Obama in Tucson: Providing an amnesty for the right wing

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In his remarks Wednesday night to a memorial service for the victims of last Saturday's massacre in Tucson, Arizona, President Obama refused to offer any political explanation for the attempted assassination of Democratic Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

On the contrary, his entire speech was an argument against such an analysis, as he declared the causes of the massacre to be unknowable. It was a statement of intellectual bankruptcy, carried out, as usual in modern American politics, amid nonstop invocations of religion.

Sitting in the audience, unacknowledged and unmentioned by Obama, was the sheriff of Pima County, Clarence Dupnik, who spoke out Saturday, attributing the attempted assassination of a prominent Democrat to the promotion of bigotry and political violence by the right-wing media and politicians.

Dupnik's bluntness made him a target of the ultra-right, with the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox News, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh all denouncing his remarks. In his speech in Tucson, Obama effectively joined in this campaign, offering a full-fledged amnesty for the right.

Four or five decades ago, an occasion such as this in the United States would have seen a clear demarcation between the invocation by the preachers and the speeches by political leaders. Wednesday night's affair, by contrast, was an awkward combination of campus pep rally and sermonizing.

The bizarre tone was epitomized by Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and Attorney General Eric Holder, who took the podium in succession and confined their remarks to reading passages from the Bible.

These are the two top officials in the US government for domestic security and law enforcement, and they had nothing to say about the murder of a federal judge and the attempted murder of a congresswoman.

Obama followed, invoking "scripture" in his opening remarks. He then began to tell the story of the January 8 shootings, relating how violence had erupted in the midst of the "quintessentially American scene" of a legislator meeting with her constituents.

Actually, it is the sudden outbreak of homicidal mayhem that has become a "quintessential American scene" in recent years. Obama made no acknowledgment of this, not once referring to such tragedies as the massacre at Virginia Tech, the endless series of workplace shootings, or the more explicitly political events like the bombings and murders at abortion clinics.

Obama turned to the Bible again. "Scripture tells us that there is evil in the world, and that terrible things happen for reasons that defy human understanding," he said, going on to quote from the Book of Job.

"Bad things happen, and we have to guard against simple explanations afterward," he said. "None of us can know what triggered the attack or what could have been done to prevent it."

Obama's invocation of religion had a wholly secular purpose: to provide sanction for his rejection of any political assessment of the events of January 8 in Tucson.

"When a tragedy strikes, it is part of our nature to demand an explanation, to impose an order on the chaos," Obama said.

Here Obama's speechwriter was virtually paraphrasing the opening passage of the column written Tuesday by conservative pundit George Will in the *Washington Post*, denouncing charges that the political right had moral responsibility for the Tucson shootings.

"It would be merciful if, when tragedies such as Tucson's occur, there were a moratorium on sociology," Will wrote. "The craving is for banishing randomness and the inexplicable from human experience."

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Obama went on to repudiate those among his liberal supporters who have pointed to the role of right-wing ideology in inspiring the Tucson massacre, calling for “a good dose of humility, rather than pointing fingers and assigning blame.”

The conclusion of his remarks was an attempt to cover up the deepening social tensions in America and present a saccharine picture of US political life that is entirely divorced from reality.

He called on his audience to “sharpen our instincts for empathy,” to show greater “kindness and compassion” and to ask “whether our priorities are in order.”

His final appeal to create a better America was entirely empty of any content. There was no reference to the actual problems confronting the American people—two wars, permanent and growing mass unemployment, extremes of great wealth and mass poverty, decay of social infrastructure, attacks on democratic rights.

Nor did he mention the most recent measures taken by Obama and Congress: extending tax cuts for the wealthy while rejecting any action to provide jobs for the unemployed, alleviate social suffering or bail out bankrupt state and local governments. Contrary to his invocation of America as one big family, it is a society with an unbridgeable class divide between the financial aristocracy and the working people.

The political response to the Tucson massacre has unfolded in a completely predictable manner. The Republicans and the ultra-right media are in attack mode and don’t back down, proceeding, instead, with ever greater arrogance and hysteria.

The Democrats are cowardly and evasive, forswearing or quickly abandoning any suggestion that the right wing should be held responsible for the direction of Jared Lee Loughner’s attack.

But on a more fundamental level, both parties and the entire ruling elite come together to cover up the social context of this crime. The title given to the memorial service, “Together We Thrive: Tucson and America,” could serve as a monument to the complacency being spread by the entire political establishment. If there is one thing that is not happening in Tucson—or in America—it is “thriving.”

The city and the country are both mired in the deepest economic slump since the Great Depression. A few figures suffice to indicate the scale of the crisis. Tucson has an unemployment rate that topped 9.2 percent during the summer, with more than 40,000 people currently out of work.

Arizona has the second highest poverty rate among the 50 states, 21.2 percent, and Tucson has the highest poverty rate of any city in the state. The median household income in Tucson is 28 percent below the national average, while the per capita income is 26 percent below the national average.

Barely 45 percent of the people of Arizona have private health insurance, with 20 percent on Medicaid and 13 percent on Medicare. Twenty percent of the population of Arizona, more than 1.3 million people, have no health insurance coverage.

More than 70,000 homes were foreclosed in Arizona in 2010, up from only 1,000 five years ago.

Mr. Will notwithstanding, there is no ban on sociology in a serious analysis of the Tucson massacre. On the contrary, only by placing this event in its social context is it possible to grasp what drove Jared Lee Loughner to his murderous attack.

Beyond his specific political views—which were a confused mix of right-wing nostrums—his mental state was clearly a product and manifestation of deep social alienation. Loughner reportedly had not received a paycheck in six months, had been terminated from at least five jobs, and had filed unsuccessful applications for employment at more than 60 low-wage retail outlets.

Under conditions of a capitalist social order that deals with the unemployed—and the mentally ill—in cold and inhuman fashion, and a ruling class that glorifies violence and practices it more widely and brutally than any other on the planet, events such as those which took place January 8 in Tucson are inevitable.

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