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Let's face it, if you want to assassinate a congressman or senator -- or a president -- Washington, D.C., is a target rich environment.

When Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was gunned down Saturday in Tucson, Arizona, U.S. Capitol Police went on high alert. The attack, which claimed the lives of six and wounded 14, seems to have been the work of a lone, unstable young man, but members of Congress here in the capital were jittery.

Terrance Gainer, the Senate's sergeant at arms, said Monday that the Capitol Police would increase their visibility in Washington, and he added: "The direct threats are very low."

That didn't stop two congressmen, Utah's Jason Chaffetz and North Carolina's Heath Shuler, from saying they would start carrying weapons in their home districts -- but not in D.C.

Is that because they feel safer in the nation's capital? If they feel safer, is it because the Capitol Police are on duty? Or because D.C. still has stringent gun control laws, despite the Supreme Court decision in 2008 that threw out the city's ban?

I couldn't get a response from Shuler or Chaffetz, but I imagine both are on board with the drive by many in Congress to strip the city of its right to regulate firearms. And if Congress or the courts make it easier to buy and register a gun in the capital city, would they and other congressmen want to carry their weapons here too?

In the next few months, these questions could drive a debate that will put the District at the forefront of the gun control controversy.

When the Supreme Court agreed with Richard Heller and others in July of 2009 that D.C.'s laws violated the Constitution, the city passed new regulations that allowed people to register weapons. But, for some, the city didn't go far enough.

"D.C.'s regulations don't pass constitutional muster," lawyer Robert Levy tells me. He was instrumental in bringing the Supreme Court case. "Essentially, there's still a ban on firearms."

There are no dealers, he says, and the registration process is cumbersome.

Lt. Jon Shelton, head of the police department's Firearms Registration Section, says the city has registered 1,028 handguns since the Supreme Court ruling. And the process now takes less than a week.

That has not stopped attorney Alan Gura, who argued the Heller case, from suing the city in federal court. His suit seeks to strike down the city's ban on guns that hold more than 10 bullets. Jared Lee Loughner, the alleged shooter in Tucson, had enough in his clip to hit 20 people. Gura wants to lift D.C.'s ban on assault rifles, too.

Under D.C.'s current laws, Loughner would not have been able to carry his gun legally here. Could he still have brought it here and used it with evil intent? Yes. But the current laws give cops a tool to prevent such a crime in the capital.

In light of the tragic events of last weekend, Congress might want to give our cops all the tools they need to keep citizens, and elected officials, safe.

Harry Jaffe's column appears on Tuesday and Friday. He can be contacted at hjaffe@washingtonexaminer.com.

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