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In The Nation: Where the Guns Are

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, July 28—The statistics of murder are the best for any crime, and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark has said that "We think we know that about 85 per cent of all murders are within families or between neighbors and friends. This means that if you're really frightened . . . about murder, the thing to do is to get away from your family and have no friends or neighbors." And the next best thing would be to get rid of your handgun, if you've got one, and in this country you probably do.

This is because, as demonstrated in the devastating report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, firearms were used in 65 per cent of all homicides in America in 1968—and in three-quarters of all those firearm homicides, the lethal weapon was a handgun, commonly known as a pistol or a revolver.

Nor does the danger of a handgun in the house end with the possibility of an outraged wife or a frustrated husband blazing away at the other; about 2,900 Americans die each year from firearms accidents, and 60 per cent of these also occur in and around the home, a substantial percentage of which come from improper or careless handgun usage.

As if this were not a damaging enough case against the handgun, the Violence Commission also demonstrates effectively that it is worth little in the protection of business establishments, and less in the protection of a man's castle. No more than two home burglaries in each thousand were foiled by the homeowner shooting the burglar, in a study made in Detroit; in the same city, 25 persons died from firearms accidents in 1967, but in four and a half years only 23 home robbers or burglars were killed by guns.

What Will Gun Lobby Say?

Now what is the gun lobby going to say in response to this damaging avalanche of evidence loosed by the Violence Commission against the handgun?

Is it going to reply that the sportsmen of America are entitled to hunt with handguns? One who pleads guilty to the foolish business of having recently tried to shoot snapping turtles with a target pistol can testify that it is unrewarding sport indeed; and it is obvious on the face of the matter that the "sporting" argument can be used in defense of handguns only in the most limited sense.

Is the gun lobby going to say that the Constitution guarantees every fool the right to risk

the lives of his family, friends and self by keeping a handgun in the dresser drawer? It does no such thing, limiting nothing in this area but the Federal Government's powers over state militia bodies and leaving it uninhibited legally in restricting individual possession of firearms.

Will it be said, these arguments failing, that restrictions on handguns will lead to restrictions on rifles and shotguns that are used for sport? Maybe so, but the Violence Commission draws a clear, sensible and fair distinction; it is saying that handguns ought to be prohibited to those who cannot show a need for them, and long guns ought to be permitted to those who are not obviously incapable of handling them—the mentally incompetent—or ineligible—such as proved criminals and children.

The Provable Proposition

Handgun enthusiasts cannot even fall back on states' rights; all that is being proposed is that the states establish their own standards as to which persons may own a handgun, and why. Only if a state failed for four years to avail itself of this state right would a Federal standard be imposed, under these new proposals.

The plain fact of the matter, and the burden of the commis-

sion report, is that there is no good argument for unlimited individual ownership of handguns, not even among the descendants, God help them, of Billy the Kid and other thugs. And the value of the commission recommendations is that they rest firmly on this one plain, provable proposition: that handguns have no real place in private hands and ought largely to be taken out of them by the states.

This proposition tests the commitment to fighting crime claimed by President Nixon and Attorney General Mitchell, since their Administration's political strength lies where the guns are. Fifty-nine per cent of Southerners own guns (and 72 per cent of that region's homicides are committed with guns). Forty-nine per cent of Far Westerners and 51 per cent of Midwesterners are gun owners, as against only 31 per cent of Northeasterners.

Yet it is the unavoidable conclusion of the Violence Commission—which Mr. Nixon and Mr. Mitchell did not consult in recommending last week against any further gun-control legislation—that the availability of firearms—particularly handguns—is a major factor in the incidence of violent crime. A program against such crime without a program against handguns is therefore a bark without much bite.