

EVERY YEAR, the owners of about 100 million motor vehicles in the United States go to one of the hundreds of motor vehicles bureaus in each of the 50 states and register their vehicles or renew their permits to operate those vehicles. No one finds anything extraordinary about that; it is done as a matter of course and with virtually no protest. No congressman feels compelled to inveigh against the automobile registration laws, no senator considers it essential to his political survival to oppose them. We all take it as a matter of course that we must regulate the widespread use of machinery as potentially dangerous as the automobile, and that we must have a way of keeping track of those who use them in the event of their misuse.

By coincidence, Americans are estimated to own about as many firearms as they do automobiles—100 million or close to two for each household. And unlike the automobile, whose essential purpose is transportation, guns are an essentially single-purpose commodity: they kill. Yet, we can regulate automobiles with relative ease, while regulating the gun is one of the most enduring political difficulties in our society. In part, the reason is that the gun is enshrined in our historical mystique. It is also the subject of an intense lobbying campaign based on a misguided interpretation of the Constitution. Whatever the reason, effective gun control has eluded our society while the tragedies proceeding from the proliferation of guns, especially in urban America, mount daily:

Dennis Banks, a good Samaritan, goes to the aid of a bus driver in Washington and is shot in the chest and dies; a public-spirited New Yorker goes to the assistance of an embattled police officer and loses his life, leaving six children orphans. Each day's news brings another grim reminder that the gun, especially the handgun, has no place in a crowded urban society. Whatever its value may have been in winning the West, the handgun's usefulness has long since passed.

On the contrary, its role today generally (and cruelly) turns out to be the opposite of that for which it was intended. People buy guns to protect themselves, but for every robber stopped by a gun, many times that number of people are injured in accidents, quarrels or other circumstances that have nothing to do with home protection.

For these reasons, 71 per cent of the American public favors some sort of gun control legislation, and increasingly the Congress is getting that message. This legislative season thus has the best prospect for action of any congress since the mid '60s, when the "Saturday Night Special" stole the show and diverted the argument from the real problem of gun proliferation.

We think that this year, Congress has an obligation to do something it has never done properly—sort out the facts about guns and the gun market very carefully before seeking to legislate. Before long, there will be dozens of pieces of legislation in the hopper. Some will call for the outright confiscation of every privately owned handgun in the land. Others will merely require stricter registration of guns, and some will seek to regulate ammunition. The great danger is that if extreme care is not taken, we may legislate against the wrong

thing, or at least place the legislative emphasis on the wrong problem.

As with illegal drugs, there is a tendency in the gun control debate to focus on the streets, where the worst of what guns can do is plainly seen. Thus, several cities have tried to buy guns from citizens, and without much effect on crime. The problem then is compounded because frustrated citizens see their tax dollars going to buy guns and yet they see no reduction in crime.

The weakness in the street approach is that as fast as the police in a city buy guns, more guns are poured into the market from various illegal channels. That is why this approach is as inadequate as trying to stop the drug traffic by picking up petty dealers and users.

If this Congress wishes to make the first serious dent in the gun market, it must begin with a careful study of the structure of that market. It must seek through hearings to discover where the great bulk of illegal guns comes from, how the guns reach the streets and who profits at each stage of that process. Several years ago, New York City, which has the oldest and strictest gun control law in the country, did a study of the origin of those guns which were involved in several serious crimes. The study concluded that there is a network of underworld gun running, frequently originating in the South, that was responsible for pouring thousands of guns onto New York's streets. Congress must find out how that system works, and how those illegal guns get into that network. Very little is known, for example, about the percentages of guns "lost" in the process of manufacture by reputable firms. Here again we find shades of the drug problem where, for example, amphetamines are legally manufactured and then "lost" in Mexico, only to reappear illegally on the streets and campuses.

About 70 Americans a day die by gunfire. The figure has been climbing since 1963. That is an epidemic which requires action. But such action should be measured and thoughtful so that its result will be sure. The gun lobby is prepared, as always, to argue that "guns don't kill people; people kill people." The reasoning is transparently specious. While homicide by all other means has risen 10 per cent in the last 12 years, homicide by guns in the same period has risen 48 per cent.

If anything else were responsible for that kind of increase in deaths, we would have found some way to prevent those deaths. To the extent that gunshot deaths are produced by accident or in the heat of anger, they may be prevented or diminished by the removal of guns from people's hands. We will hear again that the Second Amendment forbids the government to abridge the right of citizens to bear arms. That argument is made without any reference to the decisive Supreme Court ruling on the subject (*U. S. v. Miller*) in 1939. The Court said the Second Amendment was intended to protect the right of states to maintain a militia, what we now call the National Guard. The Second Amendment was not intended to provide that every citizen could tote lethal weapons. Since no such constitutional right exists, that canard should be eliminated from the debate. The only issue is whether any citizen has a legitimate right to own a handgun, and how such ownership will be controlled. We control the ownership of cars, we can do it with guns—and we must.