

Saturday Night Special

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, May 26—It was pointed out in this space on Nov. 11, 1970—and as early as April 30, 1969, by Neil Sheehan in The New York Times—that the 1968 Gun Control Act was being to some extent thwarted because domestic firms were importing and reassembling the individual parts of cheap handguns, which were themselves barred by the act from importation.

This turns out to be only partially true. The parts are being imported and reassembled, all right, and with devastatingly dangerous effect. Before the act, for instance, the importation of cheap revolvers—weapons of such low quality that few sportsmen or law officers would want one—had risen from 41,350 in 1951 to 747,012 in 1968. That was enough to move Congress to ban shipments of handguns that could not qualify under a factoring system as a sporting weapon.

Since the act, which did not bar the importation of the individual parts of cheap handguns, five former importers have been authorized to import enough parts to assemble in this country about 1.5 million such guns. In addition, domestic manufacturers now are producing annually nearly a million cheap handguns made entirely in the United States. All these "Saturday night specials" retail for about \$15 to \$30, and often for much less on resale in the streets and alleys of every major city.

These are figures supplied by Representative John Murphy of New York, a principal sponsor of the 1968 act. He and another Murphy—Commissioner Patrick V. of the New York City police, who is a firm supporter of gun-control legislation—appeared the other day in a news conference to ask support for Representative Murphy's new legislation to bar the sale of cheap handguns domestically manufactured or assembled.

The Congressman also has written Representative Emanuel Celler, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, that domestic manufacturers now are producing 41 different versions of the "Saturday night special" that would not be importable under the 1968 law.

Representative Murphy urged Mr. Celler to hold immediate hearings on the bill to apply the importation standards to domestically produced handguns. This is a measure obviously needed to plug a gaping loophole in the 1968 law, and the political prospects are reasonably good that this modest additional gun-control step can be taken; it is one that the most vocifer-

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ous sportsman or gun fan will find hard to oppose on any rational grounds.

Further figures supplied by Representative Murphy—who got them from the Treasury's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division—do not, however, bear out the notion that the domestic production of "Saturday night specials" has thwarted the 1968 law. In fact, as Representative Murphy said at his news conference, the record shows that "gun legislation does reduce crime and contribute to its prevention."

From January, 1969, to March, 1971, 967 arrests were made under Title I of the 1968 act, which prescribes certain standards as to who may and may not legally buy and sell guns (convicted felons, for instance, may not). In a comparable period before the passage of the act, only 258 arrests had been made on somewhat similar charges.

Altogether, under various provisions of the 1968 law, 4,477 arrests had been made through March, 1971—including, Representative Murphy said, "significant arrests of every type of criminal known." Arrests are not convictions, but since this record represents an increase of about 410 per cent over gun-law arrests in the 27-month period before the 1968 law was passed, convictions and imprisonments for various firearms violations are bound to have increased, too.

The importance of these statistics is that they tend to disprove those who have been convinced that gun-control laws would have the effect of disarming law-abiding citizens, while leaving criminals free to dodge the law and commit as many crimes as ever. The effect, instead, has been to make it much easier to charge a violation of the new law to a gun-bearing criminal, or potential criminal, before the gun has been used in a crime.

A small further step, beyond closing the senseless loophole that permits the domestic manufacture of "Saturday night specials," has been proposed by a New York State Bar Association committee. It recommended a voluntary Federal license that would offer legitimate gun owners certain advantages, and at the same time make a beginning at determining on the Federal level who should and who should not be permitted to own a gun. That would be a small step indeed, but big ones are not likely in this politically volatile field.