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The Political Ritual After Mass Shootings

By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD** OCT. 2, 2015

The Republican presidential candidates were quick to offer sympathy but little else to the nation, to the grieving families and to the terrified town where the latest in American gun carnage took 10 lives on Thursday at an Oregon community college.

“We have to really get to the bottom of it,” Donald Trump, usually the most voluble candidate in offering quick-fix certainty about national challenges, told The Washington Post. “It’s so hard to even talk about these things.”

Now, as the presidential campaigns intensify, is precisely the time that he and the other candidates must talk about these things — about the horrendous toll the mass shootings have inflicted on the nation, with no end in sight. Like other Republican politicians, and many Democrats, too, Mr. Trump simplistically narrowed the topic of the gun massacre to “another mental health problem.”

This has become the standard political line, particularly among Republicans, for ducking the crucial fact that easy access to powerful arsenals — the Oregon murderer reportedly had 13 firearms, six of which he brought with him — is the great modern enabler for individuals, mentally ill or not, to massacre the innocent in shooting sprees.

The contrast could not be greater between the bromide-driven slate of Republican candidates promising thoughts and prayers after “this senseless tragedy” and President Obama in his understandable fury and near despair over the political cowering to the gun industry and its lobbyists. Mass shootings have become an unsurprising part of American life, with lame public rituals in which politicians express grief and then retreat quickly into denial about this scourge.

The gun lobby has such a grip on Congress that it has successfully squelched most federal research on the problem. It wasn't until last year that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, prompted by the White House, issued a report confirming that mass shootings have been rising significantly in recent years.

In a 13-year study, analysts found that while the average number of annual shooting sprees with multiple casualties was 6.4 a year from 2000 to 2006, that number jumped to 16.4 a year from 2007 to 2013. The study found that many of the gunmen had studied previous high-profile shootings and were attracted to the attention that mass killers received when they staged lethal attacks.

Modern high-powered weapons, adapted from war and unscrupulously marketed on the home front, have unfortunately provided the means for a shooter to act out his anger and despair in a matter of minutes. The state-sponsored citizens report on the gun massacre of 20 schoolchildren and six workers in Newtown, Conn., in 2012 concluded there is “no legitimate place in the civilian population” for fast-firing rifles and large-capacity magazines that were invented for the military but have flooded the American marketplace.

These are the problems that political leaders should be discussing after the latest gun tragedy. Democratic presidential candidates have not ducked the issue. Hillary Rodham Clinton has repeatedly called for greater gun safety, telling voters, “We have to take on the gun lobby.” Bernie Sanders, who as a

senator from Vermont has been criticized for not being strong enough on the issue, firmly endorsed President Obama's gun control agenda after the Oregon massacre. He said he is tired of sending condolences to grieving families after these brutal murders.

Republican candidates should be no less tired of sending condolences. In the presidential debates, they should not be allowed to retreat behind the mental health issue and avoid confronting the grim reality. They should explain what actions they will take, if elected, to avoid being the nation's serial griever-in-chief.

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