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Guns and responsibility

By Eugene Robinson
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We may not be sure that the [bloodbath in Tucson](#) had anything to do with politics, but we know it had everything to do with our nation's insane refusal to impose reasonable controls on guns.

Specifically, the rampage had everything to do with a 9mm semiautomatic Glock pistol - a sleek, efficient killing machine that our [lax gun laws](#) allowed an unstable young man to purchase, carry anywhere and ultimately use to shoot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in the head. The weapon also was used to shoot 19 bystanders, killing [six of them](#), including a [federal judge](#) and a [9-year-old girl](#).

The accused gunman, 22-year-old [Jared Lee Loughner](#), appears to be deranged. But this fact does not automatically absolve the politicians, partisan activists and professional loudmouths who spew apocalyptic anti-government rhetoric full of violent imagery. Certainly only someone "unbalanced" would spray a crowd with deadly gunfire. Only someone on the fringe - of society, of sanity - might conceivably hear a slogan such as "[Don't Retreat. Instead - RELOAD!](#)" and think it not a stirring political metaphor but a direct order.

Pima County [Sheriff Clarence Dupnik](#), in whose jurisdiction the massacre took place, said that "the rhetoric about hatred, about mistrust of government, about paranoia of how government operates" has an "impact on people . . . who are unbalanced personalities to begin with."

But Loughner has so far declined to talk to authorities. At this point, it is impossible to know whether he was thinking about white-hot political discourse or listening to imaginary transmissions from outer space.

We do know, however, that Loughner reportedly had a history of drug use and [bizarre behavior](#). Students and a teacher at a community college that Loughner briefly attended found him so erratic, confused, menacing and potentially violent that they persuaded college authorities to bar him from campus pending a psychiatric exam.

Yet on Nov. 30, he was able to walk into Sportsman's Warehouse in Tucson and purchase the weapon that authorities allege was used in Saturday's rampage. He apparently also bought extra magazines loaded with ammunition.

To buy the gun, Loughner was required to pass a federal background check - and he did, a store manager told reporters. It is against federal law to sell a gun to someone who is mentally ill, but there is no indication that Loughner was ever officially deemed to suffer from mental illness. Even if he had been, there is a good chance that his name would not have been properly entered in the [National Instant Criminal Background Check System](#).

According to the [Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence](#), about 80 percent to 90 percent of disqualifying mental health records are not in the background-check database. Some states simply don't bother to submit the information; others do so haphazardly. Arizona is neither the best nor the worst on this score.

In other respects, however, Arizona is one of the most lenient states in the country when it comes to gun ownership. It is one of only three states - along with Alaska and Vermont - that allow individuals to carry concealed handguns without a permit. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano vetoed "concealed-carry" legislation when she was Arizona's governor. Her successor, Gov. Jan Brewer, [signed the measure into law](#) last year.

Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign, said in a statement that "if Congress had not allowed the 'Assault Weapons Ban' to expire in 2004, the shooter [Loughner] would only have been able to get off 10 rounds without reloading. Instead, he was able to fire at least 20 rounds from his 30-round clip."

The specifics of state and federal gun laws matter greatly - lives are at stake - but we really need to look at the bigger picture. The Second Amendment is a fact of life. But even recent Supreme Court rulings have left the door open to effective gun control measures.

We must recognize the obvious distinction between rifles, shotguns and target pistols used for sport on the one hand, and semiautomatic handguns designed for killing people on the other. We must decide that allowing anyone to carry a concealed weapon, no questions asked, is just crazy. And for heaven's sake, we must demand that laws designed to keep guns out of the hands of lunatics be enforced.

Giffords is a supporter of responsible gun ownership. If we force our elected officials to act responsibly, the next senseless massacre just might be prevented.

Eugene Robinson will be [online](#) to chat with readers at 1 p.m. Eastern time Tuesday. Submit your questions or comments before or during the discussion.