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I'm Okay, You're Criminally Insane: Life in a Neurotic Fear State

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I'm okay, you're criminally insane

Michael I. Niman finds a direct line between the shooting of an Arizona congresswoman and the creation of a neurotic fear state

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I'm going to keep this one simple. We all know the basic story. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, an increasingly rare Arizona Democrat, was critically shot through the head by a wannabe assassin wielding a machine gun which he bought after being suspended from his community college due to behavioral issues. And we know the backstory. Giffords was one of 20 Democratic members of Congress "targeted" for defeat with crosshairs over her district on Sarah Palin's graphic hit-list map. Eighteen of the targets were unseated in the 2010 election. Giffords was one of two to survive, until she was shot earlier this month, along with 19 others who joined her at a public event. Six are now dead. A few others are in critical condition. The shooter used an assault weapon designed to kill up to 33 "deer" in a single quick volley. Such weapons, or at least their ammunition clips, were illegal until a Republican-controlled Congress allowed the ban to expire in 2004.

There's been much written during the weeks since this tragedy. Most of it makes sense. Much of the discourse addresses our increasingly violent political rhetoric. It's not a loaded political statement to say that almost all of this violent rhetoric comes from the political right. It's easily quantifiable. Vitriol is a cheap substitute when empiricism fails your cause. The thousands of mediated calls we've heard this to tone

down the hate are decades overdue. Palin is nothing new. Reagan called for a "blood-bath" right before the historic Kent and Jackson State National Guard massacres of unarmed student antiwar protestors. Right-wing calls for violence against opponents they can't contend with intellectually have been unrelenting.

Take the case of journalist Julian Assange. In the weeks leading up to the Giffords shooting, Fox News (sic) commentator Bob Beckel called for shooting him. Conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg complained that he wasn't "garroted" or shot by "a CIA agent with a sniper rifle." His fellow syndicated columnist, William Kristol, suggested he should be "neutralized." The *Washington Times* ran a column under the headline, "Assassinate Assange." The list of right-wing wonks and politicians calling for Assange's murder grows by the week. Why are we surprised that someone who shares their political worldview would actually act in a way "respectable" people advocate?

Mixed in with all the logical, rational condemnation of violent rhetoric, however, is a bit of kneejerk lunacy. Take Republican New York Congressman Peter King – he wants to sponsor a law banning guns within 1,000 feet of government officials. This is akin to members of Congress reserving the public healthcare option just for themselves, or giving themselves raises when the economy

is tanking. Now the same folks who revoked the assault weapon ban want to ban assault weapons, and other guns, just around themselves, the rest of us be damned. This is the same Peter King, by the way, who just two months ago proposed designating the journalistic organization Wikileaks as a “foreign terrorist organization,” to be targeted much like al Qaeda. His gun ban, of course, won’t apply to journalists, unless, I suppose, they’re on the government payroll.

The King law, by the way, would be hell on cops, who would have to enforce such bans when, say, government officials – whatever that means – ride the subway or drive on freeways, perpetually moving their 1,000-foot-radius zones of tranquility across a population of concealed-carry zealots.

Republicans haven’t cornered the market on idiocy. Take Philadelphia’s Democratic Congressman Robert Brady. He recently announced plans to introduce a bill to criminalize the use of “language or symbols” that “could be perceived” as threatening to federal officials. This vague wording leaves the definition of what construes a “threat” to the obfuscated, unnamed source who could, as the passive voice reads, perceive it. Thanks, Representative Brady, for calling Big Brother in to protect us from language and symbols, free speech be damned. On his website, Brady clarifies his intent, explaining that this legislation “would make it a federal crime to make criminal threats against Members of Congress or their staff while performing official duties.” This from a member of Congress. Way to go, Philadelphia.

Got that? It will be a “crime to make criminal threats.” That’s because it’s already a crime to make threats. Only now, it will be a super-duper-bad double crime. Wow! Of course this law only pertains to threats against members of Congress, and only when they’re on the job. Threatening them, say, when they’re at the movies, would only be a normal crime. Unless maybe you use symbols, like a crosshair. Which brings us to the question, why can’t Brady just call

up Sarah Palin and get this shit off his chest and leave our damned constitutional rights to free speech alone? Of course, he better make this call quick, before his bill is enacted. But wait – Palin isn’t a member of Congress, so Brady can vent his spleen and then have Palin arrested when she responds – which, I hear, is an old Philadelphia tradition.

Moving right along, let’s look at former Clinton White House adviser William Galston’s column in the conservative *New Republic*. Galston, who pulls double-duty at the Brookings Institution, wants to re-write federal mental health laws in the wake of the Giffords shooting. Okay, the shooter was disturbed. That’s a given. He shot someone. Hence, according to Galston, we need to pass laws mandating that, as he puts it, “those who acquire credible evidence of an individual’s mental disturbance should be required to report it to both law enforcement authorities and the courts, and the legal jeopardy for failing to do so should be tough enough to ensure compliance.”

Put simply, the Giffords shooting is the fault of the shooter’s community college professors for not reporting his disorderly student conduct to authorities. Okay. The problem is, community college professors, like the rest of us, come in regular contact with a plethora of people every day who they think are disturbed. Ratting them out could turn into a full-time job. Sorting them out would be impossible, especially because we eliminated most mental health service providers a generation ago. And then there’s that whole new class of criminals: those who came in contact with a disturbed person and didn’t see that they were disturbed, didn’t rat them out, and hence face “legal jeopardy for failing to do so.”

This doesn’t deter Galston. Once they’ve been ratted out, he wants to make it easier to incarcerate those accused of being disturbed. As he puts it, “the law should no longer require, as a condition of involuntary incarceration, that seriously disturbed individuals constitute a danger to themselves

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DARK DEEDS

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or others, let alone a 'substantial' or 'imminent' danger, as many states do."

If you don't see a direct line between the Giffords shooting and the need to transform society into a neurotic fear state dominated by a mental health incarceration-industrial complex, I'm with you. This Galston guy seems a bit disturbed.

Which of course brings us back to Alaska governor turned Fox reality show host Sarah Palin – the star of 2011 so far, like it or not. She went public with her own delusion on the day the rest of the nation was mourning the 20 victims of the Giffords shooting melee. You see, forget them. As always, it's

all about Sarah Palin. Sarah Palin is the real victim – victim of the bad things people are saying about the bad things she's said and tweeted. To quote her, such slander is a "blood libel." The term commonly refers to the anti-Semitic mythology that Jews murder children in order to use their blood in religious rituals and the baking of Matzos. Did I mention that Gabrielle Giffords is Jewish?

Meanwhile, on Planet Earth...

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BENDIB'S WORLD

Khalil Bendib

