

# Is This the Beginning?

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The shooting of Gabrielle Giffords, and several others including a nine year old girl, in Arizona is a tragedy. Jared Lee Loughner, the obviously disturbed and possibly politically motivated 22-year-old man, took the life of five people including a child and possibly made two other young children motherless. Some people lost their lives and others had their lives permanently changed. The parents of Christina-Taylor Green, the nine-year-old girl who was killed, will likely relive the horror of Saturday every day for the rest of their lives. Mark Kelly, Giffords' husband, has to explain to his two young children why their mother is not coming home tonight, or perhaps ever again.

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that as time goes by, only the people with close ties to Giffords or one of the other victims will remember this day as one where their world was forever changed. For the rest of us, the months and years will push this memory further into obscurity, something we remember vaguely from time to time, but not something of great import in our lives. However, it is also possible that today will take on a greater, and even more devastating meaning for our country, and for all of us.

While the shooting was in some respects one very unstable man acting alone, it is also intellectually and politically dishonest to ignore the political context in which this happens. As our politics became increasingly saturated with violent images, use of the term revolution, replacing the word stop or block with kill, threats by candidates that if elections did not turn out their way it might be necessary to resort to violence, the chances of something like this happening grew. Military analogies have long been part of the language of political campaigns in the US. We speak of "air wars" "troops" and "targeting" in campaigns, but in the last few years this rhetoric has moved to a different level.

It is possible that talk of ["second amendment remedies" from one right-wing Senate candidate](#), an image of a map with [crosshairs on various congressional districts around the country](#) on the website of another prominent conservative politician, the constant drumbeat about traitors in the White House from right wing pundits and politicians, [exhortations to ordinary citizens to harass their representatives](#) who supported the health care bill in 2009 and similar gestures or statements in no way contributed to Loughner's actions, but it is also possible, and probably at least as likely, that [a disturbed, loner with strange political views given to conspiracy theories](#) was influenced by these ideas and images. While the right wing should not be blamed for this incident, they probably should take this opportunity to take a closer look at the potential consequences of what they have been saying and doing these last two years, but so far they have not. Most serious conservative politicians have been quick to express their sadness about the incident, [in some cases even calling for toning down political rhetoric](#), but have sought to do this without confronting the violent rhetoric specific to the far right.

The question the killings in Arizona raise is whether this will become an isolated incident or whether it is the beginning of something more. For example, Giffords' shooting could lead to members of Congress becoming less accessible due to concerns about security. This would be considerably more damaging to our political system than might seem to be the case at first glance. Members of Congress are already somewhat isolated from their constituents, but increasing this chasm between ordinary Americans and politicians will make people less trusting of government and lead elected officials to become even more out of touch with their constituents. This would probably exacerbate America's political crises.

It is also possible that there will be other acts of politically-motivated violence, particularly if the tone of the rhetoric remains the same. If this happens, we will remember Giffords' shooting not as an isolated incident, but as the day the country really came undone. More incidents like this will devastate our country, turning the US into a place where politicians are scared for their safety and violence is a regular part of political life. This is unlikely to happen, but it was also unlikely that a member of Congress would be shot while meeting with constituents in front of a grocery store.

It is not fair to blame Sarah Palin or any other right-wing political figure for this possibility, but it is reasonable to expect them to know better and to understand that gestures, words and images have consequences. It is also wise for everybody to understand what is at stake here. Each time Republican candidates, or anybody else, talks of revolution, "second amendment solutions," traitors and the like, or resort to violent imagery or language, the door to the violence that will destabilize our country is being pushed just a little further open -- once it is opened, closing it will be a lot more difficult. This is also the lesson from Arizona.