Behind the Arizona Shootings: Correcting Three Misalignments

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As the public absorbs the news about the Arizona shooting rampage that targeted Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, some key points stand out. The shootings seem to have been politically motivated, given what we know of the mindset of Jared Loughner, the young man charged with the crimes. They occurred in the unusually rancorous political climate of Arizona, where vituperation has been boiling up around issues of immigration, race, healthcare reform, abortion, and the economy. Is there a connection? Does inflammatory rhetoric incite deadly violence?

Looking around the world, we're forced to admit that it does. We're accustomed to seeing the mean-words / mean-actions connection in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. But we've been lulled into thinking that somehow America is different, that global cause-and-effect forces don't apply to us or that *our own* toxic speech is actually quite harmless.

That collective stupor is finally breaking up. Thoughtful commentators and politicians across the country see the link between vitriolic discourse and deadly outcomes. Across the board, there are calls for cooling the outrage and creating a more civil society.

But how? It's one thing to decry political thuggery, talk-radio invective, and the weapons-based imagery of crosshairs, enemies, and armies that arose during the 2010 election cycle. It's another to rebuild our crumbling civility. That crumbling involves far more than a lone young man with gripes against the government — or a single member of Congress with unpopular positions. There's a bigger picture here. To recapture our public comity, we need to correct three basic misalignments: between campaigning and governing, between reporting and opinion, and between ethics and integrity.

1. The campaigning/governing gap. It's well known that excellent campaigners can be terrible legislators — and vice versa. Some of the attributes that, sadly, succeed on the campaign trail — fierce competitiveness, from-the-hip counterattack, grandiose aphorisms, careless promises, and the easy egotism of an all-about-me conversational style — are losers in the cooperative and collegial processes of lawmaking.

In the past, the space between campaigns — even if only a scant two years — allowed incumbents to shift back into legislative mode. But today's incumbents face a voracious 24/7 media cycle that gives them little space for reflection. They're also up against the daunting costs of re-election and the incessant dialing for dollars required of every member of Congress. Result: Campaigning has replaced governing as their dominant activity. Little wonder so much legislation stalls out. If members are constantly in attack mode, what opportunity arises for the compromise and negotiation so central to the legislative process?

Lesson One: The more we learn to distinguish mere campaigning from real governing, the more we'll tolerate only brief seasons of campaigning — and demand much more level, reasoned, and balanced conversation the rest of the time.

2. The reporting/opinion gulf. If claws-out campaign talk always followed a rational examination of the facts on both sides, it might have a scrap of legitimacy. But the decade has seen a severe deterioration of our ability to get the facts. Much of the media, and most of the blogosphere, have replaced *news* with *views*. Our political discussions, in particular, give voice to individuals who have never had to investigate more than one side of any issue. Held to no standards of fact gathering, having no obligation to fairness and balance, they simply opine on their biases.

What's wrong with that? Simply that today's opiners often are unequipped to grasp and refute the opposing position. Unable to respond intelligently to a thoughtful, penetrating critique of their own stance, they sink into bluster, rant, and attack. That doesn't mean they need to avoid contentious issues or become sicky-sweet nice. They simply need to know the issues well enough that they can discuss ideas rather than lob opinions.

Lesson Two: To restore civility in political discourse, we need to engender a healthy respect for fact-based reporting.

3. The ethics/integrity disconnect. Oddly enough, the downward trend into nasty discourse has appeared just as ethics has been rising in public interest. Is there a connection? Yes, if *ethics* is seen only as telling right from wrong. If, as an opinionator, I'm convinced of my own moral rectitude, chances are I'll use *ethics* as a stick to beat my opponents — because I'm "right" and they're "wrong." In an age of oversimplification, this misuse of ethics drives public discourse deeper into bigotry and self-righteousness.

Integrity, by contrast, understands that the public-policy arena contains very few right-versus-wrong issues. It's filled instead with tough choices where both sides are right. That fact doesn't make us hopelessly indecisive. Instead, it helps us recognize that our opponents are right while we argue convincing for a higher right on our side. With that mindset, we don't have to fear that compromise will force us to cozy up to wrongdoers. Instead, it leads us to agree with much of another person's right argument — for the sake of reaching a fair legislative outcome.

Lesson Three: Those who see politics only as a right-versus-wrong endeavor may never compromise. Yet compromise, if it grows out of a right-versus-right mindset, is one of the highest forms of integrity.

Last weekend's events should cause some deep national soul-searching. We know the problem. We now need to address the misalignments that created it.