

**San Antonio Express-News: Hate-filled words fuel political dialogue**

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By: Cary Clack

Words have power. Yet no words possess the power to erase what happened in Tucson on Saturday, to resurrect lost lives and to make whole hearts that are forever broken.

But only words cleansed of hate, washed free of self-righteous furor and charged with the purpose of creating better understanding and community can lead us away from more Tucson-like eclipses of our national soul.

As of this writing, the politics of the young man who attempted to assassinate U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, wounded 13 more, and who did assassinate a federal judge and kill five others, including a 9-year-old girl, are murky and undefined. He doesn't look like the Tea Party prototype quickly imagined by some on the left soon after the shooting nor does he resemble the liberal bogeyman conjured by some on the right. Yes, he listed *The Communist Manifesto* and *Mein Kampf* as two of his favorite books, along with *Peter Pan* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

We don't know, yet, if this deeply disturbed person was influenced by the poisonous rhetoric of the times. It almost doesn't matter because we didn't need Saturday's massacre to inform us that in the last few years the political discourse in this nation has escalated in vitriol and personal attacks.

Political debate is supposed to be vigorous, with feelings sometimes hurt even among friends. But, these days, it's not enough to disagree with someone and argue with them on the facts.

Too many want to treat politics as a civil war and scorch the earth with incendiary language as they denigrate and demonize their opponents, smear them with lies and question their character.

Even when such language doesn't lead to physical violence, such language is verbal violence.

"A lot of people were raised with the phrase 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.' Wrong!" says the gifted, award-winning poet Carmen Tafolla. "Words have the power to poison minds, destroy relationships, break bonds, deflate egos, crush hopes, desiccate dreams, create hate and more. It's this last one that we see happening every two seconds in today's world. Sweet, responsible people, who might have been perfectly pleasant people on a front porch, hear hate-filled propaganda about someone they've never met and begin to absorb and even cultivate that hate within them."

We must move beyond finger-pointing about who's responsible for Saturday and start looking in mirrors and listening to how we talk to and about others. Read the comments not only on partisan political websites but the online versions of daily newspapers and see how easy it is to tear people down and dehumanize them simply because of their political views.

But decency belongs to no one political party, and civility has no ideology.

Next week we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., and nonviolence should be mentioned.

Among King's principles was that nonviolence chooses love instead of hate and that it attacks injustice and not people, because people are always capable of redemption. To attack someone personally is to deny them their dignity.

To verbally humiliate someone, whether it's in the home, the office, the classroom or the political arena, is violence.

Anyone, whatever his politics, who propagates hate and even hints that violence is an answer should be called out for his words. Because these are the words, as Tafolla says, that break the bonds that unite us.

Christina Taylor Green, a newly elected student council member at the age of 9, went to Congresswoman Giffords' event to learn more about politics. Instead, she was killed.

In her spirit, and for all children as well as ourselves, can't we imagine a politics and a culture where no matter how divisive the issue or heated the debate, we're never blind to each other's humanity?

Even in Tucson's blood-stained shadow, it's still: We the People.