

Freedom to Choose

No doubt the mind of Jared Loughner will be studied extensively over many years, with experts seeking to explain his motivations and the Tucson tragedy. Regardless of what they determine, finally, the fact remains steps must be taken to avert similar outrages. The place to start, according to one Tucson victim, is a serious talk about America's culture of violence.

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"On every street in every city, there's a nobody who dreams of being a somebody."
(Tagline for the 1976 movie [Taxi Driver](#).)

As many say, the United States is an exceptional country. Go ask painful-to-watch [Sarah Palin](#). Unhappily, [Jared Loughner](#) is another painful exception, but of a different kind.

For a variety of reasons we all now know, the Tucson outrage has touched a nerve globally: in Australia, for example, coverage has been extensive, despite the catastrophic flooding here. People all over, particularly Americans are, once again, agonizing about the meaning and searching for answers. Pundits, right and left, are fulminating and pontificating. Politicians and media celebrities are being roundly criticized for being uncivil in their daily discourse. President Obama has called for greater civility throughout the national discourse.

Is there a definitive answer to such carnage? That's doubtful, but in this context, there are some certainties, even now: The Second Amendment will *not* be overturned or modified any time soon, despite rumblings from some quarters; no American politician will challenge the influence of the NRA prior to 2012, if at all, and will leave gun laws as they are, probably, [because support for more gun control has plummeted since 2007](#); and, without doubt, shootings will continue somewhere in USA. One US source I read – there are many online – stated that 400 are murdered every day across USA.

Is there an answer to Jared Loughner, however, and others like him? Almost certainly, he is mentally sick in some fashion. [Schizophrenia has been mentioned](#). Paranoia is coupled with it. None of us know for sure, yet. Arguably, the roots of his mental aberrations will be found in his early life and upbringing. The psychological report will be interesting reading, if we ever get to see it.

The pressing question on most peoples' minds is probably this: Why? Short questions, especially this one, however, often result in incomplete answers. So, perhaps a better way to start is this: **what was Jared Loughner trying to achieve?** In other words: what was his motivation? Now that he has been formally charged with a number of serious crimes, I feel sure psychiatrists and psychologists, among many others, will be searching for relevant answers.

There are a couple of immediate responses that are pertinent, I think: first, it's obvious he wanted to injure or kill a number of people – regrettably, he succeeded; second, the story of his atrocity has reverberated around the world which could suggest he was looking for recognition, and maybe notoriety – he has succeeded in both, absolutely; and finally – I might be pushing it here – he knows that such an act would be taken very seriously by everybody, unlike, it appears at this stage, the responses he'd been experiencing at the local community college in Tucson, in his attempt to join the army, and in his many local jobs. However, there is no doubt now that Loughner has been revealed as an extremely dangerous person, an aspect that came to the minds of a few students and teachers who attended college with him, so I have read.

Hence, in sum: he's killed many innocents, millions of people now know his face and everybody knows they must now treat him seriously. So, what does Jared really want? To put that in other terms, a bank robber doesn't raid a bank for money: he *wants* the money to *do* something with it.

Almost certainly, Loughner will spend the rest of his life in high-security lock-down – much like other dangerous sociopaths; but he must have known that was a possibility beforehand, and it obviously didn't stop him. Was he then looking for death in a shootout with police? Psychological testing and interviews will reveal such a tendency, for sure; for now, we must wait to hear what he says, ultimately. Is he part of a conspiracy? According to his online biography and other sources, he subscribed to a conspiracy theory website, and held contentious ideas about government. And, unless you are somebody like Adolf Hitler, your recognition and notoriety will fade over time. In ten years or less, I'll wager most people will ask: Hey, *who* was that guy now – you know – that nutter in Tucson at the Safeway?

So, to repeat – **what's in it for Jared?**

Well, many will recall **John Hinkley's** assassination attempt in March, 1981 on Ronald Reagan, former President of the United States. Hinkley's prime motivation was “the culmination of an effort to impress actress Jodie Foster”. Hinkley was in love – but a love that was not returned, for obvious reasons. Moreover, according to that biography, Hinkley “watched the 1976 movie *Taxi Driver* on a continuous loop” in order to watch that young actress – who played a young prostitute – as much as possible. In doing so, he would have also watched the progression of the fictional Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro) from lonely, unlucky-in-love and introverted taxi driver to lonely, psychotically-enraged assassin.

Hinkley was desperate to impress a young woman, to become her hero; the fictional Travis Bickle had the same desperate needs concerning a woman who'd rejected him. Hinkley attempted to assassinate a President but failed to kill him; Bickle tried to attack a Presidential candidate, but was thwarted by an alert security team. There is then strong evidence that this movie story influenced Hinkley's self-imposed choice for action.

According to the online biography “Loughner's life began to unravel after his high school girlfriend broke up with him” and, increasingly, he began to display behavioral aberrations that reinforced students' efforts to avoid him. He lived with his parents – described as a “very private” family – and is an only child. There is anecdotal

evidence he took various types of drugs. He held extreme views on some topics and had read politically contentious books (e.g. *Mein Kampf*, *The Communist Manifesto*). Overall, there are clear indications Loughner had developed into a loner; he'd been rejected in love; and his increasingly extreme views and behavior further alienated him from the local community and friends. Hence, with such a succession of emotional setbacks over three or four years, it's likely Loughner needed something to conclusively demonstrate his own self-worth: in other words, to become his own hero.

To achieve that, he freely chose violent action of the worst kind.

There is no information yet about Loughner's preferences in movies. It's instructive, however, to watch the movie *Taxi Driver*, and note particularly Bickle's crazy grin as he approaches his target, while his hand snakes towards his hidden gun. It's a chilling image that is eerily like Loughner's mug shot now on display in so many online sources. I noted also that the New York Times' article, quoted above, includes the fact that Loughner took photos of himself posing, with guns, in front of a mirror – action that is a hallmark of Bickle's growing mental instability prior to his assassination attempt.

(As an aside, this is not an attack on Hollywood movies; art imitates life, but we are all influenced by movies in various ways.)

But while the fictional Bickle and the real Loughner had the urge for similar action, there is a crucial difference: in Tucson, Loughner achieved his goal, much like Hinkley long ago. Ironically, the fictional Bickle fails to become his own hero and, instead, becomes everybody's hero by accident. Such heavy irony is as much a narrative ploy as it is an indictment of the individual loneliness that permeates much of most societies.

And so, as I watched the Friday PBS News Hour (January 14) with Jim Lehrer, I nodded in agreement as Mark Shields said: "We're not all in this alone", after he, Jim Lehrer and David Brooks had discussed President Obama's acclaimed speech in Tucson; **loneliness, though, is still something that millions contend with daily.**

Hence, it's what lies ahead that's more important now.

Perhaps, then, the last word here should come from one of Loughner's victims, Randy Gardner, being interviewed on the News Hour: "I think we need to have a real talk – and a serious one – about our culture, why it is so violent, and what we can do to improve it."

A sensible suggestion, without doubt; but it's up to the American people to choose, freely.

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