The Nation and the Tucson massacre

Patrick Martin
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has already taken note of the initial reaction of the liberal magazine the *Nation* to the massacre in Tucson that killed six people and critically wounded Democratic Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

A posting by Richard Kim, a member of the *Nation* editorial board, decried the assault as "An Attack on Government, an Attack on the Public, an Attack on Democracy" and claimed that the antidote to the vitriol of the ultra-right was to "cherish more dearly the practice of politics and citizenship as something noble in its intent, something to expand and celebrate—instead of something to denigrate as the enemy of the people."

David North responded, "These words are a devastating self-exposure of the political bankruptcy of what passes for the 'left' in the United States, and show why it is possible for the extreme right (despite being funded to the hilt by corporate money) to exploit popular grievances and monopolize the rhetoric of social discontent." (See: "After the shooting in Tucson")

The political system that Kim urged Americans to "cherish" has done nothing to offset the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Democrats and Republicans alike insist that the unemployed must bide their time until the capitalist class decides that wages and benefits have fallen far enough to make rehiring them profitable. Government programs that once alleviated mass suffering have been slashed, in the name of "deficit reduction," while trillions are funneled into bailouts for Wall Street and tax cuts for the wealthy.

In the week that has followed, the *Nation* has offered a series of diversions from the fundamental political issues—with commentaries focusing on gun control and the lack of mental health services in Arizona, along with predictable hosannas to Obama's sermon at the memorial meeting for the victims of the Tucson massacre, a speech which was likewise hailed by the right-wing media.

An editorial published on the *Nation* web site January 13 embraced the "crazed gunman" explanation advanced by the right-wing media and politicians. "It's too soon to know why this lone gunman went on his rampage or whether anyone could have stopped him," the editors wrote. "All the early signs point to a deeply disturbed young man who stalked Giffords and planned her assassination over months while friends, classmates and teachers expressed growing alarm at his outbursts and Internet postings."

The editorial went on to quibble with the right wing over whether "Loughner's evident mental illness" absolved them of any political responsibility for his targeting a Democratic congresswoman. The editors argued that the right-wing politicians were being hypocritical because they had a long record of opposing or cutting funding for community mental health services.

Moreover, they continued: "In Tucson, Loughner's apparent mental illness combined fatally with one of the country's most irresponsibly lax gun laws, driven by a firearms lobby so powerful that last year Governor Jan Brewer signed a measure ending the longstanding requirement for a permit to carry concealed weapons. "

This harping on gun control and metal health was combined with adulation for Obama's January 12 speech in Tucson. John Nichols, the *Nation*'s Washington bureau chief, described it as a "remarkable speech" in which Obama spoke as "an idealist recalling a more innocent America—and imagining that some of that innocence might be renewed as shocked and heartbroken citizens seek to heal not just a community but a nation that is too harsh, too cruel, too divided."

There was no mention of the fact that Obama is the "commander-in-chief" responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent Afghans, who are being mowed down, blown up and incinerated in an imperialist war that kills more innocent civilians every day than Jared Lee Loughner murdered on January 8.

Nichols went on: "Obama's language recalled the most idealistic appeals not just of his own political journey but of past presidents—Lincoln, FDR, Reagan and Clinton—when they sought to heal a torn or traumatized nation." That Nichols can put on the same plane Lincoln,

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who freed three million slaves, and the doddering and reactionary Reagan, let alone Clinton, speaks volumes about his political outlook.

Ari Berman of the *Nation* editorial board also gushed about the "almost absurdly idealistic appeal" by Obama. He added, "And for a few minutes on Wednesday night, we dared with our president to answer cynicism with idealism, to answer tragedy with hope, to answer division as one nation, indivisible."

It is, however, precisely the attempt to present America as "one nation, indivisible" which is so completely false. America is a deeply class-divided society, in which a tiny aristocracy at the top monopolizes the wealth created by the labor of more than 150 million working people.

Everything that obscures that division or chloroforms the masses to make them insensible to it in their political thinking is reactionary through and through.

Katrina van den Heuvel, editor of the *Nation*, touched on the social dimensions of the Tucson massacre in a column, not for her own publication but for the *Washington Post*, published January 10. She wrote: "For young people like accused gunman Jared Lee Loughner, a community college dropout apparently rejected by the military, these are brutal times. In an economy where many Americans are struggling simply to keep their heads above water, where poverty is spreading and young people without college educations face bleak futures, fury and depression are certain to spread."

This is certainly true, but it raises a fundamental political question, which Van den Heuvel and her cohorts at the *Nation* do not care to address. Why is it that the political expression of "fury" over "brutal times" takes the form of an attempt on the life of a Democratic Party legislator? Why is it that the confused political conceptions of Loughner, as much as is now known of them, echo the language of the ultra-right?

Loughner is, after all, from the demographic in the population where there were the greatest illusions in the campaign of Barack Obama and the Democrats in 2008—young, working class, without prospects, unsuccessfully seeking through community college education to escape a future of low-wage, dead-end jobs.

What has the Obama presidency produced for millions of young people?

• An escalation of the war in Afghanistan, where more than 100,000 young American men and women are now engaged in the tenth year of a savage war against the local population.

• An economic slump now extending into its fourth year, in which young people have borne the brunt of mass unemployment and wage cutting.

• Drastic cuts in social spending, which are hitting education, health care (including mental health) and other public services.

That record explains why the vast majority of working class youth abstained from voting in the 2010 congressional elections, in which the Republican Party took back control of the House of Representatives.

As the WSWS has repeatedly emphasized, to the extent that mass social discontent cannot find a progressive expression in the form of collectively organized class struggle, it will find expression in the outbursts of desperate individuals. Some of these take the form of suicide or workplace shootings of managers and bosses. Others take a more openly political form, as in Loughner's targeting his congresswoman as she met with constituents at a local supermarket.

To use such events, as the *Nation* does, to peddle illusions in a Democratic Party and a president that are widely discredited among working people leaves sections of socially distressed people vulnerable to the omnipresent corporate-financed propaganda of the reactionary right. What is required is a genuinely progressive path—the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics on the basis of a socialist program.

The *Nation* and the liberal "left" in general, reflecting the wealthy upper-middle class layers for which they speak, are utterly opposed to such a revolutionary perspective. Their greatest fear is the emergence of a movement of the working class independent of the Democratic Party.

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