

# Gun Control: Why We Don't Have It

*Spurred by the two alleged attempts on the life of President Ford, and a Gallup Poll showing that 70 per cent of the American people are in favor of stricter gun control, the U.S. Congress has passed and sent to the White House a stiff gun-control measure designed to reduce the number of privately owned, concealable handguns.*

It would make a nice news story, but don't expect to read it anytime soon.

For the truth is, your friendly congressman—no matter what his views on gun control—is not about to lay his career on the line by voting for tough gun-control legislation.

Before you accuse him (or her) of cowardice, remember Joe Tydings, the former Maryland senator who has been returned to the private practice of law almost solely because of his strong advocacy of gun control. Tydings' defeat is as much reminder as most members of Congress need of this fact of political life: The pro-gun control people won't vote for you merely because you are for gun control. But the anti-gun control people will sure as hell vote against you on that single issue. And there aren't enough members whose seats are sufficiently safe that they can stare down the gun lobby.

The New York Times recently quoted an aide to an unnamed Western congressman as saying: "In private, my boss would probably agree that private citizens have no business owning concealable pistols. But he would never dare say so in public. There's something special about guns to the people who own them."

There certainly is. They'll flood a congressman's office with letters, inundate his district with American Rifle Association-type literature, but stonhole him, attempt to "educate"

him. And they'll beat him in any half-way close election.

That is the one crucial reason why Congress won't be passing effective handgun legislation anytime soon. There is another, subsidiary reason; Not many congressmen are that strongly convinced that gun-control legislation would do enough good to warrant the political risks.

If they could anticipate some dramatic result from a gutsy antigun stand—a marked decline in the murders, robberies and accidental shootings, for instance — they might be shoved into taking a stand.

But the problem doesn't lend itself to dramatic solutions. It took 200 years to build up America's private arsenal of some 100 million firearms, including some 25 million handguns, and it would take a long time before the kind of legislation favored by 70 per cent of the people would show any noticeable effect.

Unfortunately, a good deal more is involved than deciding what to do about the 100 million firearms already extant. Due to the absence of effective legislation, we are adding perhaps a million guns a year to that already alarming total. As a result, we are steadily increasing our chances of being robbed, murdered or killed accidentally.

That last is a category that tends to become obscured in the debate over how to make the President safer from would-be assassins. Kooks and criminals command our attention, but more than 70 per cent of all handgun deaths involve families, lovers and friends—either through accidents or through passion.

Thus, it is no answer to say that the criminal-minded would blithely ignore proscriptions against the sale or purchase of firearms, or requirements that they be registered, and, therefore,

gun control would disarm only the innocent. The "innocent," at least statistically, are our worst handgun enemies.

Nor is there to my knowledge any compelling evidence that the handguns owned by the law-abiding among us makes us any safer from the criminals who would rob and kill us. Not many robbers or housebreakers are kind enough to give us time to go and find our pistols where we have hidden them from the children and then locate and insert the bullets (surely we've read about enough of those tragic accidents not to leave the things loaded, even if they are hidden).

If there were strong evidence that gun-control legislation would make us safer from "the criminal element," the Gallup Poll's 70 per cent might prevail. The evidence isn't there, however, except in reports indicating that a large percentage of handguns taken from apprehended criminals were stolen originally during burglaries of "good guys" homes.

But if gun control won't save us from crooks, perhaps it would make us a little safer from ourselves.

And even here, registration programs are clearly insufficient.

As a first step, we could halt the manufacture, importation and sale of firearms and bullets except for law-enforcement purposes. That at least would freeze at present levels the number of guns in circulation.

A difficult, painful but necessary second step would be a program for reducing that deadly stockpile. That's just the sort of legislation Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) has introduced.

But it isn't likely to be enacted until the antigun people become as single-minded as the gun lobby and let their congressmen know that they can turn elections, too.