

# THE SHOOTING OF GABRIELLE GIFFORDS

## Introduction

### Focus

In January 2011, another U.S. gun rampage made international headlines. This *News in Review* story looks at the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords and a number of her constituents at a meet-and-greet gathering in Tucson, Arizona.

### Vocabulary

The Tea Party is a political movement in the United States that promotes very conservative ideals like reduced taxation and less government debt, and prefers a literal interpretation of the U.S. Constitution.

On January 8, 2011, Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was hosting a community event in an Arizona mall. As she visited with community members, a man walked up to her, pointed a semi-automatic pistol at her head, and shot her at point-blank range. The gunman, Jared Lee Loughner, then opened fire on the crowd, firing 31 rounds from his weapon. When he stopped to reload, bystanders jumped in and wrestled him to the ground. But the damage was done. Loughner had killed six and injured 14 others. A nine-year-old girl and a federal judge were among the dead.

Miraculously Giffords survived the attack despite the fact that a bullet had sliced through her brain. Within days doctors were predicting she had a good chance at recovery, although no one could say what type of long-term damage she might have suffered. At the time this guide went to print, Giffords had been moved into a rehabilitation facility where she would receive around-the-clock care.

Almost immediately, observers began directing some of the blame for the shooting at Sarah Palin and the Tea Party. The political climate in the United States, and the state of Arizona in particular, had grown particularly volatile in the run-up to the U.S. mid-term elections. Politicians had begun adopting violent language, with former vice presidential candidate and Tea Party advocate Palin

implored her followers: “don’t retreat—RELOAD.” Palin was also criticized for a campaign poster that she put on her Facebook page. The poster showed a map of the U.S. with 20 electoral districts seen as too liberal by the Tea Party highlighted in the crosshairs of a rifle’s scope. Giffords’ district was one of the 20. Many wondered if the violent language and imagery of U.S. politics had gotten out of hand.

In the meantime, Loughner was taken into custody. His mug shot showed a wild-eyed, head-shaved youth with a sinister smile on his face. It quickly became apparent that Loughner was deeply disturbed and likely suffering from a serious mental illness. Investigators dug up some of Loughner’s Internet postings, all of which indicated a disjointed worldview involving conspiracy theories and mind control. Friends say he harboured a grudge against Giffords after the congresswoman failed to adequately answer a question put to her by Loughner at a public meeting in 2007. The question: “What is government if words have no meaning?”

In the aftermath of the shooting, many were left to wonder if the hostile climate of U.S. politics influenced Loughner to open fire at Giffords’ community event that tragic Saturday morning in Tucson.

## To Consider

1. Do you think people can be pushed into violent action by listening to violent messages or opinions? Or do you think mental illness is the cause of this type of violence? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think political attacks, like those taken by Sarah Palin, can go too far?

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## Video Review

### Further Research

Google “Gabrielle Giffords” to get an update on her recovery.

### Before Viewing

The U.S. Constitution claims the inalienable right of all its citizens to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There are 27 amendments tacked onto the original Constitution, the first 10 of which comprise the Bill of Rights. U.S. citizens frequently refer to these amendments when defending their rights. The video deals with aspects of two of these amendments. Generally speaking they are the First Amendment, which guarantees the right to free speech, and the Second Amendment, which guarantees the right to bear arms.

1. In your opinion, how important are these rights?

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2. Why do you think Canadians do not have the guaranteed right to bear arms?

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3. How might these rights be misused?

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### Viewing Questions

Respond to the questions below in the spaces provided.

1. a) What happened to Gabrielle Giffords on the morning of January 8, 2011?

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b) How serious was the injury she suffered?

2. Who was charged after the shooting spree?

3. a) What evidence was there that the shooter had lost touch with reality?

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b) What was his math teacher’s greatest fear?

4. How did Giffords react to Sarah Palin’s targeted list that put her in the crosshairs of a Republican plan to unseat her from Congress?

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5. What was Sheriff Clarence Dupnik referring to when he said, "The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. That may be free speech, but it's not without consequences"?

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6. Write down one of the inflammatory comments made by U.S. talk-radio hosts.

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7. What is meant by the expression "pursuing Second Amendment remedies"?

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8. Why is it unlikely that the U.S. will pass laws to prevent people from saying things that may incite hatred and violence?

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9. Why do some experts believe assassinations are more prevalent in the U.S. than in any other G8 country?

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10. How common are guns in Canada?

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11. What lessons are some Canadian political strategists trying to learn from the current U.S. political situation?

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12. How common are serious threats against Canadian politicians?

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13. How do police determine if a threat is real?

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## After Viewing

1. Before viewing the documentary you took a look at some of the amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Has your opinion surrounding these rights changed since viewing this *News in Review* story? Provide details to support your answer.

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2. When taken into custody Jared Loughner utilized another constitutional amendment. He chose to invoke the Fifth Amendment. This guarantees a citizen the right to remain silent. At the time this guide went to print, Loughner had not spoken to authorities since his arrest.

- a) Why would this right have been added to the U.S. constitution?

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- b) Do you agree that people should have this right? Why or why not?

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## *Rampage at a Suburban Shopping Mall*

### Further Research

Learn more about mental illness by visiting the Web site of the Canadian Mental Health Association at [www.cmha.ca/bins/index.asp](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/index.asp).

### Reading Prompt

Authors commonly get a reader's attention with a "hook." A hook is a literary device that draws a reader into a story before getting into the actual narrative of what happened. A hook is commonly used to start a story. Read the following material and determine if the hook actually draws you into the story.

### The Death of Hope

Christina Taylor-Green was a vibrant 9-year-old girl who had just won a spot on her school's student council. She was mature and engaging. She was born on September 11, 2001, and was featured in a book called *Faces of Hope: Babies Born on 9/11*. Christina's parents felt the book title fit their daughter perfectly and, while the U.S. mourned on the day of her birth, her parents felt Christina was proof that some good had happened on that terrifying day. Her interest in politics had prompted her neighbour, Susan Hileman, to invite her to meet a local congresswoman at a political event one Saturday morning in January 2011.

What Susan Hileman didn't know was that her well-intentioned plan to introduce Christina to Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was on a collision course with Jared Loughner's plan to murder the politician and anyone else who dared to show up at her Congress on Your Corner event. Shortly after 10 a.m. Loughner walked straight up to Giffords and fired a bullet into her head. Then he turned on the crowd and emptied the remaining 30 bullets of his Glock 19 semi-automatic weapon. Young Christina Taylor-Green was among the victims. She clung to life briefly but was pronounced dead on arrival at hospital.

### What Happened?

The night before Jared Loughner went on a shooting rampage that killed six and left 14 others wounded, he left a voice-mail for a friend where he basically

said goodbye. Then, shortly after four the next morning he posted a note on his Myspace page saying goodbye and asking people not to be mad at him. About three hours later he drove to a Walmart store and attempted to buy ammunition for his gun. For whatever reason, the clerk refused, so Loughner went down the road and bought ammunition at another Walmart.

On his way home from the store, Loughner was pulled over for running a red light. A background check indicated no outstanding warrants against him, so he was let off with a warning. Not long after arriving home, his father saw him take a black bag out of the family car. When asked about the contents of the bag, Loughner grew agitated and ran away from the house. His father followed him in the car but couldn't find him.

Loughner resurfaced shortly after 9:30 that morning when he caught a taxi to the mall where Giffords was about to stage her Congress on Your Corner event. He entered the Safeway grocery store with the taxi driver so he could get change to pay for his fare. Once he settled things up with the cabby, he made his way outside.

Meanwhile, just before the event started Giffords sent a Twitter message to her constituents asking them to stop by and let her know what was on their minds. About 10 minutes later Loughner walked up to Giffords and shot her in the head. In the space of just over 10 seconds he shot and killed six people and wounded 14 others.

Loughner wasn't done. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another 31-round magazine for his pistol. Before he could reload, a man struck him with a folding chair while two other men lunged at him. Meanwhile 61-year-old Patricia Maisch alertly ripped the Glock magazine out of his hands. The heroic bystanders held the crazed gunman until the police arrived minutes later.

### **The Immediate Aftermath**

Miraculously, Gabrielle Giffords survived the attack. One of her aids is credited with saving her life by immediately applying pressure to her head wound. She was rushed to hospital and underwent emergency brain surgery. While doctors are optimistic, they are quick to point out that recovery from a brain injury of this magnitude is long-term and complicated. The other injured were treated and released.

Meanwhile Christina Taylor-Green, a federal judge, a Giffords staffer, and three senior citizens were dead.

### **Assassination or Mass Murder?**

It didn't take investigators long to determine that Loughner had intentionally targeted Giffords. Notes retrieved from a safe in his house showed that he had planned ahead and wanted to assassinate Giffords. Police also found a letter sent to Loughner after he attended a Congress on Your Corner event in

2007. Friends told police that Giffords' inability to adequately answer a question put to her by Loughner is what started his long-standing grudge against her.

Investigators also discovered that Loughner was a very unstable young man. Just a few months before the attack, Loughner was visited at his home by campus police from Pima Community College, where he had been a student. He was told he could not return to school until he received a psychological evaluation that demonstrated that he wasn't a threat to himself or others. This came after campus police had to deal with disturbances caused by Loughner on several occasions, prompting one student to write in an e-mail, "We have a mentally unstable person in the class that scares the living crap out of me. He is one of those whose picture you see on the news, after he has come into class with an automatic weapon" (*Washington Post*, January 9, 2011).

What makes the attack in Tucson different from most mass shootings is that it blended the targeting of an individual with an attack on innocent bystanders, leaving many to wonder if this was an assassination, a mass murder, or both.

To the parents of Christina Taylor-Green, labelling the shooting spree meant little. Their little girl, born on a notorious day, died a notorious death. This face of hope deserved better.

### **To Consider**

1. What is the author trying to make the reader feel in the opening hook?
2. What evidence is there that Loughner planned his attack on Giffords?
3. What evidence is there that Loughner may have been suffering from a mental illness?

# THE SHOOTING OF GABRIELLE GIFFORDS

## *The Shooter: Was He Mentally Ill?*

### Did you know . . .

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), schizophrenia is a psychotic disorder that involves delusions and/or hallucinations, a lack of motivation, social withdrawal, and distorted thoughts and feelings.

### Definition

*Nihilism*: total rejection of established laws and institutions. An extreme form of skepticism: the denial of all real existence.

### Before Reading

Some mental health professionals believe that Jared Loughner suffers from schizophrenia. What do you know about the disease? What other mental illnesses are you aware of? Why does society view mental illness differently from physical illness?

### Prelude to a Massacre

If friends had checked Jared Loughner's Myspace page early on the morning of January 8, 2011, they would have read the following: "Goodbye friends. Please don't be mad at me. The literacy rate is below 5 per cent. I haven't talked to one person who is literate. I want to make it out alive. The longest war in the history of the United States. Goodbye. I'm saddened with the current currency and job employment. I had a bully at school. Thank you. P.S.—plead the fifth!" (ABC News – KGUN Tucson, [www.kgun9.com](http://www.kgun9.com)).

It is not really clear what friends would have understood from Loughner's ramblings. Maybe they would have thought he was losing his mind or he was high on drugs. Maybe they would have thought that the troubled young man was about to kill himself. Few could have predicted that Loughner was on the verge of mass murder.

He posted the comment at 4:12 a.m. Six hours later—almost to the minute—Loughner was being wrestled to the ground after shooting a politician and then turning his Glock semi-automatic pistol on a crowd of people outside a grocery store in Tucson, Arizona.

### Descent Into Mental Illness

As investigators dove deeper into the life of Jared Loughner they discovered a young man who had slowly lost his grip on reality. Some feel the descent began after a break-up with a girlfriend in high school. Others felt that he really

began to fall apart in the year before the shooting, becoming increasingly volatile and disoriented in the months preceding the shooting.

His time at Pima Community College in the year before the shooting showed that he was seriously disturbed. Campus police were called to deal with him on five occasions, mostly for outbursts in class. In one incident he interrupted his math teacher and claimed that the number the teacher wrote on the board was really another number. On a test for the same math teacher he didn't answer a single question. Students complained to school officials that Loughner's behaviour was both bizarre and terrifying. The last straw for the Pima Community College administration came when Loughner posted a bizarre YouTube video accusing the school of going against the U.S. Constitution and committing genocide. This marked the end of Loughner's college career. He was told he couldn't return to school until he received psychological counselling and demonstrated that he would not cause harm to himself or others.

### Conspiracy Theories

Around the same time, Loughner became obsessed with conspiracy-theory Web sites and began adopting a bizarre nihilistic philosophy that called for a new currency as well as the claim that the U.S. government was exercising mind control over its citizens. In fact, Loughner posted several incoherent videos on YouTube espousing these ideas.



## **Buying a Glock**

In November 2010, Loughner walked into a Sportsman's Warehouse retail store in Tucson and legally purchased a Glock 19 semi-automatic weapon. Despite the incidents at Pima College, store employees discovered no outstanding police warrants and no evidence of treatment in a mental health facility when they ran the mandatory background check on Loughner. Technically, they were not in a position to keep him from buying a gun. Loughner walked out of the store with the Glock and, a little over a month later, had Giffords and the rest of his victims in his sights.

## **The Aftermath of the Shooting**

In the moments after the shooting, Loughner was tackled and disarmed by four bystanders. He had emptied one of his 31-round magazines and was getting

set to reload when the bystanders stepped in. Police found two more magazines belonging to him when they took him into custody.

Meanwhile, mental health professionals combing over the Loughner story seem to have come to a general consensus that the young man is suffering from schizophrenia. His behaviour fits the classic pattern: adolescent anti-social behaviour, turning increasingly reclusive, beginning to adopt an incoherent and delusional worldview. While the overwhelming majority of people with schizophrenia never turn to violence, the occasional one does. Tragically, Loughner—schizophrenic or not—took a violent and devastating path that left six dead, a U.S. politician fighting to regain her health, and scores of others left scarred by what happened that day.

## **To Consider**

1. Do you think Loughner's Myspace message was a clear warning that he was about to go on a shooting spree?
2. Why did Pima Community College feel compelled to kick Loughner out of school?
3. What do you think should have been done to prevent Loughner from walking into a store and purchasing a semi-automatic weapon?
4. If it is determined that Loughner suffers from schizophrenia, should he be found not guilty for the shooting?



# THE SHOOTING OF GABRIELLE GIFFORDS

## *Political Dissension*

### Did you know . . .

Gabrielle Giffords staged dozens of Congress on Your Corner events in Tucson over the course of her first four years in Congress. Most of them involved her simply setting up a table in front of a store and answering questions brought forward by her constituents.

### Question Before Reading

What do you think of when people refer to someone as a “rising star?” What qualities do you expect the person to have? How successful do you expect the person to be?

### Gabrielle Giffords

Gabrielle Giffords was considered a rising star in the Democratic caucus prior to Jared Loughner’s shooting rampage at her Congress on Your Corner event. *The New York Times* predicted that Giffords could one day run for governor of Arizona, while more than a few political insiders claimed that Giffords was presidential material. Now she is on a long road of healing and rehabilitation after a bullet from a Glock cut through her brain.

### Intelligent and Inclusive

Giffords was considered a promising young politician because she managed to convey a message that was both intelligent and inclusive. Originally a Republican, Giffords switched to the Democrats in 1999 and ran for state government in 2000. She served in the Arizona legislature and senate before making the jump to federal politics in 2006.

Her successful bid to win a seat in Congress came at a time when politics was becoming increasingly volatile in Arizona. She came out with strong positions on immigration and increased border security. She witnessed the onset of the financial crisis and voted in favour of President Obama’s economic recovery bill. What drew the ire of most her critics was her support of Obama’s health-care reform bill. Shortly after voting in favour of the bill her Tucson offices were vandalized.

### Blue Dog Democrat

Giffords is considered to be a “Blue Dog Democrat.” The Blue Dogs are moderates who hold centrist political views. For example, Giffords espouses political ideals that are both from the right side of the political spectrum (gun rights and fiscal restraint) and the left side (pro-embryonic stem cell research and advocacy for renewable energy). The Blue Dogs are not afraid to vote against their party if they believe their moderate principles will be put in jeopardy.

### Responding to Palin

Meanwhile, her support for health-care reform put her on the Tea Party’s hit list. Sarah Palin’s now-infamous Facebook poster showed a map of the U.S. with 20 electoral districts in the crosshairs of a gun. Included among the targeted districts was Giffords’.

Giffords was worried about the deterioration of political discourse in the U.S. and, after the release of Palin’s crosshairs poster, felt compelled to fight back. In an appearance on MSNBC she said, “Community leaders, figures in our community need to say ‘look, we can’t stand for this’ . . . [F]or example, we’re on Sarah Palin’s targeted list. But the thing is that the way that she has it depicted has the crosshairs of a gun sight over our district. And when people do that, they’ve got to realize there’s consequences to that action” MSNBC ([www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/36033690#36033690](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/36033690#36033690)). Those words took on new meaning after Loughner’s attack.

**Definition**

*Rhetoric*: the undue use of exaggeration or display

**Nasty Politics**

Giffords' concern over the tone of politics also came into focus in her bid to keep her seat in Congress. Her opponent, Tea Party member and Republican Jerry Kelly, went after Giffords with reckless abandon. At one point, he advertized a public appearance at a shooting range with this message: "Get on Target for Victory in November[.] Help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office[.] Shoot a fully automatic M15 with Jesse Kelly" (*Guardian News*, "The Targeting of Gabrielle Giffords" January 9, 2011, [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)). Giffords defeated Kelly in a tight race that saw her prevail by a slim 4 000-vote margin.

**Scathing Rhetoric**

In a news conference after the attack on Giffords and her constituents, Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik got international attention when he said that Americans need to do some serious soul-searching because the scathing rhetoric of politics, espoused daily on radio and television talk shows, was inciting bigotry and hatred. This set off a firestorm of political debate, with those on the left claiming that the violent imagery of the right inspired the shooting

and those on the right claiming that Giffords was shot by a madman, not by a renegade apostle inspired by their words. Trying to restore calm, President Obama offered a more balanced perspective, telling those gathered at a prayer service for the victims of the shooting, "For the truth is that none of us can know exactly what triggered this vicious attack. None of us can know with any certainty what might have stopped those shots from being fired, or what thoughts lurked in the inner recesses of a violent man's mind" (ABC News, January 12, 2011, Transcript: Obama speech addresses tragedy in Tucson).

**Giffords' Recovery**

While the debate between the political left and right raged on, Gabrielle Giffords continued to show promising signs of recovery. She was able to restore some movement in her body and began to say some words. Eventually she was moved to a rehabilitation facility in Houston, Texas. Doctors are optimistic but are uncertain as to the extent of her recovery. One can only hope that Giffords, the rising star cut down by an assassin's bullet, can see her star rise again.

**Analysis**

1. Make a point-form list outlining Gabrielle Giffords' political life.
2. How did Giffords handle the controversy surrounding Sarah Palin's crosshairs poster?
3. What debate did Sheriff Dupnik seem to set off with his comments at a news conference?
4. How did President Obama try to calm the situation after the debate between the left and the right intensified?
5. What is your opinion about the impact of political rhetoric? Can it inflame someone to violence? Does it lead to a culture of disrespect?

# THE SHOOTING OF GABRIELLE GIFFORDS

## *Activity: Media Analysis*

The Canadian media often respond to mass shootings like the one targeting Gabrielle Giffords as evidence of gun-crazed Americans wreaking havoc on their own people. Certainly, the entertainment that people in the U.S. and Canada consume might be an indication that North American society is fascinated by gunplay. For example, a month after the attack in Tucson, the most popular television shows in the United States and Canada were as follows:

Top 10 Television Shows in the U.S. February 6-13	Top 10 Television Shows in Canada February 6-13
1. Grammy Awards 2. American Idol – Wednesday 3. NCIS 4. American Idol – Thursday 5. NCIS: Los Angeles 6. Two and a Half Men 7. The Mentalist 8. Criminal Minds 9. CSI 10. Modern Family Source: Neilson ( <a href="http://www.nielsen.com/us/en">www.nielsen.com/us/en</a> )	1. Grammy Awards 2. Big Bang Theory 3. American Idol 4. Criminal Minds 5. The Mentalist 6. Two and a Half Men 7. HNIC Game #1: Toronto vs. Montreal 8. \$#! My Dad Says 9. Grey’s Anatomy 10. Glee and House Source: BBM Canada ( <a href="http://bbm.ca">http://bbm.ca</a> )

### **Step One: Current Media Analysis**

Take a look at the list of shows indicated above. Of the top 10 shows, how many of them deal with violent themes, murder, or gunplay? What conclusions can be drawn from the prevalence of violent themes on the lists? What do the lists suggest about the differences between Canadian and U.S. audiences?

### **Step Two: Personal Media Analysis**

1. Make your own top-10 lists of:  
Television shows  
Movies  
Video games
2. Determine which shows, movies, or video games depict themes of violence, murder, or gunplay.
3. What does your list suggest about the types of entertainment you like to consume? Did the outcome of your analysis make you want to change your viewing or playing patterns?

### **Step Three: Reflection**

Respond to the following statement in a thoughtfully written 250-500-word reflection:

*While it would be too simplistic to suggest that the glorification of the gun in the media directly influenced Jared Loughner’s murder spree, it might not be unfair to suggest that North America’s pre-occupation with guns contributes to violence within society.*

You can support or challenge the statement.