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Bloodshed Puts New Focus on Vitriol in Politics

By CARL HULSE and KATE ZERNIKE

WASHINGTON — The shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords and others at a neighborhood meeting in Arizona on Saturday set off what is likely to be a wrenching debate over anger and violence in American politics.

While the exact motivations of the suspect in the shootings remained unclear, an Internet site tied to the man, Jared Lee Loughner, contained antigovernment ramblings. And regardless of what led to the episode, it quickly focused attention on the degree to which inflammatory language, threats and implicit instigations to violence have become a steady undercurrent in the nation's political culture.

Clarence W. Dupnik, the Pima County sheriff, seemed to capture the mood of the day at an evening news conference when he said it was time for the country to “do a little soul-searching.”

“It’s not unusual for all public officials to get threats constantly, myself included,” Sheriff Dupnik said. “That’s the sad thing about what’s going on in America: pretty soon we’re not going to be able to find reasonable, decent people willing to subject themselves to serve in public office.”

In the hours immediately after the shooting of Ms. Giffords, a Democrat, and others in a supermarket parking lot in Tucson, members of both parties found rare unity in their sorrow. Top Republicans including Speaker John A. Boehner and Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona quickly condemned the violence.

“An attack on one who serves is an attack on all who serve,” Mr. Boehner said in a statement. “Acts and threats of violence against public officials have no place in our society.”

President Obama made a brief appearance at the White House, calling the shooting an “unspeakable act” and promising to “get to the bottom of this.”

Not since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 has an event generated as much attention as to whether extremism, antigovernment sentiment and even simple political passion at both ends of the ideological spectrum have created a climate promoting violence. The fallout seemed to hold the potential to upend the effort by Republicans to keep their agenda front and center in the new Congress and to alter the political narrative in other ways.

The House was set to vote Wednesday on the new Republican majority's proposal to repeal the health care law that had energized their supporters and ignited opposition from the Tea Party movement. Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the new majority

leader, said Saturday that the vote and other planned legislative activity would be postponed.

The original health care legislation stirred strong feelings that flared at angry town hall meetings held by many Democratic lawmakers during the summer of 2009. And there has been broader anger and suspicion rising about the government, its finances and its goals, with the discourse partially fueled by talk shows and Web sites.

Tea Party activists also condemned the shooting. Judson Phillips, the founder of Tea Party Nation, noted on his Web site that Ms. Giffords is “a liberal,” but added, “that does not matter now. No one should be a victim of violence because of their political beliefs.”

But others said it was hard to separate what had happened from the heated nature of the debate that has swirled around Mr. Obama and Democratic policies of the past two years.

“It is fair to say — in today’s political climate, and given today’s political rhetoric — that many have contributed to the building levels of vitriol in our political discourse that have surely contributed to the atmosphere in which this event transpired,” said a statement issued by the leaders of the National Jewish Democratic Council. Ms. Giffords is the first Jewish woman elected to the House from her state.

During last spring’s health care votes, the language used against some lawmakers was ratcheted up again, with protesters outside the House hurling insults and slurs. The offices of some Democrats, including Ms. Giffords’s in Tucson, were vandalized.

Ms. Giffords was also among a group of Democratic House candidates featured on the Web site of Sarah Palin’s political action committee with cross hairs over their districts, a fact that disturbed Ms. Giffords at the time.

“We’re on Sarah Palin’s targeted list,” Ms. Giffords said last March. “But the thing is the way that she has it depicted has the cross hairs of a gun sight over our district. When people do that, they’ve got to realize there’s consequences to that.”

The image is no longer on the Web site, and Ms. Palin posted a statement saying “my sincere condolences are offered to the family of Representative Gabrielle Giffords and the other victims of today’s tragic shooting in Arizona. On behalf of Todd and my family, we all pray for the victims and their families, and for peace and justice.” (Late Saturday, the map was still on Ms. Palin’s Facebook page.)

Democrats have also pointed out cases where Republican candidates seemed to raise the prospect of armed revolt if Washington did not change its ways.

But many Republicans have noted that they too are subject to threats and abuse, and during the health care fight some suggested Democrats were trying to cut off responsible opposition and paint themselves as victims.

Sensitive to the issue, Tea Party activists in Arizona said they quickly reviewed their membership lists to check whether the suspect, Mr. Loughner, was associated with them. They said they found no evidence that he was.

Tea Party members in Tucson had disagreed sharply with Ms. Giffords, particularly as the health care debate unfolded, but she ended up backing the measure despite the political risks. They strongly supported her opponent, Jesse Kelly, in the November election, and staged several protests outside her office.

DeAnn Hatch, a co-founder of the Tucson Tea Party, said her group had never staged any rallies against the congresswoman elsewhere, and she did not believe there were any Tea Party protesters at the event Saturday.

“I want to strongly, strongly say we absolutely do not advocate violence,” she said. “This is just a tragedy to no end.”

But others said it would be hard to separate this shooting from the ideological clash.

“At a time like this, it is terrible that we do have to think about politics, but no matter what the shooter’s motivations were, the left is going to blame this on the Tea Party movement,” Mr. Phillips, from Tea Party Nation, said on his Web site.

“While we need to take a moment to extend our sympathies to the families of those who died, we cannot allow the hard left to do what it tried to do in 1995 after the Oklahoma City bombing,” he wrote. “Within the entire political spectrum, there are extremists, both on the left and the right. Violence of this nature should be decried by everyone and not used for political gain.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 8, 2011

An earlier version of this article misstated the year when Democratic lawmakers held town hall meetings about the health care legislation. It was 2009, not 2007.