

FOR RELEASE UPON DELIVERY

FIREARMS CONTROL

An Interview of

THE HONORABLE HOMER CUMMINGS
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

by

REX COLLIER
Of the Staff of The Washington Evening Star

Broadcast over the Blue Network of The National Broadcasting Company

From Station WMAL

Washington, D. C.

April 25, 1938

8:50 - 8:45 P. M. EST.

Question: Mr. Attorney General, I note that in your Annual Report to the Congress you have stated that one of the pressing problems in connection with the enforcement of the criminal law arises out of the traffic in firearms by members of criminal groups. You refer to a statute enacted in 1934, as part of your crime law program and which placed machine guns, sawed-off shotguns, sawed-off rifles, and silencers under Federal regulations. Now as I understand it you are urging the extension of that law to cover pistols, revolvers and gas guns.

Atty. Gen: That is correct and I might add, Mr. Collier, that this is not a recent inspiration with me. I have been fighting for such legislation for four years.

Question: I know you have, General, and as a newspaper man in Washington, D. C., I have followed the fight with a good deal of interest.

Atty. Gen: There is now, as you know, a measure before the Congress which will accomplish the objective which I have urged. It is known as H. R. 9999. It was introduced at my request by Representative Doughton, of North Carolina, on March the 23rd of this year.

Question: I think the radio audience would be interested in knowing just exactly what this measure provides.

Atty. Gen: Briefly it does two things. First, it provides for the registration of all pistols, revolvers and gas guns. Second, it requires that if a person acquires one of these weapons after the act goes into effect he must pay at the time of the purchase or transfer a tax of one dollar, and submit his fingerprints.

Question: Does that mean, then, that if I own a revolver today that I must pay a tax on it and give my fingerprints?

Atty. Gen: It does not. No fingerprints are required in connection with the registration. No fee is imposed in connection with the registration. The tax and fingerprint provisions apply only as to guns acquired after the effective date of the act.

Question: Mr. Attorney General, I think it would be helpful if you could explain just what relation the firearms question has to the general problem of crime control.

Atty. Gen: Let me first give a little background on this matter. Several years ago the Congress, at my request, passed a group of crime laws, which enabled the Federal Government to extend its strong arm for the suppression of vicious crimes of an interstate and similar character. The public is aware of what has been accomplished in that direction. However, this work can never approach completion until something is done to keep track of the obb and flow of the vast traffic in firearms. Specifically, firearms have a double relation to

the crime problem. In the first place, this country has the highest homicide rate of any of the important countries of the world. In 1935, for example, the homicide rate per 100,000 persons in the United States was eight and three-tenths percent. The rate for Canada, our next door neighbor, was only one and four-tenths percent. With our cousins across the sea, in England, Scotland and Wales, it was only four-tenths of one percent. Of the homicides in this country, almost 70 percent are committed by firearms. In other words we kill each year by firearms 8,400 persons. These are startling and appalling facts, and they create a problem with which we must come to grips.

In the second place, entirely aside from the question of homicides, our observation and experience show that the roving criminals and desperadoes who commit such violent crimes as kidnaping and bank robbery, are invariably equipped with large arsenals of firearms. In the files of the Department of Justice are long lists of weapons seized from criminals at the time of their capture. The arsenal of one gangster contained over forty weapons. The country simply cannot remain indifferent to this problem. Nation-wide uniform registration of firearms must be had in order to cope with it in an effective manner. Registration is not the complete answer, but it is a necessary first step.

Question: As I understand your proposal, then, it does not touch in any way the ordinary hunting weapon.

Atty. Gen: That's correct. Rifles and shotguns are not included.

The youngster can still shoot rabbits in the wood, the trap and skeet guns are untouched, the duck hunter and the big game hunter need have no concern. And that leads me to make this observation. The only opposition to the bill, of which I am aware, comes from, first, the munition makers, and second, certain sportsmen's organizations. The opposition of the first group is easy to understand. For years they have been supplying gangsters with their arsenals. The opposition of the second group can be explained only by the fact that the measure which is now pending in Congress has been completely misrepresented to the sportsmen of the country.

Question: What procedure is a person required to follow in registering his gun?

Atty. Gen: It is very simple. He secures from the Collector of Internal Revenue in his district, or for that matter from the local post office, a short form. He fills out his name, his address and a description of the gun that he owns. He sends it in to the Collector of Internal Revenue in his district. That is all. It's a much simpler process than registering his automobile, and it's not much more difficult than signing a petition for daylight saving time. It's ridiculously simple.

Question: Under this bill, is a person required to obtain a license in order to purchase or carry a pistol?

Atty. Gen: Oh no. That's a matter governed entirely by the law of the State or the municipality in which a person lives. We simply want a registration of the weapons.

Question: Just what would be accomplished by the enactment of this law, General?

Atty. Gen: In time we would have a record of practically every pistol and revolver in the United States and, because of the records which would be required on the transfer of these weapons, our file could be kept up to date. The law-abiding man will register his weapon. The crook probably will not, but if the crook doesn't register and we find him with a gun he will be subject to the penalties of the statute. In other words, we would make the pistol contraband in the hands of the criminal.

Question: What good does it do, General, to have a large file of guns owned by persons who are not criminals?

Atty. Gen: Simply this. Tomorrow's supply of guns for the underworld is today in the hands of honest citizens. Under this bill no honest citizen will transfer his weapon without complying with the terms of the statute, and in time the underworld supply of guns, except those secured by theft, will be cut off.

While it is true that many weapons are stolen, we must remember this, that the great bulk of these weapons have been purchased over the counters of hardware and sporting goods stores or secured by express from manufacturers and dealers in distant parts of the country. One of the best recent illustrations is that of the Brady Gang which was apprehended at Bangor, Maine, last October. These three notorious bank robbers and murderers had in their possession twelve pistols, and at the time that they were caught they were negotiating for the purchase of more guns over the counter of a hardware store. That's the sort of system which we have fostered in this country. And even in the year 1938 we hear the hollow argument of the inalienable right of a person to buy a pistol without leaving any form of identification.

Question: General, you have mentioned the two groups which have opposed the Small Arms Act. Can you tell me which groups are in favor of the proposal?

Atty. Gen: In the first place, I would list the press of the country. The editorials which have come to my desk concerning this matter have been almost unanimous in endorsing the bill, and they represent newspapers in all parts of the country. Some of the organizations which have endorsed the measure are the American Bar Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and organized labor. I might list scores of smaller groups representing business, labor and the professions.

Question: I am interested in your mention of organized labor. What is the laboring man's stake in such a proposal?

Atty. Gen: Simply this. For years industrial conflicts have been marked by violence and bloodshed. Pistols, revolvers and gas guns have been weapons commonly used. Some of our large industrial concerns have built up arsenals for possible use in labor disputes. This is, of course, a barbaric practice. I think the public is entitled to know where these guns are kept and just which corporations or individuals are in favor of the settlement of labor disputes by gunfire. Professional strike-breakers and pug-uglies have often carried such weapons. If they carry an unregistered gun under this act they will be convicted and you can be sure that most of them won't register such guns because to do so would reveal the kind of game they are playing.

Question: What is the present status of the Small Arms Act in the Congress?

Atty. Gen: After its introduction it was referred to the House Ways and Means Committee. That Committee has taken no action up to the present time. I have been promised that as soon as the tax bill is settled by the conferees from the House and the Senate, that a hearing will be accorded the groups interested in this measure. I sincerely hope that the hearing will be scheduled at an early date and that the bill will be promptly enacted into law. When the merits of this measure are understood and when discussion of it is freed of misrepresentations, the people of the United States will insist that this measure be passed.