

RIFLE UNIT SPLIT OVER GUN CURBS

Leaders' About-Face Spurs
Bitter Fight by Members

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 6—An about-face in the National Rifle Association's traditional stand against Federal regulation of gun sales has opened a bitter dispute among its million members.

In the aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy with a cheap, foreign, war surplus military rifle—one of the hundreds of thousands of castoff weapons of foreign armies that are now available to mail-order customers of American gun dealers—the association is now seeking some Federal control of firearms distribution.

Among many N.R.A. members, however, the switch of its leadership is regarded as a grievous heresy. The leaders contend that they are acting to stave off public demands for far tougher laws. Some proposals in Congress and in the state legislatures, they point out, would outlaw ownership of guns.

Opposed in the Past

The association's traditional doctrine has been that almost all gun laws are bad laws. It has sought stricter punishment of armed criminals but at the same time fewer regulations on gun purchasers, licensing and use.

Now its top officials are seeking regulations that are opposed by a large segment of "the shooting fraternity." Such top leaders of the association as Franklin L. Orth, executive vice president, believe that "the sport of shooting itself is in

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danger unless we act" to limit the mail-order distribution of small arms.

The association's proposed measure would not affect laws covering over-the-counter sales of arms by registered dealers. But even the modest changes it is now favoring have aroused sharp reaction within its own membership.

Proponents of stricter Federal firearms sale regulations have been threatened with assassination themselves. Mr. Orth refused to confirm or deny that he has been a principal target of such threats. But it was known that he and other association officials had received threats against their lives by mail and telephone. Some

threats also were directed against the families of the officials.

Dismissed as Cranks

One association spokesman said that the threats had been "dismissed as the work of cranks." But he acknowledged that the main impact of the threats had been to underline in dramatic fashion the need to keep the proliferating supply of mail-order guns from the unbalanced and the uncontrolled shooter.

Significantly, however, the association's headquarters here apparently has done little or nothing to generate membership support for its new position. Some critics of the association have suggested that this reticence has raised doubts about the sincerity of the policy change.

Another explanation for this silence, however, appeared to be the explosive nature of the membership opposition to any gun laws.

The association's executive committee met here this weekend to plan strategy for the association's staff in testifying before legislative committees next year in support of the leadership's decision to back some gun-control legislation.

This leadership decision, which became apparent last year, has caused what is believed to be the greatest controversy within its membership in the group's 93-year history. Accordingly, the association's 23-member executive committee was unable to agree on a policy for legislative guidance in 1965.

Committee Named

Instead, it appointed a five-man subcommittee to study the matter further. Members of this group are expected to confer with Federal and state law enforcement officials.

One reason for this cautious approach is that many law enforcement authorities who support moderate laws controlling gun sales believe the matter can be dealt with effectively only by state laws. The association has less lobbying influence in the state legislatures than in Congress.

"When we try to do the decent thing in some states," an official noted, "the antigun people pile on these amendments and we never know what we'll get in the end."

The association accordingly still opposes most gun control proposals before state legislatures. The association's monthly magazine, The American Rifleman, noted portentously in the current December issue that the legislatures of 47 states will be in regular session during the next six months—many of them for the first time since the Kennedy assassination.

Harsh Bills Expected

Some harsh measures are expected to be introduced, particularly in the legislatures of densely populated, heavily urban states with rising crime rates such as New York, Massachusetts and California. With very few exceptions, the association will oppose them.

The association has told its more than 600,000 members and

firearms legislation

400,000 affiliates to be prepared to resist gun control legislation that "is pointed in the wrong direction" and any proposal "that disarms the honest, law-abiding citizen while it fails miserably in its avowed purpose of disarming the criminal."

"Any proposed legislation," declares the association, "must not be directed at firearms or the right to keep and bear arms but at the illegal use of guns."

According to the N.R.A. this is a position supported generally by such influential groups as the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the National Police Officers Association, and a host of wildlife, conservation and outdoor organizations.

The "anti-gun law" forces thus benefit from an organized and, in many cases, unified lobbying and "educational" effort to prevent the adoption of restrictive gun laws.

"The opposition," one sporting spokesman said, "is an amorphous, ill-informed bunch of do-gooders, but they've got a lot of editors and reformers on their side because being against guns nowadays is like being against prostitution, liquor and unemployment—it has a certain inherent virtue."

Firearm enthusiasts do not underrate the strength of this movement.

Among the spokesmen for "the opposition" are such formidable figures as J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. At his controversial news conference on Nov. 18, Mr. Hoover de-claimed, among other things, that "automobiles and dogs are licensed—why not guns?"

Another frequently cited source of "anti-gun" strength is a Gallup Poll published last January, barely two months after President Kennedy's death. It reported that eight out of 10 persons favored laws that would require a police permit to buy any gun.

But such laws are anathema to the shooting hobbyist and the hunter.

The decision to support "sensible and moderate" Federal legislation, accordingly, has been taken cautiously and gradually by the N.R.A. over the last year.

The change in the association's policy first became official earlier this year when association spokesmen, including Mr. Orth, testified before a Senate committee in support of a proposal to regulate the interstate shipment of rifles, shotguns and pistols.

That bill died in the Senate Commerce Committee, where it was reportedly "lobbied to death" by irate gun fanciers, many of them members of the N.R.A. The threats against the association's officials followed their testimony in support of this legislation.

The association's support was considered a sharp departure from traditional "pro-gun" doctrine. Critics of the policy change, including vociferous factions within the group's numerous local gun clubs, de-

nounced the association's leaders for impliedly supporting "Federal control" of small arms sales.

Moreover, association spokesmen said, because the association had always defended rifles and shotguns—as distinct from concealable hand guns—as privileged sporting weapons that should be immune from any control, the association's support of new legislation covering all firearms drew bitter and incredulous reactions.

The association-supported measure was denounced as a step toward "Federal gun registration." In fact, it would not have required registration. Its terms were considered mild.

Its main provisions would have required a number of identification steps to be taken by gun buyers and licensed mail-order retailers before any firearm—rifle, shotgun or handgun—could be shipped in interstate commerce.

A proposal to require police authentication and approval before shipment was removed from the bill at the association's insistence.

Senator Thomas J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, who was the sponsor of the gun-control bill, has said he will reintroduce it next year. He said its defeat this year was caused by "hysterical opposition by a small but well-organized minority."

In letters and at meetings of many local gun clubs affiliated with the association, angry marksmen in recent months have said that their N.R.A. representatives in Washington were following "the Commie line," designed to weaken the country by limiting the citizen's access to guns.

These views are attributed by association officials here to "a few extremists who got in by mistake."

A further paradox, association spokesmen said, is that at the same time the association was opening itself to bitter criticism from its members by supporting Federal mail-order sales regulations, it came under sharp attack from both friends and critics for harboring the very "extremist elements" from which most of the internal criticism has come.

This controversy invited other criticism. The association, for example, is attacked in the December issue of Harper's Magazine as a "high-powered pressure group . . . within gunshot of the White House" that has "managed to kill even mild firearms controls bills."

The N.R.A. calls the Harper's

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attack "scurrilous and unaccurate."

Association officials insist that they have either purged affiliated gun clubs of "unwanted extremists" or forced members of alleged extremist groups to shed their controversial connections. But reports persist that the association has inadvertently supplied "organized para military koobs" with free Government surplus rifles and ammunition.

So ardent a supporter of the association as Senator Dodd has publically suggested that some Government-issue rifles and ammunition have found their way through the association to such armed "patriotic" groups as the Minutemen of America and the Paul Revere Yeomen, Inc.