



After every massacre, politicians and media complain that “nothing is ever done.”

There is; it’s just not the sweeping gun control they want.

THE HARD WORK TO KEEP AMERICANS SAFE IS HAPPENING EVERYWHERE.

JUST NOT WASHINGTON, D.C.

I

by CHARLES C.W. COOKE

Is there any figure in America more self-assured than the gun controller?

Consider the unsparing manner in which our self-appointed arbiters of liberty tend to talk in the aftermath of an atrocity. “We know what to do,” they insist, irritably. And “you—you fearful, irrational, backward fool, you!—you must agree to do what needs to be done. Pronto!”

Doubt is a stranger to their lexicon. Humility and hesitation are wholly foreign concepts. And charity? That wagon is at the bottom of our cultural ravine. What America needs, we are instructed, is a “national conversation about guns”—one that, this time, finally, will turn out differently than it has

before. “Now,” we’re informed, “is the moment to do something.”

Superficially, such demands seem somewhat reasonable.

In any free society, discourse is fundamental. But do any of

our public exchanges on guns sound remotely “conversational”? As an opponent of further control, I am always happy to debate, and to do so regardless of who has extended the invitation. But I am not prepared to be wheeled into a TV studio to be cast as a hapless obstructionist who agrees with my opponents in secret, but who is too venal or greedy or obstinate to admit it. Like many critics of harsh gun regulation, I consider the vast majority of the proposals we hear to be useless, dangerous or unrelated to the topic—and, in some cases, all three. In common with most who are wary of



expanded government power, I believe that the heat of the moment is a time for calm, not reaction. And, as with many advocates of the right to keep and bear arms, it is not that I have “no ideas” as to how we might best limit the abuse of firearms, but that my ideas

would do harm. In 2004, the “assault weapons” ban was allowed to drift off into its sunset provision, which had, despite the promises made at its signing ceremony, done nothing whatsoever to diminish violent crime, but which had outlawed commonly owned firearms on the basis of nothing more than the way they looked. And, having failed to achieve what they were supposed to, a similar fate has met gun registries, waiting periods and one-gun-per-month limitations. Meanwhile, to the approval of a supermajority, the Supreme Court has nixed the flagrantly illegal handgun bans in D.C. and in Chicago, and reaffirmed what was obvious to all but the most obtuse: That the

movement had succeeded in passing its laundry list of wishes over the past quarter-century—and if the country had seen a reduction in crime commensurate with the one we just lived through—anti-gunners would have proudly touted its measures as the reason behind the drop. “Look,” we would have been told, “we made our changes, and things got better. What more evidence do you need?”

Why then, I wonder, is the opposite claim dismissed out of hand? That is, why are the skeptics, rather than the enthusiasts, treated as the outliers? It seems to me that there is a dangerous myopia at play here—a myopia that leads the advocates of more restrictions to see only some changes as worthy of note or apprehension. Somehow, we have reached a point at which restrictive federal legislation is seen not only as axiomatically worthwhile, but as the only possible means by which meaningful transformations can be effected. This, naturally, is absurd—a parlor game for the terminally tunnel-visioned.

It’s also unhelpful. Writing in *The Washington Post* in the wake of the atrocity in Las Vegas, a former statistician at the left-leaning FiveThirtyEight website made a remarkable admission: Gun control, she conceded, simply didn’t work in the way she had thought it did. “I used to think gun control was the answer,” wrote Leah Libresco. But “my research told me otherwise.” Having looked at every single one of the “lives ended by guns each year,” Libresco concluded that the “common-sense” reforms she had coveted were useless. “The policies I’d lobbied for,” she related, “crumbled when I examined the evidence.” As for the reflexive use of other countries as a model for the United States? Not so fast, explained Libresco. “I researched the strictly tightened gun laws in Britain and Australia,” she wrote, “and concluded that they didn’t prove much about what America’s policy should be.”

What did she suggest instead? Simply put: Think smaller, and stop obsessing over federal law, and even state law. “A reduction in gun deaths,”

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aren’t approved of by the people making requests. Here, as everywhere else, “You must agree,” won’t cut it.

Once one comprehends this, one can see how hollow the clichés tend to ring. Despite the widespread insistence to the contrary, it is simply untrue that Americans have “done nothing” of late to alter the laws governing firearms—and it is untrue, too, that they “refuse to talk about guns.” During the last quarter-century, Americans have talked about guns non-stop, and, in addition, they have ushered in such a sweeping array of reforms as to constitute what might be called a “restoration” of the right to keep and bear arms. In the vast majority of states in the Union, they have adopted some form of “shall-issue” concealed carry, and in some they have abolished permitting entirely, thereby freeing up good people to serve as a voluntary bulwark against those who

Second Amendment protects an individual right.

Rather than usher in a backlash, these changes have been welcomed by a public that has proven both able and willing to take a larger role in ensuring their own security. As polling consistently shows, skepticism toward the desirability and efficacy of gun control has increased dramatically since 1992. And so it should have, for over the same period as the number of guns was increasing and the laws governing them were being liberalized, firearm deaths were cut in half and violent crime fell by more than 70 percent. Establishing causation is always extremely difficult, and the question of how violence is reduced is a complex and contentious one that, so often, leads us to the answer, “Don’t know.” Despite the muddy waters, however, we can say one thing for sure: If the gun control

Libresco concluded, “is most likely to come from finding smaller chances for victories and expanding those solutions as much as possible. We save lives by focusing on a range of tactics to protect the different kinds of potential victims and reforming potential killers.” Forget a ban on “assault weapons” or semi-automatics. Forget limiting concealed carry to only those who have connections. Forget mandatory waiting periods and difficult-to-get permits and restrictions on features that look scary to the uninitiated. And instead, look to how we can intervene with individuals.

Such an approach makes a great deal of sense. In certain contexts, the federal government is indispensable: As the founders understood, some questions are intrinsically national in nature, and are therefore best dealt with by an empowered central authority. But many questions are not national, and should not be cast as such. The great genius of the American system lies in the way its Constitution distinguishes between the two, consolidating power when necessary, and fracturing and distributing it elsewhere.

This same system boosts our bustling civil society, which, when unencumbered by plodding central authority, tends to innovate at will. Again: The fact that Congress isn’t ticking off Michael Bloomberg’s agenda does not suggest inertia or disinterest. On the contrary. As I write, our “little platoons” are at work doing what they always do after a tragedy—adjusting. Hotel chains, casinos and concert promoters have announced that they will review their security; the tech industry has gotten to work developing early detection systems that would thwart would-be attackers early; and first responders, from security guards to police forces, are studying the ugly tactics that were used here. In Las Vegas, the killer used a firearm, but that is by no means assured, and it should by no means be the sole focus of the investigation. In recent years, devastating attacks have been carried out with explosives, with

vehicles and with knives—a sad fact that underscores the need to focus as much on the individuals who carry out such abominations as on the tools that enable them. That the shooter had the ingredients for a fertilizer bomb in the car that he left at the scene should illustrate the folly of trying to prevent such people with broad federal restrictions. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Unless, that is, there’s will pushing back in the opposite direction. Quietly, in a thousand corners of our culture, that will is being expressed, as Americans across the country find opportunities to take the “smaller chances for victories” that Libresco has so smartly extolled. Much of their work

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This, I accept, is not an easy answer, and it is unlikely, therefore, to sate the yearning for catharsis that massacres inspire in the mob. As our history books calmly warn us, it is considerably more satisfying to call for strict regulations or for total prohibitions than to do the hard, focused and sometimes tragic work that our diffused problems require. It is easier, too, to lash out at those who dissent. As such, I expect to see little movement in our debates. Because

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will be assiduously ignored—buried beneath the cries that we’re “doing nothing” and that nobody cares. But they are, and they do, and they don’t need a license for either.

Indeed, their insight is welcome, and it is indispensable. As my National Review colleague, Robert VerBruggen, has observed, it remains the case that “violence is incredibly concentrated” in the United States—both geographically and demographically—and that our responses to it need in consequence to be bespoke. Gun violence, VerBruggen notes, is in practice limited to “particular neighborhoods, blocks and intersections,” and to “specific social networks as well.” In fighting it, he suggests, a combination of focused policing and targeted “cognitive behavioral therapy” have proven remarkably effective, where broad-based gun control has not. At the root of his case is a simple idea—that local knowledge is key. If it wishes, Washington can throw money

he knows not of what he speaks, Jimmy Kimmel will continue to reach for chimeras and to denigrate his critics on late-night TV. Because he is lazy and simple and monomaniacal, Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., will tweet himself into pique until his fingers are raw and tired. And the fixtures on the Sunday shows will sigh and inveigh, and fixate upon the dome outside their windows, and keep far from the streets on which our fights are won and lost.

In the meantime, the rest of us will get on as we were before Las Vegas: Doing what we can where we can, making the changes we believe will be helpful, and declining to look to Oz for that cheap conjurer’s magic that does nothing for the cause but keep us briefly entertained.

“Nothing has been done”? Look harder. 🇺🇸

Charles C. W. Cooke is the editor of National Review Online and a frequent America’s 1st Freedom contributor.