

Arizona shooting: Wild west politics

Every Republican and media loudmouth who has flirted with insurrectionary rhetoric should examine their consciences

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Faced with a terrible event like [the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona](#), it is important neither to leap to cute conspiratorial conclusions nor to be in any way naive about the circumstances in which such things can happen. The [United States](#) is not the only country in which politicians are at risk of their lives. Think [Sweden](#), think the Netherlands, think Russia, never mind Iraq, Israel, India, Ireland or, [only last week, Pakistan](#).

Pause to think, too, before vaulting into the tempting comfort of doom-laden pontificating about the dangers of armed mad people in America, about [three Conservative MPs murdered by the IRA](#) in the not so distant past, or about [Stephen Timms, the Labour MP who was shockingly stabbed by a constituent](#) in east London last year when he, just like Ms Giffords at the weekend, was doing his job, listening to his voters' problems. Sometimes even heirs to the throne are at risk from dangerous people.

But what happened in Tucson cannot be brushed aside as one of those things that could happen to anyone in public life anywhere. It happened to an articulate, moderate, pro-business, pro-gun, female Democrat in the United States at a time of deepening and increasingly obsessive partisan polarisation. The US already had a distinctive history of political violence in the modern era. The assassinations of the 1960s, the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 and a series of attacks on abortion clinics have all been evidence of the readiness of a small but significant group of mainly male, mainly white, mainly rightwing, mainly religious conservative Americans to use lawless, lethal violence against real or imagined examples of political movements or institutions by which they deem themselves threatened. Now Congresswoman Giffords and the score of people who were shot with her in Tucson are their latest victims, gunned down in the 21st-century wild west.

It is too early to say with certainty that the Tucson shooter was linked to or even inspired by [the reckless rhetoric](#) that now marks American politics and which has helped swing the new Congress decisively away from Ms Giffords' Democrats. What is clear, though, is that every Republican and media loudmouth who has flirted with insurrectionary rhetoric – and a lot have – should examine their consciences. It is hard to disagree with [Sheriff Clarence Dupnik in Tucson](#), who lamented after the shooting that "the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous". In many countries, an event like this might shock the political class into collective determination to change the tone. It is a measure of how different American politics has now become that it is hard to expect any such thing.