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The “Lock and Load” Rhetoric of American Politics Isn’t Just a Metaphor



By Marty Kaplan

I’m not saying that putting a bullseye on Arizona Democrat Rep. Gabrielle Giffords’ congressional race - as Sarah Palin did - was an explicit or intentional invitation to violence. Nor am I saying that the “Get on Target for Victory” events held by the guy Giffords beat - “Help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office Shoot a fully automatic M16 with Jesse Kelly” - was the reason her assassin went after her. This tragedy is still unfolding, and the questions of motive and incitement will be argued about for a long time to come.

But I am saying that the “lock and load”/“take up your arms” rhetoric of American politics isn’t just an overheated metaphor. For years, the language of sports has dominated political journalism, and discourse about hardball and the horserace and the rest of the macho athletic lexicon has been a factor in the trivialization of our public sphere. This has helped dumb down democracy, making a serious national discussion about anything important too wonky for words.

The “second amendment solution,” though, does something worse than make politics a branch of entertainment. It makes it a blood sport. I know politics ain’t beanbag. But words have consequences, rhetoric shapes reality, and much as we like to believe that we are creatures of reason, there is something about our species’ limbic system and lizard brainstems that makes us susceptible to irrational fantasies.

If you’re worried that violent video games may make kids prone to bad behavior; if you think that misogynic and homophobic rap lyrics are dangerous to society; if you believe that a nipple in a Superbowl halftime show is a threat to our moral fabric - then surely you should also fear that the way public and media figures have framed political participation with shooting gallery imagery is just as potentially lethal.

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