



Published on *Washington Examiner* (<http://washingtonexaminer.com>)

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Created Jan 10 2011 - 8:05pm

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In the wake of Saturday's horrific murder spree in Tucson that left six dead and Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., gravely wounded, the House GOP leadership announced that normal legislative business would be suspended. It was the right move, showing proper respect for the victims and avoiding the crass spectacle of partisan votes in the tragedy's aftershock.

Moreover, judging by some legislators' reactions to the attack, Congress sorely needs a breathing period, lest it do serious damage by legislating in haste.

On Sunday, Rep. Robert Brady, D-Pa., announced that he will draft a bill criminalizing the use of language or symbols that could be read as threats to members of Congress. His prime example of such "threats" was an electoral-map graphic that ran on Sarah Palin's "SarahPAC" Web site until it was taken down Saturday.

"You can't put bull's-eyes or cross hairs on a United States congressman," Brady fumed, even though that wasn't what Palin did. The graphic put cross hairs over 20 legislative districts McCain had carried where members had voted for Obamacare, urging voters to "take back the 20."

Common sense and First Amendment doctrine says that the Palin graphic isn't anywhere close to violent "incitement." It's one thing for a legislator to complain that "the rhetoric is just ramped up so negatively" (I often feel that way myself) -- but quite another when he threatens to use the force of law to "shut this down."

For his part, Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., called for beefed-up congressional security and special treatment by the Transportation Security Administration at airports (currently available only to top congressional officials, like the speaker). Clyburn complained that "we've had some incidents where TSA authorities think that congresspeople should be treated like everybody else" -- easily the most positive news I've heard about the TSA since its inception. Flexibility is in order here, Clyburn argued, because Congress is "held to a higher standard in so many areas."

Airports are "where we feel the most ill at ease," Clyburn stated, without explaining why congresspeople would feel especially threatened in areas where they're surrounded by security officials already on the lookout for hidden weapons.

It's perfectly understandable that Saturday's horror made some representatives feel unsafe. But assassination attempts on federal legislators are, thankfully, very rare in American life.

A 2002 Congressional Research Service report lists members of Congress who have died of "other than natural causes" while in office. The only assassination in the last 40 years was Rep. Leo Ryan, D-Calif., shot to death in 1978 by members of the Jim Jones cult.

From what we know so far, the Jared Loughner case seems to fit into that mold. There's little evidence he has a coherent ideology. Loughner's philosophy professor says the 22-year-old acted like "someone whose brains were scrambled" and whose "thoughts were unrelated to anything in our world."

It's hard to see what useful lessons about political discourse and public policy we can derive from this tragedy, though that hasn't stopped people from exploiting it to score partisan points. Paul Krugman, who once called for Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., to be burned in effigy, blasts the Tea Party for allegedly creating a climate of hate. Let he among us who is without sin cast the first, er, aspersion.

Maybe the rest of us could use a breathing period as well. We should reject "solutions" that threaten to criminalize protected speech or increase the distance between the people's representatives and those they serve. In the meantime, let's pray for the victims, and let the facts catch up to our Twitter feeds.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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