



**WSBA President
Steven G. Toole**

Tragedy in Arizona: Who's Accountable?

Once again we turned on the television and heard tragic news, this time about a deadly shooting in Tucson, Arizona, outside a Safeway store. It appears that Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was the primary target, but in the melee that followed the initial shot, a federal judge and five others were killed, including a nine-year-old child, and numerous others were injured. Congresswoman Giffords miraculously survived a shot to her head at point-blank range, although it will be quite some time before the full extent of her recovery is known.



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Americans watching and reading about this senseless tragedy reacted with horror, grief, anger, sadness, concern, and the emotions go on. We were in shock at the sight of such a violent attack, particularly as it was aimed at a sitting member of Congress and prematurely ended the life of a young, innocent child. Politicians denounced the shooting and after a short period of reacting emotionally, we all turned to blame. Who was to blame for this act of violence? Was this an act of terrorism? Was it a conspiracy? Is there more violence to come? Since Gabby Giffords is a Democrat and had taken a lot of heat for supporting President Obama's healthcare legislation, people questioned whether politics played a role in this tragedy. Even former Governor Sarah Palin was blamed due to campaign literature attributed to her in which the crosshairs of a rifle were laid over Congresswoman Giffords' congressional district with a message that Giffords' district should be "targeted."

As the investigation continued and days passed, we learned that the shooter, Jared Loughner, was a person losing his sanity. It now appears that these tragic shootings were the actions of one disturbed individual. With

this conclusion reached, the families of the victims and Americans in general were still faced with grief and sadness, but we could at least proceed to the healing stage. We turned our attention to praying for the recovery of those injured, mourning those who lost their lives, and praising those who acted as heroes. We breathed a deep sigh of relief and attributed this craziness

to an isolated, unpredictable incident; a tragic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were now satisfied that it was highly unlikely that this horror would ever happen to one of us or one of our loved ones — and we moved on.

But does it end here? Can we conclude that these shootings in Arizona were truly senseless and unpredictable, and were solely attributed to a fringe element of our society over whom we have no control or accountability? Were we totally innocent in setting the stage for the chain of events that led to the tragedy outside the Safeway store in Tucson? I recognize that logic and accountability cannot necessarily be applied to someone who is mentally unstable. But even these people read the papers, watch television, and listen to the news. They are exposed to the same rhetoric and hatred that the rest of us hear every day. The problem is that they are less able to separate reality from fantasy. They are less able to control their emotions and their actions. However, this doesn't mean that we cannot reasonably anticipate these lunatic reactions. Indeed, if we create an atmosphere of distrust and hatred, we are fostering an environment in which the

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Jared Loughners of our world are nurtured and can feel justified in wanting to “cure” the world by going on killing sprees and wiping out the people that they — and apparently a part of our society — blame for all our problems.

Unfortunately, the state of Arizona has become a poster child the last couple years for the hatred and bigotry that is becoming associated with politics in this country. The cooperative spirit of bipartisan politics is virtually lost. *Leaders from all political sides spew forth vitriol that sends out the message that if you aren't with us, you're against us. If you don't agree with us on this particular issue (i.e., healthcare reform), then you are the enemy and you are going to be responsible for the downfall of America. You are going to put people out of work, cause people to go homeless, and starve.* We overlook our Constitution and the constitutional right to freedom of speech. We demonize our opponents for merely exercising those constitutional rights. We blame them for everything that is not working in our lives and we talk about violence and hatred. Of course, for most of us, this is only talk. We are venting. But aren't we accountable for putting the sentiments out there, into the addled minds of the people who aren't able to distinguish speech from actions and believe that the people who think differently from them are evil and need to be extinguished?

For years, I have been complaining to anyone who will listen about the evils of negative political attack ads. They started to become prevalent in the late 1980s and have now become a mainstay of our fall election campaigns. It is not enough to run a campaign based on the merits of a particular candidate or a particular initiative; it is eas-

ier to prevail by personally attacking your opponent — and not just attacking, but destroying. It appears to be fair game to take a small truth and spin it until it is entirely out of context and then use that spin to paint your opponent as someone who hates America and is out to destroy our way of life. Our goal is not just to persuade people to vote for us, but to get them so emotionally charged that they become zealots and sell our spin to anyone who will listen. This is all done by frightening people. Give them

just enough information so that they believe they are well informed and then scare them into action. The fact that we hide the truth is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that we win. *Is this really the way we believe our children should be raised — to believe that the ends justify the means, at all costs?* Is it any wonder that we have more and more violence in our society, particularly related to political matters? Can we really disclaim any responsibility for those predictable few who are out of touch with reality and get carried away and decide to *right the world* by going on killing sprees?

Members of Congress reported 42 cases of threats of violence in the first three months of 2010. This was nearly three times the 15 cases reported during the first quarter of 2009. And most of these threats related to the healthcare legislation promoted by President Obama. What is this all about? In my opinion, it is a direct response to the political and corporate leadership of our country following a strategy of “win at all costs.” *Rile up the masses and scare them into believing that those supporting the other point of view are intentionally trying to destroy life in America.* Admittedly, if the American public didn't buy into this extremism, the negative attack campaigns would not work. But human nature being what it is and with the busy lives we all lead, it's difficult to thoroughly educate ourselves on all sides of an issue. If each side is going to spend millions of dollars sprucing up their candidates, hiring gifted speech writers who are

virtually free to make up what they want, and then hire psychologists and marketing specialists whose business is to know how to influence people and get them riled up, we have no chance — our society is doomed.

In history, the great empires that rise to the top always eventually fall. My fear is that we are in the beginning of the decline of the *American empire*. Somewhere our leadership bought into the concept that it is okay to manipulate people to get what you want; that truth is not important; that winning is. *My response to this is: shame on us. We should know better and we need to do something about it.* We cannot continue to sustain an environment that allows people like Jared Loughner to become empowered. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and tell ourselves that we are not accountable for what is going on in our society. We are better than that, and it is not too late. We need to take the high road and not succumb to the dirty tricks played on us through rhetoric. We can start with our own lives and initially take small steps to spread civility, truth, and honesty. We can make a difference. 

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