

The New York Times

A Right to Bear Glocks?

By Gail Collins, January 9, 2011

In 2009, Gabrielle Giffords was holding a “Congress on Your Corner” meeting at a Safeway supermarket in her district when a protester, who was waving a sign that said “Don’t Tread on Me,” waved a little too strenuously. The pistol he was carrying under his armpit fell out of his holster.

“It bounced. That concerned me,” Rudy Ruiz, the father of one of Giffords’s college interns at the time, told me then. He had been at the event and had gotten a larger vision than he had anticipated of what a career in politics entailed. “I just thought, ‘What would happen if it had gone off? Could my daughter have gotten hurt?’ ”

Giffords brushed off the incident. “When you represent a district — the home of the O.K. Corral and Tombstone, the town too tough to die — nothing’s a surprise,” she said. At the time, it struck me as an interesting attempt to meld crisis control with a promotion of local tourist attractions.

Now, of course, the district has lost more people in a shooting in a shopping center parking lot than died at the gunfight of the O.K. Corral, and the story of the dropped pistol has a tragically different cast.

In soft-pedaling that 2009 encounter, Giffords was doing a balancing act that she’d perfected during her political career as a rather progressive Democrat in a increasingly conservative state. She was the spunky Western girl with a populist agenda mixed with down-home values, one of which was opposition to gun control. But those protesters had been following her around for a while. Her staff members were clearly scared for her, and they put me in touch with Ruiz, who told me the story.

Back then, the amazing thing about the incident in the supermarket parking lot was that the guy with a handgun in his armpit was not arrested. Since then, Arizona has completely eliminated the whole concept of requiring a concealed weapon permit. Last year, it got 2 points out of a possible 100 in the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence state score card, avoiding a zero only because its Legislature has not — so far — voted to force colleges to let people bring their guns on campuses.

Today, the amazing thing about the reaction to the Giffords shooting is that virtually all the discussion about how to prevent a recurrence has been focusing on improving the tone of our political discourse. That would certainly be great. But you do not hear much about the fact that Jared Loughner came to Giffords’s sweet

gathering with a semiautomatic weapon that he was able to buy legally because the law restricting their sale expired in 2004 and Congress did not have the guts to face up to the National Rifle Association and extend it.

If Loughner had gone to the Safeway carrying a regular pistol, the kind most Americans think of when they think of the right to bear arms, Giffords would probably still have been shot and we would still be having that conversation about whether it was a sane idea to put her Congressional district in the cross hairs of a rifle on the Internet.

But we might not have lost a federal judge, a 76-year-old church volunteer, two elderly women, Giffords's 30-year-old constituent services director and a 9-year-old girl who had recently been elected to the student council at her school and went to the event because she wanted to see how democracy worked.

Loughner's gun, a 9-millimeter Glock, is extremely easy to fire over and over, and it can carry a 30-bullet clip. It is "not suited for hunting or personal protection," said Paul Helmke, the president of the Brady Campaign. "What it's good for is killing and injuring a lot of people quickly."

America has a long, terrible history of political assassinations and attempts at political assassination. What we did not have until now is a history of attempted political assassination that took the lives of a large number of innocent bystanders. The difference is not about the Second Amendment. It's about a technology the founding fathers could never have imagined.

"If this was the modern equivalent of what Sirhan Sirhan used to shoot Robert Kennedy or Arthur Bremer used to shoot George Wallace, you'd be talking about one or two victims," said Helmke.

Giffords represents a pragmatic, interest-balancing form of politics that's out of fashion. But, in that spirit, we should be able to find a way to accommodate the strong desire in many parts of the country for easy access to firearms with sane regulation of the kinds of weapons that make it easiest for crazy people to create mass slaughter. Most politicians won't talk about it because they're afraid of the N.R.A., whose agenda is driven by the people who sell guns and want the right to sell as many as possible.

Doesn't it seem like the least we can do?