

# Emotional Reactions to Terrorism Lead to Dubious Policy

In the wake of terrorist attacks, it is common to feel anger, sorrow, and a very human impulse to do *something*.

Since we can do little but mourn the victims, we often resort to saying what must be done. In our highly polarized society, this often means blaming others and pointing fingers (often on social media).

For politicians, it's often even worse. Those who fail to pass certain gun control legislation are "[complicit](#)" in the violence. Those who do not refer to the attack as "Islamic terrorism" should [resign in disgrace](#).

The feeling that *something* must be done is normal, but does it lead to prudent public policy?

Negative, at least according to Ilya Somin, Professor of Law at George Mason University. Writing on the Volokh Conspiracy blog on the *Washington Post*, Somin argues that emotional responses to tragic events are [a lousy way to make public policy decisions](#).

*First, much of the public [is ignorant about public policy issues, and forms opinions without serious consideration of the evidence](#). Such ignorance is [not necessarily a sign of stupidity or bad moral character, but is usually just a result of rational behavior by individual citizens](#). Nonetheless, if you know very little about terrorism, gun control, radical Islamism, and so on, your immediate emotional reactions to a terrorist attack are unlikely to be a good guide to policy. Anger and sorrow are not substitutes for knowledge.*

Second, Somin tells us that politicians often cannot resist catering to that poorly-informed public, their “political fans” who use specious reasoning to come to the conclusion that they were correct all along. This is called confirmation bias.

It works like this: *See, I knew we should have banned \_\_\_\_\_!*  
(Take your pick: Guns/Muslims)

The flaw in this type of thinking is obvious, but it happens quite often. The results aren’t good, Somin notes:

*There is [a long history of dubious and counterproductive policies enacted as a consequence of knee-jerk emotional reactions to high-profile tragedies](#). Examples include such cases as [Megan’s Law](#) (enacted in the aftermath of public outrage against high-profile cases of sexual predation against children) and [the “zero tolerance” policies adopted in many schools in the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine shootings](#), which have done little to reduce crime, and much to harm school children. High-profile terrorist attacks also often generate counterproductive knee-jerk reactions that harm innocent people without doing much to prevent future terrorism.*

I’d probably add the TSA to this list (unless [a five percent success rate](#) impresses you) and a few other laws, but you get Somin’s point.

There is an enormous temptation to let emotions cloud human reasoning in the aftermath of atrocities such as that which was witnessed in Orlando. And political leaders are often at the ready to exploit those raw emotions. Take the most recent tragedy, for example.

Some are already citing it as evidence that [Muslims should be banned](#) from immigrating to the U.S. Others have used similar slaughters to argue that people on terrorist watch lists

should be [stripped of their constitutional right to bear arms](#) without due process. (Recall: It's unlikely these individuals have been formally accused of a crime, let alone charged or convicted.)

What we should do, if Somin's thesis is correct, is mourn the victims and be vigilant of the siren song of the demagogues who see crises [as moments of opportunity](#).

Do you think he has it right?

—

[Jon Miltimore](#)Intellectual TakeoutFacebook.

[Image Credit: Pixabay| CC0 Public Domain]