UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

Words and Violence

I am writing this column shortly after the mass murder in Tucson, Arizona which targeted the US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. By now everyone surely knows that former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin used crosshairs to identify a number of Democratic Members of the US Congress, including Ms. Giffords, on her “Sarah-PAC” website during the 2010 campaign. You must also know that last March, Palin invoked a firearms analogy when she addressed a Tea Party rally: “It’s not a time to retreat. It’s a time to reload.”

I do not believe that Ms. Palin focuses on the gun analogies because she literally wants people

to shoot their political enemies. Yet, the use of this type of rhetoric does help create a climate of anger and polarization. And I think it can be argued that the incendiary words and images create a media environment which can have an effect on mentally ill individuals who might already be prone to violence.

In the aftermath of the shooting in Arizona, several commentators drew an interesting distinction between what is legal speech under the First Amendment of the US Constitution and what is appropriate political speech. In my opinion, this is an important distinction.

Of course, it's not just speech which can incite people to violence, but our difficult social problems and specific government policies. Arizona, for example, has been experiencing a good deal of racial tension after the passage of a law requiring that police check the immigration of all individuals stopped by the police for other violations. Ms. Giffords was a vocal opponent of that law.

We live in a society where violence is, unfortunately, relatively common. And the United States, in particular, provides ridiculously easy access to firearms. The mentally-ill perpetrator of the Arizona shooting reportedly was able to buy his Glock handgun easily at a gun dealer in Tucson.

I do not blame Sarah Palin for this shooting, but I do think we need to hold politicians and pundits responsible for their inflammatory rhetoric. The left and right wing in the United States are diametrically opposed to one another, a fact which plays out in the media every day. For their part, cable news and blogs highlight the hateful, controversial words of individuals who make a good living feeding this inferno of anger. Why, because it makes good copy and video which increases the viewership of cable news outlets and, thus, feeds their profits. The public loves to watch anger and violence on television and at the movies. This enthusiasm for conflict spills over into media stories about politics and public affairs.

But, of course, politics is not a sporting event. It is not a war. It is not entertainment. It is, or should be, a method for resolving differences in an organized, civil way. The debates about what laws to pass and what the proper role of government should be are very important and should be treated with the respect they deserve.

Is the media to blame? Yes, and so are we all. Perhaps this level of contentiousness is inevitable with our prolific electronic media and its constant need to produce profits. But something has to change. Do consumers need to demand a more civil debate and boycott the voices of intolerance and hate? Do media outlets need to filter and provide context for inflammatory rhetoric? Do politicians need to put ethics over political expediency by speaking with tolerance and not demonizing those with different points of view? Yes, yes, and yes! What will it take to make this happen?

“A poet’s hope: to be, like some valley cheese, local but prized everywhere.”

W. H. Auden