snouted revolver. Priced at \$49.95, it is the cheapest unused handgun in the store.

"The parts are made in Germany and then put together down in Florida," the clerk explains.

The businessman asks if there are any other .32 caliber revolvers of better quality in stock.

"We'll have some more in two or three weeks. We can't keep them in stock. They come in and go right out."

"Can't you order any?"

"No, the demand is too great. We just have to take what they send us."

"I'll think about it," says the executive as he walks out.

A heavy-set black man in overalls, who was standing nearby examining a telescopic sight for his hunting rifle, looks after the white man. "A revolver is one kind of gun I'd never buy. That's only good for shooting *people*," he says to no one in particular.

A little later a young man in a red-striped sport shirt and with a fruit-flavored cigar in his mouth comes in with a friend on their lunch break to pick up a pistol he has reserved. He shows the clerk his police permit, pays the rest of his money, and buys a box of cartridges.

"What you gonna shoot with that thing, anyway?" his friend asks.

"Anything I can hit, sweetheart. Any-

thing I can hit." They both laugh.

After lunch a lady of about thirty appears in the store. She is short with close-cropped hair and wears no make-up.

"I have never had occasion to use a weapon of any kind," she says to a tall, rather solemn, young black clerk. She chooses her words with extra care, as if explaining a difficult recipe to a new cook. She flips out the cylinder of a snub-nosed .38 police special, twirling it a few times and snapping it back in place. She holds out the gun, cocks her head, and sights down the barrel girlishly.

"We have a small place out in the country in Virginia," she explains, adding that she wants something with which to protect herself from animals.

The clerk suggests a .22.

"Is that powerful enough?"

"Oh, yes. With a piece like the one you have now it wouldn't be too easy to hit much at any distance. You want something that has more accuracy."

"If I'm running away from someone, could I turn and stop him with a .22?"

"There aren't many animals in Virginia you wouldn't be able to stop with one."

A lanky, young black man, dressed in an outsized, floppy velour cap, two-toned shoes, and work pants cut high over the ankle, is the next customer.

"What's that?" he asks at length.

"That's an automatic."

"They good?"

"It depends on what you want it for."

The clerk looks into the face of the black. "If you don't have too much experience with handguns, you're probably better off with a revolver. There's less chance of jamming."

"O.K. How much's that?" he asks, pointing to the .357 the businessman had looked at earlier in the day.

"That will run you \$168."

"That's some bread."

"That's some gun."

After examining several other weapons, he settles on the Saturday Night Special. The clerk pulls out the permit application and begins to take down the required information.

"Occupation?"

"Telephone man."

"How long have you been employed at your present—?"

"They going to check this stuff?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . you better not say that about being a telephone man."

"What do you want to say? Where do you work?"

"D.C. Library."

"You a librarian?"

"Janitor."

"How long have you been employed at your present occupation?"

"They really check all this stuff?"

"They really do."

"Three months."

The clerk asks him where he lives. After the young man thinks for a long time, he gives an address in the southeast part of the city.

"Reason for wanting to purchase a revolver?"

No answer.

"Home protection?" the clerk offers.

"That's right, home protection."

The young man counts out \$13. "I'll be back."

"It'll be ready." □

Why John Ashbrook Is Running for President of the United States

BY ROBERT SHERRILL

A December issue of *National Review* had a number of jingles on the cover that were cutely identified as being from "Richard Nixon's Christmas Song Book." A version of "White Christmas" opened with the lines:

*I'm dreaming of a new ball game
With every Right-wing nut I slight,
Where the Galbraiths praise me
And Mills obeys me
And Spock is suddenly polite. . . .*

For the holiday season only, the right-wing intellectuals were attempting to smile through their tears; for months they had felt—and they still feel—that Nixon betrayed them by going soft on deficit spending, soft on welfare, soft on the armaments race with Russia, and, perhaps worst of all, soft on Communist China. Their once-beloved leader now was viewed as a surrealistic marshmallow, and, to top it off, he was imperiling The Cause. As one right-wing leader put it, "The conservative movement may be in danger of dying under Richard Nixon—he seems to get away with things with the Republican rank and file that no one else can."

The feeling of betrayal, coupled with the fear that the two-party system might be moving toward the condition often described by George Wallace ("not a dime's worth of difference between them"), resulted in the phenomenon of John Ashbrook, presidential candidate.

Until now, Ashbrook has aspired to be nothing higher than congressman from the Seventeenth District of Ohio, a job he has successfully filled for eleven years. He is also a lawyer and the publisher of the

weekly *Johnstown Independent* of Johnstown, Ohio, population 3,208. He does not strike one as a heavyweight politician or a party rebel; he is sandy-haired, blue-eyed, pleasantly open and candid about most things, and there is still a touch of the lanky collegian about him, although he is forty-three years old and two decades beyond his Harvard undergraduate days.

But those who know Ashbrook say he can be very, very tough. His friends call him a man of inflexible, high principles; his enemies call him cramped and narrow-minded. In either case, he does not sound as if he is running in a friendly spirit. He was responsible for the only two votes cast for Nixon out of the Ohio delegation in 1968 (the rest were held by Governor James Rhodes as "favorite son"); but now that he has turned on Nixon, he has turned completely.

"Here's the Nixon who told us in '68 that anyone who says the Cold War is over is threatening the security of the country," Ashbrook says with a heavy note of disgust. "I'd like for somebody to get up in a news conference and ask him if he still feels that Communism is a threat. I don't think he looks upon domestic Communism as a threat, and I doubt if he thinks international Communism is a threat."

Ashbrook totally discounts the idea that, if re-elected, Nixon would be free to take up a more conservative role. "That's the biggest myth in the cloakroom," says Ashbrook. "The two most discussed questions in the congressional cloakrooms are: Is Richard Nixon a captive of his advisers? If he gets a second term, won't he be more conservative?"

"I don't think there's any substance to either question. I think we are seeing the true Nixon now. My friends think I'm naïve. They think I don't know the difference between rhetoric and commitment. I know the difference. Every GOP platform since 1952 has said we are going to reverse spending, to seek armed superiority, to fight Communism, et cetera, and when the candidate agrees with those positions, and runs on them, I don't look upon that as rhetoric. That's supposed to be commitment. Nixon hasn't got it."

Ashbrook went to Nixon privately and tried to get him to repent, or at least he did during the first two years of this administration. "For instance, early in 1969 I was talking with Nixon about education," says Ashbrook, "and I told him, 'Your first couple of education commissioners were just as liberal as the Democratic commissioners. Why, James Allen was for busing before the people in Indiana and Florida ever heard of it.' I said, 'Why do you get your commissioners out of New York? Why not the Mid-