

## What Tucson Doesn't Mean

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 10, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The attempted assassination of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, which turned into a massacre, fills us all with sadness, horror and, God willing, resolve. We are sad because lives were lost, including those a nine year old girl who had recently made her First Communion and a federal magistrate who had just come from daily Mass, a staffer for the Congressman, and three other constituents. We are horrified anytime violence intrudes upon our domestic political discourse (although we Americans have a high tolerance for the intrusion of violence in our foreign policy). And, we should all be filled with resolve that anyone who seeks to terrorize Americans into curtailing the openness of our society or abridging the ease with which we approach our elected representative will be frustrated, that we will not permit one tragedy to deform our democracy or hobble its workings.

Unfortunately, the massacre in Tucson also filled some people with foolishness. Exhibit A was Keith Olbermann who essentially blamed the shooting on former Governor Sarah Palin. Olbermann reasoned, better to say unreasoned, that because Palin had put up a map with certain congressional districts listed as "targets" in the "crosshairs," she had somehow encouraged such violence. Alas, Ms. Palin deployed only a metaphor, not an armory. If Ms. Palin chose to make a political point by quoting Machiavelli's famous aphorism that if you strike at the Prince, make sure you kill him, that would not be an incitement to violence, although it would be an atypical, learned reference from the sage of Wasilla.

It is true that Fox News, Laura Ingraham, Anne Coulter, and Rush Limbaugh, exist to perpetuate a view of American politics, untethered to evidence or reality, that is a petri dish for conspiracy theories and other paranoid fantasies. Indeed, the most outrageous thing Ms. Palin recently said was not anything about crosshairs, but her comment to Ingraham that President Obama's "goal was to weaken America." Palin did not say that she thought the President was unintentionally weakening the country. She said it was intentional. That's treason. If you actually believed that the President was committing treason as opposed to thinking he was mistaken, taking action, even violent action, to prevent him from furthering his diabolical intentions would make a kind of sense. But, Palin committed hyperbole, not conspiracy.

The parallel universe that Fox News propagates is revolting not because it caused this tragedy. It didn't. It is revolting because it is not true, and a political discourse that is unconcerned with truth and continually subjugates it to a political agenda, mocks the First Amendment privileges our nation accords to the press and the democratic process itself. You don't have to be a fascist to grasp the difference between persuasion and manipulation of the media and act upon it, but you are walking down a path that leads, inexorably, away from a healthy democracy.

I confess that in 2008, during the campaign, I worried deeply about the cultivation of a hateful, racist milieu that might convince some crazy to shoot then-candidate Barack Obama. The history of shooting prominent African-Americans seemed so real. But, that hate-filled, racist milieu already existed. There are plenty of racists in America, and nothing anyone says is going to make them less or more racist. I do not think a congressman shouting "Liar" at the President serves as an invitation to violence, but it is an invitation to stupidity and

intelligence is, or should be, the enemy of violence. The attempted assassination of Giffords would have an entirely different feel if she had been a Latina, yes?

As a writer, I am fond of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's observation, in his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy*, that "the pen is mightier than the sword." The pen, however, is not the sword and we should not confuse the two even if some disturbed souls do. Short of shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater, the First Amendment protects Palin's foolishness, Limbaugh's vitriol, Ingraham's stupidities, etc. There is nothing liberal, repeat nothing liberal, about those who advocate for codes to prohibit "hate speech" or who make facile links between hateful speech and hateful acts.

Of course, the young man who murdered six fellow Arizonans in the parking lot of a Tucson Safeway appears to be disturbed. Maybe he was trying to make a political statement. Maybe he was trying to impress Jodie Foster. Before people like Olbermann rush to assign blame for the assassination and massacre to their political opponents, it is good to remember that nothing in the political environment caused Squeaky Fromme to shoot at President Ford or John Hinckley to shoot at President Reagan or bodyguards of the Rev. Jim Jones to shoot the last Congressman to die in the line of duty, Rep. Leo Ryan. (And, in case you are tempted to think there is something inherently violent about right wing political activists as opposed to their left wing counterparts, recall that the Rev. Jim Jones was a political ally of liberal San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk.) Crazy people are crazy: They don't need any incitement from a "vitriolic political climate."

Politicizing this tragedy is appropriate in one regard, and might be in another. Instead of seeking a connection between language and the shooting, there is a much more proximate linkage. The assassin used a gun. Sadly, given the lay of the political land, this tragedy will not result in a successful effort to amend our insane gun laws. The National Rifle Association has been so effective for so long, that responsible legislation to limit who can and cannot buy a handgun results in millions of hunters up in arms, even though hunters don't use handguns to snag deer. The other, possible, politicization of this tragedy that would be appropriate is if we find that the perpetrator was involved with the militia movement. We have not heard a lot from that movement in the past few years, and I am guessing that the government used its enhanced post-9/11 powers to break it up. But, one of the tests a polity must face is to stand up to its own extremists if they are seen to be complicit. So far as we now, there is no connection between the assassin and more extreme political organizations.

There is a reason to oppose the vitriolic, demonizing, hate-filled speech that comes forth from Fox, from Limbaugh, from Olbermann, from all the blowhards on the left or the right. That reason is because their speech is vitriolic, demonizing and hateful, and, most importantly, it is unhinged from reality. It need not lead to violence to be reprehensible. I understand the desire, in the face of tragedy, to seek a reason, some explanation for this evil that has befallen so many innocent victims. But, sometimes in life, there are no reasons, no neat causalities to explain why certain tragedies occur. Mr. Olbermann should have remembered that before he tried to intimidate into silence those whose right to be foolish is guaranteed by the First Amendment.

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