Arizona assassination spree tied to political right

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Mounting evidence has linked the 22-year-old gunman who severely wounded Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, killed a federal judge and killed or wounded 18 others in Tucson, Arizona to the political right.

According to a memo issued by the Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of the shooting spree at a Tucson, Arizona strip mall Saturday, Internet activity by the gunman, Jared Lee Loughner, linked him to American Renaissance, which DHS described as an "anti-government, anti-immigration, anti-ZOG [Zionist Occupation Government], anti-Semitic." The online publication of the organization advocates white supremacy and racial separation.

Giffords was critically wounded in the hail of gunfire unleashed by Loughner as the Democratic Congresswoman was holding a "Congress on the corner" event, meeting with constituents outside a local supermarket. Killed in the attack were federal Judge John Roll, Gifford's aide Gabe Zimmerman, a nine-year-old girl, Christina Green, and three others.

Doctors voiced "cautious optimism" about Giffords' prognosis after surgery for what they described as a "devastating wound." She was reported to be in a medically induced coma Sunday night.

Loughner was charged in a federal indictment issued Sunday on first degree murder charges for the killing of Judge Roll and Gabe Zimmerman and the attempted murder of Congresswoman Giffords and two other of her aides. He is to appear in court today on the charges, which carry the federal death penalty. The gunman will face state charges in relation to the other victims who were not US government employees.

Judge Roll, who was the chief federal judge in Arizona, was himself the subject of hundreds of death threats in 2009 when he presided over a case brought on behalf of undocumented immigrants against an Arizona rancher. Vilified by right-wing talk show hosts in the state, Roll received hundreds of calls threatening to kill him and his family. "They said, 'We should kill him. He should be dead,'" US Marshal David Gonzales told the *Arizona Republic*. Roll and his family were placed under 24-hour protection.

Speaking in Tucson Sunday, FBI Director Robert Mueller said that he did not believe any "specific threat remains" after the shooting, but that he did not "preclude that additional charges may be brought under the domestic terrorism statutes as the investigation continues."

Investigators reported that a search of Loughner's home uncovered an envelope with the words "My assassination", "I planned ahead" and "Giffords", together with what appeared to be Loughner's signature. Also found in the house was a letter from Giffords thanking Loughner for attending a previous "Congress on the corner" in 2007.

Various classmates and neighbors have described Loughner as a loner who exhibited erratic behavior and signs of emotional and mental instability that led him to be suspended from a local community college last fall. Authorities demanded that he present a mental evaluation confirming that he did "not present a danger to himself or others" before he would be readmitted.

The gunman had attempted to enlist in the Army in December 2008, but was rejected. The media quoted unnamed sources as saying that he failed a drug test.

While he had a record of minor criminal charges, he was able to buy the Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol used in the shooting after passing an FBI background check.

Material posted by Loughner on the Internet included rambling and incoherent references to "conscience dreaming" and sleep walking. Intermixed with these seemingly irrational observations was rhetoric that appeared to have been absorbed from the stock in trade of the political right.

In a YouTube video posting consisting of scrolling text and music, Loughner railed against the "second constitution", a term used by the political right to refer to the post-Civil War 13th Amendment banning slavery and the 14th Amendment guaranteeing citizenship to all those born in the US and equal protection under the law in every state.

On the eve of Loughner's shooting spree, Republicans in the US Congress launched a vitriolic campaign seeking the scrapping of the 14th Amendment in order to deny the right to citizenship for children born to undocumented immigrants within the US. Arizona has been an epicenter of this reactionary anti-immigrant campaign. The incoming Republican leader of the Arizona State Senate, Russell Pearce, who authored the state law criminalizing immigrants without papers—since blocked by a federal court—is pushing this year for a state law denying citizenship to babies born to the undocumented and is leading a

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campaign nationally to promote similar legislation in other states.

Similarly, the YouTube video included the declaration, “No! I won’t pay debt with a currency that’s not backed by gold and silver.” This is a standard theme sounded by Fox News commentator Glenn Beck and others on the extreme right, who have joined to their reactionary ideology the promotion of gold sales as a lucrative side business.

Whatever Loughner’s mental issues, it is readily apparent that his violent actions were prepared and guided by right-wing political forces that openly promote and legitimize violence against their opponents. These forces have in turn been amplified far beyond any genuine popular base by the media network of Fox owner Rupert Murdoch and elements such as the Koch brothers and other wealthy financiers who have poured vast amounts of money into promoting the Tea Party and other phony political fronts for the extreme right.

Among the most frank and forthright in explaining this connection to the vicious crime was given by the seven-term sheriff of Pima County, Clarence Dupnik, who was leading the local investigation. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, he denounced “the vitriol and rhetoric that we hear day in and day out from the people in the radio business and some people in the TV business”.

The sheriff’s remarks stood in sharp contrast to the response of so-called liberal Democrats from President Barack Obama and other elected officials to television commentators who, in their vast majority, cautioned against drawing any political conclusions other than the need for “civility.”

Dupnik cited previous attacks launched against Giffords over issues such as health care legislation and immigration. A former Republican, Giffords joined the conservative Blue Dogs Democratic caucus, but voted with the party leadership on these issues.

“Some of the vitriol got a lot of people very agitated,” said Dupnik. “There is no doubt in my mind that when a number of people night and day try to influence the public, there is going to be some consequences.”

“When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government—the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country, is getting to be outrageous,” he continued. “And unfortunately, Arizona, I think, has become the capital. We have become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry.”

The state has seen the increasing activity of vigilante white supremacist groups drawn to the border with Mexico in the hunt for undocumented immigrants. There is ample evidence that Giffords, the first Jewish woman elected to Congress in Arizona, was hated by these fascistic elements.

Last year, someone dropped a handgun at one of her public events, while an unknown attacker shot out the glass door to her campaign office.

Giffords was targeted by the Republican right in the 2010 elections and won a third term only by a 1 percent margin in the majority Republican district. Her political survival was a source of considerable frustration for the Republican right, which managed to oust Democrats in most other so-called swing districts.

Her opponent, Tea Party favorite and former Marine Jesse Kelly, had organized an event inviting supporters to join him in firing M16 assault weapons as part of the campaign to “help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office.”

In the course of the election campaign, right-wing protesters would gather weekly near her office carrying signs with slogans such as “It’s time to reload” and “One way or another, you’re gone.”

During the campaign, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin put up a web page that included Gifford among 19 other Democratic members of Congress whose districts were shown with a sniper sight’s crosshairs super-imposed upon them.

At the time, Giffords condemned the tactic, warning “When people do that, they have got to realize there are consequences to that action.” In response to such criticism, Palin replied on twitter, “Don’t retreat, reload.”

After the Tucson shootings, Palin’s web site removed the page, while an aide claimed incredibly that the crosshairs were not meant to represent a rifle sight, but rather a “surveyor’s symbol.”

Patricia Maisch, a 61-year-old woman whose actions in grabbing an ammunition magazine from Loughner as he was attempting to reload has been credited with helping to prevent an even more horrific massacre, was interviewed Sunday night on Fox News. Anchor Shepherd Smith asked her if she had any “words of hope” based on her experience.

“I don’t think so,” she responded. “Extreme right reporters on radio and TV have added to this problem. The extreme right has gone too far.”

Similarly, Congresswoman Gifford’s father, when asked if his daughter had any enemies, replied, “The whole Tea Party.”

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