

ARIZONA SHOOTINGS

Political rhetoric draws Internet fire

SHOOTING METAPHORS

No motive by suspect cited, but commenters blame Palin, tea party, pundits

Tribune Washington bureau and The New York Times

Law-enforcement officials had only begun their examination of the supermarket scene where Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others were shot Saturday when many on the political left settled on a culprit: overheated political rhetoric.

Even before the name of the shooter was known, a fierce debate spilled across blogs and social media, with liberal commenters blaming the attack on violent imagery evoked by some tea-party candidates and conservatives leading up to the November elections.

They noted that Jesse Kelly, a tea-party candidate who narrowly lost to Giffords, held a fundraiser at a shooting range in which he invited supporters to "help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office" by

shooting an M16 with him. They pointed to an online map, posted by Sarah Palin, in which gun sites marked each congressional Democrat that the former Republican vice-presidential nominee wanted to defeat, along with her frequent use of shooting metaphors.

In a post on her Facebook page, Palin did not address her past language, but offered condolences to the victims. "On behalf of Todd and my family, we all pray for the victims and their families, and for peace and justice," she wrote.

The attack Saturday punctuated what has been a particularly brutal season in U.S. politics, especially around passage of last year's health-care law.

In March, after Giffords voted for the bill, the glass door to her Tucson office was smashed.

"The rhetoric is incredibly heated — not just the calls, but the e-mails, the slurs," she said days later.

Thomas Hollihan, who teaches political rhetoric at the University of Southern California, said people on the political fringe "get affected

by a kind of toxic political culture that makes them angry and paranoid that their government is being taken away," he said.

Yet, he cautioned against coming to conclusions about the motivations of the shooter. "People who commit crimes like this are often just unhinged," he said.

Indeed, information that trickled out Saturday about the man arrested for the shooting, 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner, did not suggest he had a clear political motivation.

Still, the shooting set off an eruption of anger at the tea-party movement, Arizona's gun laws and media pundits such as Glenn Beck.

Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, noting that Giffords and slain U.S. District Judge John Roll were his close friends, blamed the crime on rhetoric — presumably political rhetoric.

"When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government," he said. "The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on



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CLARENCE DUPNIK
Pima County sheriff

this country is getting to be outrageous, and unfortunately Arizona has become sort of the capital. We have become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry."

Dupnik said it is time for the nation to "do a little soul-searching."

"The vitriolic rhetoric that we hear day in and day out from people in the radio business and some people in the TV business. ... This

has not become the nice United States that most of us grew up in." Later, he said: "It's not unusual for all public officials to get threats constantly, myself included. That's the sad thing about what's going on in America: Pretty soon we're not going to be able to find reasonable decent people willing to subject themselves to serve in public office."

Asked by The New York Post if his daughter had any enemies, Giffords' father, through tears, responded: "Yeah, the whole tea party."

Tea-party leaders took pains to distance themselves from the attack.

"Spirited debate is desirable in our country, but it only should be the clash of ideas," Amy Kremer, chairwoman of the Sacramento-based Tea Party Express, said in a statement. "An attack on anyone for political purposes, if that was a factor in this shooting, is an attack on the democratic process. We join with everyone in vociferously condemning it."