

CHARLES ANDERSON, a San Francisco police officer, summed up the state of our gun laws in memorable fashion Monday afternoon. He was talking about the suspect in the latest assassination attempt against President Ford and he was explaining how it was that he took Sara Jane Moore into custody Sunday, found her in possession of a handgun and ammunition and then had to let her go. "We brought her to the station," Anderson said. "We didn't book her because you can't book on that (handgun possession) according to our state laws. It's a citation offense. It's a felony if you carry brass knuckles, a billyclub, dagger or ice pick—but a gun is a misdemeanor."

The police departments of most American cities would have been just as powerless. The simple truth is that the prevailing attitudes concerning the possession of handguns are so permissive that it was possible for Mrs. Moore to come up with another gun with little effort and in no time. Those guns were but two in 40 million that are already floating around in the United States. Something in excess of two million more are made and sold each year.

Though it is easy to sympathize with Officer Anderson's frustration and dismay, the answer to the problem is not to be found in San Francisco or in California law. The answer must be fashioned here in Washington. There may never be a time when a President can walk in complete safety on the streets of this country, so great is the danger of random violence. The question is whether the President and the Congress can agree on legislation that will reduce the level of that potential violence from handguns. It is a question, to put it simply, of playing the percentages. The President has escaped two attempts on his life. More than 25,000 other Americans die by gunfire every year, the victims all too often of the senseless violence that results from the ease with which guns can now be acquired.

No state or city ordinance will do nearly as much as a federal law that bans the sale and possession of

handguns by anyone other than law enforcement or military personnel, and those few civilians who can demonstrate an overwhelming need for a handgun. In no case would a sensible handgun law contemplate anything like the present insane levels of proliferation. With the soaring rate of handgun ownership, there has been an equally dismaying increase in the number of Americans who have become victims of handgun violence, most of them at the hands of friends and relatives.

The Ford administration's response to this chronic condition is a bill that bans the so-called "Saturday Night Special," which is another way of saying a cheap handgun. The President's proposal places great weight on the assumption that most of the serious handgun crimes occur with cheap weapons. Not only is there scant evidence in support of that theory, but in the two recent armed assaults involving Mr. Ford, neither gun would fall into the category his bill would ban.

As the incidents involving President Ford have made clear, gun violence and derangement frequently go hand in hand. The wise gun policy toward which this nation must move—and quickly—is one that erects as many hurdles as are possible between citizens and handguns. Handgun victimization is largely random, almost a lottery. To reduce the violence of that lottery, it is necessary to restrict access to the weapons that play such a large part in it. Mrs. Moore had a gun confiscated on Sunday by the police and she had another on Monday morning. The private gun collector who sold her both weapons apparently was exempt from a California gun control law that requires applicants for guns to wait five days for delivery. That is a perfect example of the crazy quilt pattern of existing gun laws. What else must be said on behalf of a need for a comprehensive gun law? And when will President Ford, who by now ought to understand the issue better than anybody in America, accept the plain lesson of his own first-hand experience?