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THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Restrict the possession of "ordinary" guns or get used to regular massacres

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. "I have a Glock 9 millimeter, and I'm a pretty good shot." That's what Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D - Ariz.) [told a New York Times reporter](#) last year. Only months later she would be fighting for her life, [shot through the head](#) with the same brand and caliber of pistol.

On January 8, Jared Loughner, 22, opened fire with a Glock 9mm. pistol during the Congresswoman's "Congress on your Corner" event at a Tucson supermarket. The unemployed, sometime student – he got booted from college for disruptive behavior – killed six, including a 9-year old girl and a Federal judge. He wounded thirteen, including Ms. Giffords.

Loughner was tackled by citizens while reloading his pistol. A search of the home where he lived with his parents [yielded a prior letter](#) from the Congresswoman and several notes suggesting his intent to carry out the assassination.

By any measure Loughner is a very sick puppy. His MySpace account was full of disconnected thoughts and delusional ramblings about off-the-wall subjects like government thought control. He wrote about returning to the gold and silver standards – with him in charge of the Treasury. "Mein Kampf" was listed as one of his favorite books, which might seem insignificant until one considers that his intended target, Ms. Giffords, is active in Judaism.

Loughner fits the archetype of the murderous loner to a tee. [Past acquaintances described him](#) as odd and reclusive. His in-class rants at Pima Community College frightened classmates and instructors. A video he posted about the college was the last straw. He and his parents were called in and told that Loughner couldn't return unless he was psychologically cleared. In his one known run-in with the law police cited him for scrawling the letters "C" and "X" on a street sign, which he said symbolized Christianity.

Loughner might have been a very odd duck, but he was nonetheless qualified under [Federal law](#) to buy a handgun. He was a legal U.S. resident, over 21 years of age (the minimum to buy a handgun), not a convicted felon, not under indictment, and was never adjudicated (meaning, in court) as mentally defective. [On November 30, 2010](#) Loughner walked into Sportsman's Warehouse in Tucson and purchased a Glock 9mm. pistol. Arizona has no state waiting period or gun-training requirement, so Loughner left with the gun right after passing the criminal record check. Oh, yes. Thanks to [a 2010 amendment to state law](#), as a legal possessor over the age of 21 [he was also automatically entitled](#) to carry the weapon either openly or concealed on his person, no permit required.

But it's not just Arizona. Ordinary handguns like the Glock 9mm. can be purchased anywhere in the U.S. In California, which is considered the most restrictive state – magazine capacity is limited to ten rounds and a permit is required for concealed carry – buyers must pass a brief safety exam and wait ten days to pick up their gun. And that's it.

It's really quite convenient.

Actually, what most stands out about the events in Tucson are their ordinariness. In "[Say Something](#)" we pointed out that "shootings by purportedly 'ordinary' people have become such a common feature of American life that we seldom give them much thought." Troubled young males who use guns to give vent to their demons are nothing new. Prior examples include the [April 1999 Columbine \(Colo.\) High School massacre](#), where two male students killed 13 and injured 21, the [March 2006 Capitol Hill massacre](#), in which a deranged 28-year old man opened fire at a youth party in Seattle, killing six and wounding two, and the April 2007 [massacre at Virginia Tech](#), where a mentally disturbed 23-year old college senior killed 32 and wounded 25.

Virginia Tech has remarkable parallels to the Tucson massacre. Its perpetrator, Sung Hui-Cho, was armed with two pistols that he had recently bought at gun stores. One was a Glock 9mm (the other was a Walther .22). Cho also had mental problems; indeed, his were so serious that a judge had ruled him mentally ill. Unfortunately, Virginia's procedure for entering that information into the database used to clear gun purchases was lacking, enabling Cho to buy guns.

Reaction to the Tucson shooting was swift. Many observers, including outspoken Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, [laid blame on a "toxic political environment"](#) that replaced reasoned discourse with posturing and threats. During last year's Congressional races Sarah Palin's political action committee televised ads to which Congresswoman Giffords objected: "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." Sheriff Dupnik and others [also blame lax gun laws](#) and the expiration of the assault weapons ban, which also prohibited high-capacity ammunition feeding devices such as the 30-round magazines used by Loughner.

But if we're seeking to prevent wackos from going on a rampage, all the half-hearted "bans" and regulatory initiatives in the world would make little difference. Ordinary guns are the elephant in the room. Medium-caliber semi-auto pistols such as the Glock 9mm. are exceedingly lethal regardless of magazine capacity. And that's to say nothing of the increasingly popular and even more deadly .40 caliber pistols (yes, Glock makes those, too.) Or the wildly popular "[Big Boomer](#)" handguns, whose projectiles pierce ballistic vests as easily as knives cut through butter.

What's needed, of course, is a fundamental reset in our attitude about firearms. Unfortunately, guns, politics and ideology have become impossibly conflated. What's more, in 2008 the Supreme Court decided in [Heller](#) that having a gun, at least in the home, is an individual right. While the Justices suggested that they would support "reasonable" regulation, their decision put proponents of gun control on the defensive. It's no longer about moving forward: it's about not losing any more ground.

Bottom line: without severely restricting the kinds of guns that citizens can possess (which, by the way, isn't going to happen) there's no way – none – to prevent massacres. Don't believe it? Read the posts linked below.