

The Gun Culture

A shot rings out in the crowd. A President, a Senator, a civil rights leader falls. Some hits, some near-misses. An outcry for a few days about gun-control laws. The rifle lobby fires up its old propaganda: Constitutional right to bear arms, disarm criminals not people, it's not guns that do the killing but untrained persons, etc. And terror stalks the streets again, as American as apple pie and assassination.

The Gun Control Act of 1968, enacted after the deaths of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., is full of holes. Dealers and importers are required to be licensed and the gangster weapons—machine guns and sawed-off shotguns—are heavily taxed. Firearms and ammunition cannot be shipped by mail-order, and cannot be sold to convicted felons, drug users and mental defectives.

But long guns can be sold to persons over 18 and handguns and ammunition to persons over 21. And it's all right under Federal law to sell weapons across-the-counter if the purchaser lives in the dealer's state. A vast illicit market still flourishes in easily available handguns.

The Ford Administration's proposed improvements in the 1968 law would tighten controls on the importation, manufacture and sale of handguns. Buyers under the Administration bill would also have to purchase guns in person and dealers would require a waiting period while checking identifications with local police—all steps in the right direction.

But the Administration's effort to correct flaws in the law is a political compromise that prevents real knowledge by law-enforcement officers of who buys guns, one that still leaves dealers free to sell guns to practically anybody. The more guns there are, the more secondary sales there will be—and the more people will consider violations of local gun laws, of the kind that almost cost the President's life in California, merely "misdemeanors."

What is essential are provisions for registering all firearms and licensing their owners. F.B.I. and local name-checks must be mandatory. Federal and state officials must be fully aware of all transactions before guns are passed across the counter. An effective law must include two basic provisions: licensing owners and registering all firearms. These features have—up to now—been opposed by President Ford.

Attorney General Levi has called for 500 new investigative agents in major cities to attack the black market in handguns. This is an excellent proposal to show that one part of the Federal Government means business. The rest of the Administration and Congress must begin to catch up with the headlines and the great majority of the people opposed to personal arsenals.

Absolute safety is unattainable, but one way to discourage the gun culture is to remove the guns from the hands and shoulders of people who are not in the law-enforcement business.