



**THE BLOG** 01/09/2011 09:01 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# The Vitriol in Our National Bloodstream



By Marty Kaplan

“Clarabelle Dopenik.” That’s what one wit on the popular conservative Web site freerepublic.com called Clarence Dupnik, the Pima County, Arizona sheriff who turns 75 this week. Elected continuously since 1980, he is the public face of the investigation into the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) and 19 others. He is also, according to bloggers on that site, “an incompetent unhinged sonofabitch” and “a jerk” “using this tragedy for baseless, cheap political shots.”

Sheriff Dupnik’s crime was decrying

*“the vitriolic rhetoric that we hear day in and day out from people in the radio business and some people in the TV business.... When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government — the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on this country is getting to be outrageous, and unfortunately Arizona has become sort of the capital.... People tend to pooh-pooh this business about all the vitriol we hear inflaming the American public by people who make a living off of doing that. That may be free speech, but it’s not without consequences.”*

The problem with Sheriff Dupnik’s calling out vitriol, blogged one conservative, was that it was actually “calling out Rush, Glen[n], Sean and Fox!!!!” Dupnik was, wrote another, “inciting violence accusing Rush, tea parties, Palin, and Republicans of bigotry and murder.”

What threatened the right the most was losing control of the national political narrative. Until the slayings in the Safeway parking lot, the master story had been the triumphant G.O.P. sweeping into Congress to repeal “the job-killing health care bill.” But as of Saturday, the new story connected the dots between the inflammatory rhetoric of McCain/Palin events in 2008, the ugly confrontations at congressional town halls in the summer of 2009, the “lock and load” cackling of the 2010 campaign - and the cultural climate of the Tucson murders. Within the space of a few hours, the story had been transformed from a revenge

narrative (Obama brought low) to a soul-searching meta-narrative: How has our society come to this season in hell, and what must be done to heal us?

The right's panic about this shift was palpable. Wrote one Free Republic commenter on the day of the shooting, "Right now, I would be interested to see the smart response from Republicans. If I was John Boehner, I would be in Arizona. As a speaker of the house, he needs to be there and meet the family before Obama goes to Arizona and gives a big speech to change the topic of the nations [sic]. Next 24 hrs is crucial till Glenn Beck and Rush come to air on Monday."

But there was no need to wait for Glenn and Rush to come to their narrative's rescue. Politico.com, a site widely read by journalists and politicians, soon reported that Sheriff Dupnik had "established himself as one of the leading liberal voices in a state that boasts only a handful... Local conservatives are quickly spinning his comments as those of a partisan." The headline of the Politico piece — "Liberal Ariz. sheriff Clarence Dupnik sees cause of violence" — eliminated any daylight between those local Republican spinners and the Beltway media channeling them. With Dupnik branded a liberal, the troubling thought that American public discourse had taken a wrong turn had been reduced to garden-variety lefty partisanship.

A *New York Times* columnist found another way to denature Sheriff Dupnik's condemnation of vitriol. He wrote that political leaders who cry "tyranny" and "socialism" aren't trying to incite hysteria; rather, they're "so amused with their own verbal flourishes and the ensuing applause, that — like the bloggers and TV hosts to which they cater — they seem to lose their hold on the power of words." Vitriol is theater, a reality show with a studio audience. Rush is just an entertainer, Glenn is just a rodeo clown and the pols are just playing to the peanut gallery. Cut these guys some slack. Hyperbole's great for everyone's ratings. Who can blame them for getting carried away?

If this tragedy is going to be a teachable moment, the lesson won't be found by determining whose vitriol is warranted. It will be found instead in what the vitriol is actually about. And that, as Sheriff Dupnik nailed it, is "tearing down the government."

In the 1970s, the "sovereign citizen movement" was still a paranoid fringe. "Its adherents," explains the Anti-Defamation League, believed that "virtually all existing government in the United States is illegitimate and they seek to 'restore' an idealized, minimalist government that never actually existed." In the decades since, this right-wing anarchism was domesticated and became mainstream. Today it demonizes the federal government, federal programs, public employees, taxes and regulation. It accords scriptural authority to the Constitution, but it is in denial about the powers that charter assigns to the central government. It is blind to the "common welfare" that "we the people" task the government to promote, maintaining instead that the patriots who won our revolution wrote a document whose sole purpose was to protect freedom from the encroachments of the loathed central state.

In truth, American government is a miraculous equilibrium between individual freedom and mutual responsibility, the one and the many, the local and the national, the personal and the public. The Constitution isn't holy writ; it's a living document whose text and meaning have evolved through the

centuries. “Government is the problem,” said Ronald Reagan. He was wrong. The problem is *bad* government, and the job of every generation is to make it work better, not to drive a stake through its heart.

Killing government is the mission of an assassin. The vitriol in our national bloodstream is the crackpot notion that killing government is the mission of the rest of us.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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