

a fashion needing change

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The opponents of firearms control legislation have been saying laws don't change people. They are not entirely right.

The United States is essentially a law-abiding nation; and the people by and large do adjust even to unpopular legislation.

Prohibition appears to have been an exception; it was unenforceable because, unlike most laws, it was never accepted. But it is notable because it is an exception.

The American people once fought and then accepted the income tax, as they fought and then accepted military conscription. They would probably fight and then accept even a total ban on the promiscuous ownership of firearms, if one were to be enacted. There is the possibility, however, that regulatory legislation by itself—no matter how restrictive—may not be enough to solve what appears to be a problem in our society. Legislation may well have to be accompanied by a longer-range, educational campaign designed to change a national habit—assuming, of course, that the habit is changeable.

All of which makes the comments of Dr. Humphrey Osmond in "Gun Toting: a Fashion Needing Change," (SN: 6/26, p. 613) particularly appropriate. Dr. Osmond believes gun-toting is susceptible to change.

It might be argued—and will be by other psychologists—that firearms are a strong, sex-linked symbol and as such are too deeply rooted in the American male psyche for easy rooting out. If this is the case, psychoanalytic theory would appear to be taking national boundaries into account. Men of many nations have been deprived of their ready access to and easy ownership of firearms, and it would be hard to argue that they are in any way more or less virile than their American cousins.

It would be inane to suggest that the efforts to contain the uncontrolled proliferation of firearms ownership take the form of a study to determine psychological links to gun ownership. It is appropriate, nevertheless, to suggest that here is a ready-made and significant subject for a course of research which might have a dual impact: It has significant social implications and could be as well a critical test of an important thesis of a prominent school of psychiatric thought.

At the same time, there may be in Dr. Osmond's thesis a basis for immediate, if not long-range action.

A very few million dollars a year in a program of education—or propaganda, if you will—backed by repeated warnings based in turn on a growing body of research, have apparently succeeded in altering some American attitudes. Cigarette smoking, as an appropriate example, is generally regarded, even by smokers, as a pretty silly thing to do. Currently there is no agency of Government empowered to launch a campaign against guns paralleling that of the U.S. Public Health Service against cigarettes.

But is there any reason why nonfederal groups—perhaps schools or the advertising industry which is already cooperating in a campaign in support of gun-control legislation—couldn't seize on the insights of a Dr. Osmond as the basis for a campaign to change the American attitudes toward firearms?

If the experiments performed by Dr. Leonard Berkowitz, to show the connection between the presence of guns and the intensification of hostility, will stand, and there is every reason to credit them as a solid contribution to the body of knowledge on violence, a gun-free society would not be any less assertive a society; it would simply be less violent in its assertiveness. And there's nothing wrong with that.

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