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Reflexive calls for tighter gun restrictions ill-timed

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It didn't take long before the tragedy in San Bernardino started being used as a prop by gun control advocates. The blood of the murdered wasn't dry before politicians and pundits began exploiting the massacre to score political points, proffering vague solutions to a problem before all the facts have even come in.

Not long after the shooting, President Barack Obama spoke to CBS about the need for "commonsense gun safety laws," arguing that just as there is a "No Fly List," there ought to be similar restrictions for gun purchases.

Presidential candidates took to Twitter to throw in their two-cents worth. "I refuse to accept this as normal. We must take action to stop gun violence," Hillary Clinton tweeted. Martin O'Malley declared, "It's time to stand up to the NRA and enact meaningful gun safety laws."

"It looks like a war zone, and it's not enough to keep lamenting these things," said California U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer. "We have to take action."

"How much more spilling of innocent blood is necessary to persuade the purists that the Second Amendment allows for restrictions on guns?" asked Press-Enterprise columnist Cassie MacDuff.

The impulse to do something is understandable. Who doesn't want mass shootings to stop? And, in the magical world of political rhetoric, it sort of makes sense that the appropriate response to something so serious as mass shootings is to pass laws that would prevent them.

But to make the argument that we must pass more restrictions, more "meaningful" or "commonsense gun safety laws," there must be more than raw emotion. There must be reasonable, cool-headed, evidence-based justifications for particular courses of action.

Whether anything in particular needs to be done, or can be done, to prevent incidents like that which happened at the Inland Regional Center is an open question. Full understanding of the shooters' goals and motivation was still lacking the day after. And there was even less to indicate that now is the proper time to call for anything other than mourning and investigating.

There are plenty of reasons for skepticism of those who use highly publicized mass shootings as a selling point for ideas that don't hold very much weight behind them, regardless of how right they feel in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting.

As David Kopel recently explained in a policy analysis for the Cato Institute of popular gun control proposals, such as universal background checks and bans on "assault weapons" or high-capacity magazines, gun control advocates simply put too much confidence in regulations without much evidence behind them.

For example, there is relatively little evidence that tight gun laws, like the 1994 federal ban on "assault weapons," had any impact on crime. It was allowed to expire in 2004.

"Policymakers can take some steps to incapacitate certain mentally ill persons who are potentially violent," Kopel wrote. "Yet, it would be wrong not to acknowledge that gun laws often cannot stop a person bent on murder. Policymakers should not pretend otherwise."

There are already plenty of laws on the books, especially in California, restricting gun ownership. And as the number of guns in the country has grown, the firearm homicide rate has continued to plunge. The Pew Research Center points out that the gun homicide rate in 2013 was roughly half of what it was in 1993.

And, contrary to the impression one may get from the news, "public mass shootings" are rare. According to the Congressional Research Service, there have been about four "multiple homicide incident[s] in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms" a year since the 1990s, rising to 4.5 during 2010-13.

To make any dramatic conclusions immediately after a tragedy is to recklessly rush to judgment. And to use tragedy to advance an agenda is deplorable.