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PROPOSALS FOR GUN CONTROL LAWS

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M E S S A G E

FROM

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

TRANSMITTING

PROPOSALS FOR GUN CONTROL LAWS

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JUNE 24, 1968.—Referred to the Committee on the Judiciary and ordered to be printed

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*To the Congress of the United States:*

Within the hour, in some city in America, a gun shot will ring out. And someone will fall dead or wounded.

Unless we act purposefully to prevent it, reckless and wild gunfire will be heard again—tomorrow, the day after, and all the days to follow

—as it was last Tuesday, when a 71-year-old gas station attendant was shot to death in the course of a \$75 armed robbery;

—as it was last Wednesday, in Graceville, Florida, when a mental patient shot a three-year old boy through the back of the head;

—as it was last Thursday, in Chicago, when a young man was killed and three others injured by shotgun blasts fired by a band of roving teenagers.

These tragedies are imbedded in the grim statistics of death and destruction at gun point. The terrible toll is rising.

The latest report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation documents a shocking increase in crimes where deadly weapons are the instruments of violence.

In 1967, there were:

—7,700 murders with guns. In 1966 there were 6,500.

—55,000 aggravated assaults with guns. In 1966 there were 43,000.

—Over 71,000 robberies with guns. In 1966 there were 60,000.

It took this country nearly two centuries to respond to the danger of guns in criminal and incompetent hands. The first Federal action came in the early 1930s, when the Congress enacted safeguards controlling the use of sawed-off shotguns and submachine guns to answer the public indignation and fear arising out of organized gang wars in the cities.

But very little was done in the next three decades, while the velocity of speeding bullets exacted their deadly toll across America. Alone among the modern nations of the world, we remained without the gun control laws that other countries accept as an elementary need and condition of life. We can see the difference in the last reported comparisons of homicides by gunfire. Out of 15 countries reporting, the U.S. ranked worst—with a rate of 2.7 gun murders per 100,000 population. Here are some of the statistics:

- 2.7 for the U.S.—.03 in the Netherlands, and .04 in Japan,
- 2.7 for the U.S.—.05 in England and Wales,
- 2.7 for the U.S.—.12 in West Germany and .70 in Italy.
- 2.7 for the U.S.—.52 in Canada and .26 in Belgium.

Since I first became President, I have fought for strong gun control laws.

Now—at long last—we have begun to move.

When I signed the Safe Streets Act last week, America took the first major step to control deadly firearms. That measure outlawed the interstate traffic in handguns and prohibited the sale of these small and lethal weapons to minors.

We are now within sight of the second major step—the control of interstate traffic in shotguns, rifles and ammunition, as I requested of the Congress on June 6. I hope the Congress will move with the greatest speed to complete its action on this proposal for protection.

But even before that step is finally completed, we must look to the next advance for the safety of the American people.

With the enactment of these measures, we will have constructed the Nation's first foundation upon which the States can build and develop their own gun control laws. Without this bulwark of interstate protection, even the best State laws would be exercises in futility.

To assure the protection of our people, Federal law needs two additional reinforcements:

- A national registration of all firearms, both those already in private hands and those acquired in the future.
- Federal licensing of all possessors of firearms in those States whose laws fail to meet minimum Federal standards.

Registration and licensing have long been an accepted part of daily life in America. Automobiles, boats—even dogs and bicycles in many communities—are commonly registered. Our citizens must get licenses to fish, to hunt, and to drive. Certainly no less should be required for the possession of lethal weapons that have caused so much horror and heartbreak in this country. Surely the slight inconvenience for the few is minimal, when measured against protection for all.

*I propose, first, the national registration of every gun in America.*

There are now more firearms than families in America. The estimates range between 50 and 100 million guns in this country. Last year more than 3 million guns were added to private stocks, building a massive arsenal which arms the murderer and the robber.

Registration will tell us how many guns there are, where they are, and in whose hands they are held.

Car registration has been the major factor in solving hit-and-run auto deaths. The new National Crime Information Center, operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation has already begun to compile and computerize data on stolen automobiles, stolen guns, fugitives from justice, and other criminal activities.

Now, for the first time, computer technology has made the national registration of guns practical and workable. The registration of guns can be fed into a computer bank at the National Crime Information Center. Through this system, the owner of a gun anywhere in the country can be identified in a matter of seconds.

*Second, I propose that every individual in this country be required to obtain a license before he is entrusted with a gun.*

Every murder by gunfire is a criminal confrontation in which—by design or through a conspiracy of events—the criminal faces his victim through the telescope cross-hairs of a rifle or over the barrel of a pistol. An inflamed moment seizes the criminal's mind, and his finger presses the trigger.

We may never be able to keep that criminal mind from erupting into violence, but we can stay the finger that squeezes the trigger—by keeping the gun out of the murderer's hand.

The surest route to accomplish this is to require every person who wants a gun to be licensed, first proving that he meets the qualifications.

The initiative for licensing should, of course, rest with the States for there licensing can most effectively be carried out. Some States have already enacted comprehensive licensing laws which prevent the vicious, the irresponsible and the insane from acquiring firearms. In New Jersey, for example, which has had a licensing law for only a short period of time, over 1,500 disqualified persons have been denied access to lethal weapons. And States which have licensing requirements have lower homicide rates.

The States are now working on model gun control laws through a special committee of the National Association of Attorneys General, the National Council of State Governments, and the National Governors' Conference. I have urged that their work be expeditiously pursued.

To assure uniformity and adequate protection, the law I propose would establish minimum Federal licensing standards. These would prevent firearms from being sold to or possessed by criminals, dope addicts, alcoholics, the mentally ill, and any others whose possession of guns would be harmful to the public health, safety or welfare.

The Federal licensing law would go into effect only in those States without at least comparable standards, and only after the States have been given an opportunity to act first.

I call upon every Governor and State legislature to move as rapidly as they can to enact forceful laws for the protection of their people.

Nothing in these proposals will impair the legitimate ownership or use of guns in this country. In other countries which have sensible laws, the hunter and the sportsman thrive. These measures will entail no more inconvenience for the gun owner than dog tags or automobile license plates pose for any citizen. Nor are they threats to the mystique

of manhood or to the heritage of our people. Only the potential murderer's chance to kill and only the potential robber's chance to terrorize are threatened. The only heritage that is harmed is the record of violent death and destruction that shames our history.

The proposals in this message are no more and no less than common-sense safeguards which any civilized nation must apply for the safety of its people.

The American people have been too long without them. The cost of inaction through the decades affronts our conscience.

Homes and city streets across the Nation which might have rung with gunfire will be spared the tragedy of senseless slaughter. We will never be able to measure this violence that does not erupt. But our history tells us America will be a safer country if we move now—once and forever—to complete the protection so long denied our people.

I urge the Congress, as I have throughout all the days of my Presidency, to act immediately to control interstate sales of shotguns, rifles and ammunition. Hearings on this legislation have long since been completed. The legislation has been reported favorably by the House Judiciary Committee and the Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee. That legislation—providing basic protection against interstate slaughter by firearms—should be brought to a vote without delay.

Once that foundation of interstate protection has been established, the registration and licensing proposals made in this message should be enacted. But these proposals afford no justification for delay in enacting strong and effective controls over interstate traffic of deadly weapons. Indeed, they build upon the foundation of interstate control which is so essential to their effectiveness.

Let us delay no longer in enacting that basic foundation of interstate protection and then let us go on to build—through registration and licensing—the kind of protection so long denied the American citizen.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON.

THE WHITE HOUSE, *June 24, 1968.*

