

Or Money

**THE SATURDAY NIGHT SPECIAL: And Other Guns with Which Americans Won the West, Protected Bootleg Franchises, Slew Wildlife, Robbed Countless Banks, Shot Husbands Purposely and by Mistake and Killed Presidents—Together with the Debate over Continuing Same. By Robert Sherrill. Charterhouse, 338 pp., \$8.95**

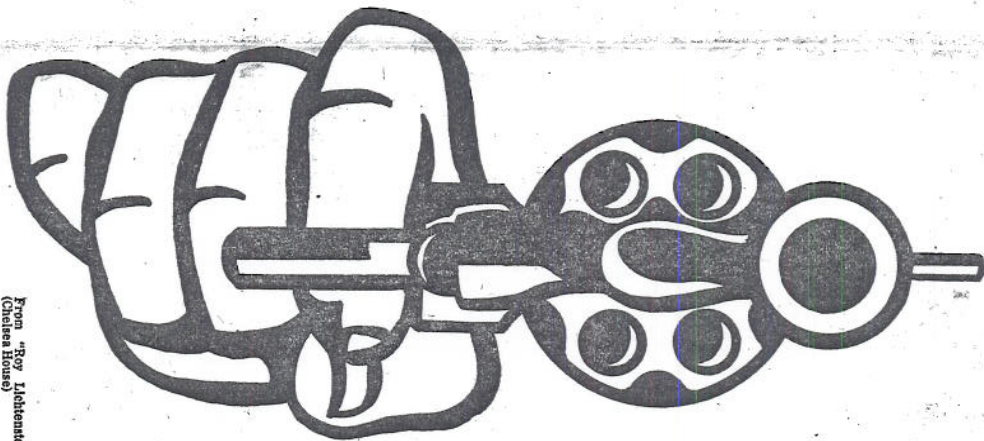
By ANTHONY MARRO

THERE ARE PERHAPS 200 million guns in the United States—that's more than two per household—and there is, as Robert Sherrill tells us, no denying that they perform some tasks especially well. Suicides, for example. "Two barrels of 00 buckshot in the month—which would guarantee the removal of the entire back of the head, as well as much of the ceiling—comprise a much quicker and more humane method for suicide than, say, a bottle of rat poison."

Assassinations, for another example. History has shown guns to be an effective method for assassination, and no American president has ever been stabbed or clubbed to death. Moreover, Sherrill notes, rifles are *de rigueur* for firing the 21-gun salute at presidential funerals, although "they might be put to more appropriate service, perhaps, if the salute entailed shooting the late Chief Executive's 21 worst advisers in a graveside ceremony—something like burying a fallen Indian chief's horse and dog with him." Such is the tone of this skillfully written and bitterly cynical book which is certain to anger both the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the anti-gun lobby (such as it is).

With his unflinching eye for the absurd, Sherrill has taken a look at the gun problem and has produced a book that is less about guns than it is about Americans. At root is not our frontier heritage, our fear of crime, or the sense of *machismo* that the anti-gun advocates sneeringly claim drives men to guns. No, the root of the problem is money, he says, and all of the above could be dissipated but for the fact that guns, ammunition and the like are a \$2 billion-a-year industry.

ANTHONY MARRO is a member of Newday's Washington bureau.



From "Got Liebschneider: Drawings and Prints" (Chelsea House)

This is more than enough to remind Congress and the state legislatures of the desires of the gun manufacturers and dealers, the sports-clothes manufacturers and the rest. "At bottom, it isn't tradition but trade that controls this issue."

All of which helps explain why a man like the late Senator Thomas Dodd could get so worked up about the cheap foreign imports that were flooding the country but not agitated at all about guns produced by the respectable, old-line New England firms. Dodd was never against guns, Sherrill tells us; just against guns that weren't made in Connecticut.

It is the industry that determines our gun policy, he says, the industry that keeps all the others stirred up: the hunters, the collectors, the NRA (which Sher-

ill claims has an unusually cozy relationship with Congress and the Pentagon because, like them, it is built on "a massive foundation of obsolete notions") and the conservation groups, who never forget that 99 per cent of the money for wildlife preservation and land acquisition comes from gun taxes and hunting permits.

Sherrill takes all the conventional swipes at the riflemen. He chides the sportsmen for being willing to slog for four hours through mud to wing one pigeon but not willing "to spend 40 seconds giving their names and addresses to the ammunition dealer." He provides an adequate sampling of horror stories: the New York woman who killed one and wounded two in a gunfight over a parking space; the Californian who knocked off his land-

lady with a six-foot-long German antitank gun. And he ridicules the NRA, describing its leadership as H. I. Mencken once described William Jennings Bryan: "He was born with a roaring voice, and it had the trick of inflaming halfwits."

He also dismisses as nonsense the NRA's contention that the Second Amendment of the Constitution gives Americans a right "to keep and bear arms." This provision, as anyone who can read should have known long ago, has nothing to do with private ownership of guns, but only with the right of the states to establish militias.

But early on in this disturbing book Sherrill suggests that there is a bright side to living in a nation where a man is free to keep enough firepower in his home to outshoot a Vietnamese ranger battalion. We should keep in mind, he says, that many of the more than 10,000 gun homicides that take place each year involve lawless who wouldn't have amounted to much anyway.

At this point, we hear from Sherrill's editor, Richard Kluger, who is distressed by what he sees as an attempt to "trivialize the gun toll." Some of these arguments strike him as anti-anti-gun, he complains in a memo that is included in the book. So Sherrill spells it out.

Most murders occur in the slums, and the problem is not so much guns as it is the conditions that people are forced to live in. If the nation allows thousands of its citizens to live like stray dogs, it has to expect some of them to go mad. "Then when they kill other stray dogs, 'it is rather silly to sigh and say their teeth were to blame; it is even sillier to pretend that we are sorry a few were killed when we do nothing to salvage the rest.'"

Bad laws often are worse than no laws at all, as anyone who has observed state legislatures close-up knows. Bad laws make people think they have protections that they don't really have, and undercut serious attempts at reform. And Sherrill, who has covered the Florida and Texas legislatures in his years as a newsmen, and the Congress as well, is quick to warn that the Gun Control Act of 1968 (passed in the year Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated; the year of the black riots) was "one of the grand jokes of all time." Because it was designed more to control blacks than to control guns, although it didn't do either especially well. It was aimed at limiting the trafficking in the cheap, mail-order guns and foreign imports that are most often found in the ghettos, but not at restricting the sort of guns that affluent whites buy from their neighborhood dealer.

There was little logic to this in terms of reducing crime, according to the author, because experience has shown that if nice people are allowed their guns, not-so-nice people eventually get their share. "They steal them," he (Continued on page 2)



# Saturday Night Special

(Continued from page 1)

says, "It's that simple." (There is some evidence to support him on this. In Detroit between 1965 and 1967, the percentage increase in stolen guns exactly matched the increase in legitimate sales—100 per cent.)

And this brings us to the much-maligned cheap handguns known as "Saturday Night Specials," unreliable for target shooting, worthless for hunting rabbit or squirrel, a weapon with little or no "sporting" use. It is one of the few types of guns that Congress has shown much desire to control, and the reason, Sherrill maintains, is that it is one of the few firearms that the gun lobby is willing—in fact, anxious—to have controlled.

It may be true that the budget Saturday Night Specials are more useful to muggers and rapists than to sportsmen, but deep down the real issue is not crime in the streets but profits. Simply put: the giants of the gun industry are eager to rid themselves of competition. What is worse, the anti-gun forces have been duped into playing the gun-lobby's game, urging leg-

islation that will strengthen the gun industry without resulting in meaningful controls. "History will not support this snooty caste-consciousness in gun traffic," he says. "All guns are terrible, no doubt, but one kind no more than the others." Any attempt to classify guns in terms of "useful" guns and "killer" guns is a confusing and futile route toward control.

**"History has shown guns to be an effective method for assassination, and no American president has ever been stabbed to death."**

*The Saturday Night Special* probably will not be well-received by the anti-gun forces, who are accustomed to having liberals line up in their parade. For one thing, Sherrill complains that instead of simply arguing that guns are not a necessity of American life, the anti-gun people have "clobbered the senses with distorted statistics hysterically interpreted." For another thing, he contends that since we can't depend on an "impotent and immoral" police to protect us, the NRA's concept of the "armed citizen" defending himself and his family may have some merit. Not only can't the police pro-

tect us from the bad guys, he asserts (only about 3 per cent of burglary arrests result in convictions each year), but all too often they are the bad guys: bursting into homes without warrants, shooting anything that moves.

The police should be the first to be disarmed, he says, and until this happens, and until something happens to improve the quality of law enforcement, any gun-control bill passed would be "an unreasonable bill in effect." He apparently is serious about this, and the result is a book that is as pessimistic as it is brilliantly conceived and written. Unless we become a more humane society, Sherrill warns us, gun controls alone are not likely to work, not just because there are so damn many guns, or because the gun lobby has so much congressional clout, but because "all this gunplay is simply a part of America."

It's us, he says of the murders, armed robberies, suicides and bushwhackings that have taken place. "We enjoy it more than we will admit."

And as for the Saturday Night Special, "hissed and booed from all sides, little villain to the last," Sherrill is not entirely happy to see it go, because he fears it simply will be replaced by more expensive, more finely tooled and more accurate weapons. The Saturday Night Specials have at least one redeeming feature: they fall apart fast.

"Fire a hundred rounds from some of the species," he says, "and there's a good chance it won't be usable except as a paperweight." In a city as overrun with paper as this one, this, too, is something to consider. □