Gabrielle Giffords survived, recovered, and returned to public life after being badly wounded by an assassination attempt on January 8, 2011. During this extended ordeal, the Arizona representative mobilized lyric, dramatic, and oratorical resources into a singular, untimely rhetoric. I contend that she invoked the cultural resources of Polyhymnia—a classical figure reminding us of the ingenious, contingent resourcefulness among the symbolic arts—to recover her public agency in a time of deep incivility and public violence. In this essay, I find Giffords’s rhetoric, including her appearances, speeches, interviews, testimony, and editorials from 2011 through 2013, to comprise acts of civil courage.

The threads of civility in American politics wore thin during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Conservatives strove to install the “Ownership Society,” seeking to put an end to the welfare state, unleash corporate energies, and spread democracy around the globe. The economic downturn of 2008 ruptured these expectations. New leaders vaulted into the public realm; thus did Barack Obama surge to the presidency, and thus was Gabrielle Giffords, a Blue Dog Democrat, elected by a narrow margin to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Hard times breed hard rhetoric, and twenty-first-century American politics have offered no exception to this rule. Partisanship dominated Congress during the Bush administrations. Unrepentant Republicans la-
bored to assure that Obama’s first administration would be his last. Incivility surged. The Affordable Care Act, in particular, spurred vituperation. The question of extending health insurance to some 40 million Americans raised fears of big government, particularly among conservatives. Conservative herself in many ways, the articulate, attractive Representative Giffords (D-AZ) supported a variety of local, popular causes such as border enforcement and veterans’ aid. Yet in the end she voted—unpardonably in the eyes of some—to support Obama’s health care plan. Tea Party Republicans flocked to contend the 2010 interim elections, targeting those who wished to work across the aisles; as a Democrat with a Republican base, Giffords’s reelection was hotly contested. Her positions were attacked, policies denounced, and headquarters vandalized. Yet when MSNBC’s Chuck Todd asked her to comment on the motivations behind one of Sarah Palin’s more controversial tweets (in which “Mama Grizzly” urged her followers, “Don’t Retreat, Instead - RELOAD!”), Giffords replied, “You know, I can’t say, I’m not Sarah Palin. But what I can say is that in the years that some of my colleagues have served—20, 30 years—they’ve never seen it like this.” Giffords’s bipartisan discourse resisted even the most severe provocations, and a determined common sense marked her civic advocacy.

Even during hotly contested national debates, the peaceful transfer and exercise of political power appears to hold sway in the United States. Thus, the shootings that left six dead and 13 injured at Giffords’s “Congress on Your Corner” event in a Tucson parking lot on January 8, 2011 came as a shock. Links between political incivility and the assassination attempt were quickly drawn. Such associations are not logically sound, E. J. Dione Jr. cautioned his readers. Nevertheless, Pima County sheriff Clarence Dupnik got the ball rolling: “When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government. The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. And unfortunately, Arizona I think has become sort of the capital. We have become the mecca for prejudice and bigotry.” Media columnists and private gossips affirmed the popular view. “Nobody is surprised at this,” reported Democrat John Loredo, saying, “That has been the tone and rhetoric that has been used for some time, and this is the only place it could have led to.” The violence was thus explained as the result of a “political landscape” that was “rife with partisanship and toxic rhetoric” inciting individuals to “take up arms against the government.”
Susan Herbst has observed that the performance of civility and its breaches constitute a little-appreciated form of strategic leveraging among politicians. Sometimes a line seems to be crossed, however. Debates that foment anger and prompt outrage generate even greater anxieties when physical violence erupts. True, most members of the public may ordinarily discount uncivil rhetoric as mere political posturing. Indeed, angry outbursts may even furnish a comic distraction from the pressures of everyday life. When a public figure is gunned down, however, the pleasures of rage mix with fears for the future. A heartfelt consensus briefly wells up to steady the boat, even among heated rivals. Consolations are given, condemnations made, principles defended, and restraint promised. Such was the scene that characterized the United States in the aftermath of the tragedy in Tucson. In the midst of this aftermath, struggling for life, Gabrielle Giffords began to travel the long distance toward recovery and renewal of health, eventually achieving a return to public life. This study follows her unexpected and in many ways untimely journey through lyrical, dramatic, and oratorical moments of address, from the January 8, 2011 shooting to her acceptance of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award in May 2013. In tracing her path, I inquire into the problematic relationships between public address and violence in partisan democracy and illustrate how cultural and personal resources of rhetoric can be deployed to recover agency and give voice to a public issue.

Rhetoric, Violence, and the Untimely

This essay is a study in untimely rhetoric. Often, the arts of address succeed by virtue of *kairos*—that is, finding the right moment for speaker, audience, and words to come together and achieve proper understanding or fitting influence. Untimely rhetorics do not admit of a single definition, and they may persist without achieving acceptance or even a hearing. Occasionally, such rhetoric is brought into focus by discourses, appearances, and actions swirling into and from unexpected events. Violence may effect crises that appear to call for timely action: state-to-state violence provokes wartime rhetoric, and genocide calls for intervention. Acts of mayhem, however, can uniquely rupture the routines of life and unsettle the practices of politics for those who are targeted. Giffords’s rhetorical address had to work within, over, and against this sort of break. The Arizona representative had brought
charm, energy, intelligence, and sophisticated reserve to her work in Congress, but the would-be assassin’s bullet left her physical well-being in doubt and her future in public life uncertain. Efforts to re-establish her standing as an agent therefore unfolded across a tangle of untimely discourses: tentative reports from the hospital immediately following the attack, ambiguous recovery, unusual congressional seating, a surprise appearance on the House floor, a uniquely crafted resignation performance, an eventual quiet return to politics, and the start (with the help of President Obama) of a national debate.

Nathan Crick refers to somewhat rare but extraordinary defining rhetorics as “singularities,” or addresses “that challenge shared conventions and risk rhetorical failure for the sake of inspiring excellence in character.” I contend that Giffords’s acts of civil courage constitute such a singular, inspired confrontation with democracy and violence. Crick finds singularities only in the work of individual rhetors seeking perfect adjustments to tragedy; however, in this case Giffords’s singular contributions were entwined with those of her husband, Mark Kelly, who supported and amplified her voice. Of course, tragedy does leave its traces, but the couple’s rhetoric speaks to the recovery of agency through their deft deployment of novel resources to challenge personal limits in addressing public partisanship, incivility, and violence. Thus, their singular untimely rhetoric moved the subject of public violence out of its silent and ritualized repose, transforming it into a voiced public issue for themselves and others.

Singular rhetorics require contextual inquiry; therefore, at the very least, a critic’s general claims about method must be rendered accountable to the discursive particularities of the case. This perspective I develop below, identifying in particular three characteristics of this untimely rhetoric that posed personal barriers and more general constraints, formal and otherwise, as Giffords worked to recover agency through the voicing of violence as a public issue.

**Physical Limits on the Ability to Communicate**

Untimely rhetoric arose in this instance from the unique challenges confronting Giffords as she attempted to reinvent her capacity to speak. The Arizona representative survived in part because the gunman’s bullet passed...
through her forehead and exited the back of her skull without crossing the midline of the brain, where critical injuries are more certain. Instead, Giffords’s injuries left her with aphasia, a condition that can entail a range of varied communicative challenges and affects over a million people in the United States.\textsuperscript{12} Aphasia is not linked to intelligence and is often caused by stroke or trauma to the head.\textsuperscript{13} Aphasic speakers may (or may not) understand written or spoken communication, but they also often have difficulty in finding words and accessing the grammatical structures required to produce complex utterances. Words can be selected. Short sentences are assembled. Speech is executed. But it remains an ongoing struggle to formulate the right words and produce sequences that make up the lengthy, fluent sentences of conventional speech. The result is that articulation is impaired, speaking is frustrated, and additional means of communication become uniquely important—drawing or gesturing, for example.\textsuperscript{14} Singing, in particular, is useful therapy for training the brain to re-establish basic patterning capacities.\textsuperscript{15} For Giffords and others whose aphasia manifests in a similar fashion, speech can ultimately take on the character of a parsed, personally entangled expression, a basic quality of the lyric as a poetic form.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Experimenting with Expressive Forms}

Untimely rhetoric is not fitted to situated conventions of address; rather, its agents sometimes enact and couple alternative bits, sequences, and forms of expression to find a voice and craft an audience. Giffords had been known as an effective public campaigner and congressional speaker. The assassination attempt augured but did not define change. Discovery of a route back from violence required experimentation with different forms of discourse on her part. Kenneth Burke distinguished among multiple types of symbolic acts, and three in particular attracted his interest over time: lyric poetry, drama, and oratory. The lyric is a symbolic form that encapsulates genuine feeling expressed by a poet who connects personal experience, sentiment, and language. Drama, as a symbolic form, puts motivation into play: expectations are set, disrupted, and satisfied through actions positioned agonistically. Oratory crafts relationships between speaker and audience, and it is the most direct form of address; in the modern newspaper, editorials
express direct address in compositional form. Giffords and Kelly, working together, unfolded and linked together in a singular way these multiple cultural resources, searching and moving—at times gradually, at other times quickly—in a campaign that renewed public life.

**Addressing Democracy and Violence**

Untimely rhetoric strives to render articulate experiences that otherwise appear misplaced or misnamed, if talked about at all. In this respect, Giffords and Kelly’s rhetoric must be read against a culture of gun violence underwritten by thin sentimentality and harsh silences throughout 2011 and 2012. Violence endlessly problematizes communication. Kenneth Burke, joining with anthropologists, suggested that language was invented initially as a constraint on violence; substituting words for blows makes community possible, or so it seems. Over time, the material and symbolic embodiments of violence and rhetoric have become institutionally embedded, historically eventful, and socially complicated. Institutions of justice, defense, insurance, and others anticipate and cope with such interruptions in different ways, but public acts of violence stress institutional boundaries of accommodation. Recently, these relationships have furnished a hot topic for critically angled speculation.

Public acts of violence demonstrably rend deep-seated bonds in disturbing ways. Erik Doxtader has reminded us of the difficulty of assessing Giffords’s rhetoric by recollecting the “onslaught of commentary” that followed her attacker Jared Lee Loughner’s shooting rampage. Words poured forth as people grieved, mourned, and sought to compensate for or find significance in the tragedy. Public address swelled, yet came up short. It was not only that advocates searched with frustration and futility in figuring out what to do about the trauma but also that the shootings at “Congress on Your Corner” became one of the first violent spectacles of an especially bloody year. Wade Michael Page killed six before taking his own life at a Sikh temple outside Milwaukee. Twelve were killed by a “joker” playing out fan fantasies in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater showing the premiere of The Dark Knight Rises. One L. Goh killed seven at Oikos University, a Korean college in Oakland. Nine were shot at a hair salon in Seal Beach, California, and another dozen at an IHOP in Carson City, Nevada.
igious site, movie theater, university, beauty parlor, restaurant—all were public places turned into scenes of violence, followed by rituals of grief, criminal pursuit, and exasperation. Politicians expressed personal concern and consolation in the wake of these losses, yet remained mum on change. The gap between public pain and policy silence suggests that a powerful consensus, featuring heated but issue-restricted partisan display, choreographed Washington’s political theater. It would take multiple, insightful acts of objection just to get serious talk on stage.

An untimely rhetoric may begin amid inchoate objections, concerns only partially articulated and lacking fully formed counterclaims.22 Indeed, the more embedded and widely shared a political discourse, the more difficult it is to express or perhaps even conceptualize alternatives, much less convince publics of a need for change. Walter Benjamin struggled with the complex balances between history, culture, myth, and the state in relation to violence. Giffords’s own personal experience and gradual move to articulation reminds us how conventions can be questioned, challenged, and recast. Following Benjamin’s search for broad-based aauratic self-perception, I take up Giffords’s untimely rhetoric by contextualizing it within a frame of inspired personal and cultural self-discovery.23 Thus, my reading interprets Giffords’s discourse within the orbit of Polyhymnia, a muse whose mobile domain spans song, lyric, pantomime, rhetoric, and eloquence.24

I invoke Polyhymnia to contextualize Giffords’s varied acts of civil courage in a culture of gun violence. In rebuilding her role in public life, Giffords’s self-crafted agency worked within, over, and against idealizations and diagnoses of her condition and future prospects. Her addresses, marked by both invention and determination, moved across the contexts of violence that she had experienced and that the nation was enduring. She engaged well-intentioned congressional praise that defined her as a fallen hero, and she punctured the melancholy idealization of consolatory rhetoric. This reappropriated vision of heroism converged with her articulations of a multilayered persona, projected when she addressed the person she was becoming, her changing responsibilities to local and national audiences, and her task of holding in the public’s memory those who could speak for themselves no longer. In this case of untimely rhetoric, then, agency was performed through a hybrid of heroic conceit,25 and multiplex, engaged personae.26 Giffords displayed remarkable pluck in persuading the American public that a new discussion needed to take place on the national stage.
Her mission carried her through multiple, uncertain moments that unfolded from 2011 through 2013: consolation and recovery, public appearances, and a farewell to Congress, then breaking the silence, a return to public address as she built her advocacy in tandem with the president, and in the end—even with setback—heroic achievement. Consider each in turn.

**Consolation and Recovery**

Public violence rips open the security of everyday life. Upon the death of a public figure, rhetoric is ritually formed to grieve, mourn, assign accountability, and move on. In addition, conspiracy fantasies, eerie comparisons, strange associations, and other varied personal opinions often extend the publicity that surrounds such an event. Although the shootings in the Tucson parking lot left six dead (including federal judge John Roll), bystanders’ timely rescue efforts got Giffords, the intended target, to a nearby hospital clinging to life. Initial reports were scattered, and her prospects for survival remained uncertain. It was only on January 11, 2011—three days after the attack—that Giffords began to breathe on her own. The next day, President Obama came into her hospital room for a visit, and at a memorial ceremony that evening he announced that, for the first time since her hospitalization, Giffords had opened her eyes.

Following Obama’s address, the press intensified its speculation about Giffords’s health, visitors, recovery, and future impairments extending from the tragedy. Naturally, Congress was interested, too. Just four days after the shootings, the normally divided House of Representatives unanimously passed Resolution 32, which offered condolences to the families of those killed, hope for the survivors’ recovery, and applause for both the “bravery and quick thinking” of those who disabled the shooter and for the service of first responders.27 The statement also honored the memory of the six Americans lost. Moreover, it defended “the bedrock principle of American democracy and representative government, . . . which Representative Gabrielle Giffords herself read in the Hall of the House of Representatives on January 6, 2011”—namely, “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”28 Finally, the resolution included a formal declaration that the United States would remain a nation where “intimidation and threats of violence cannot silence the voices of any American.”29 These were strong words, indeed.
Resolution 32 represented the formal will of Congress in naming a new hero. The honoring of a recently fallen leader endows a state with legitimacy, particularly in the chaos following a traumatic event, by rendering violence an act with a remedy. Such discourse may begin, as it did in this case, by working through grief—almost in the form of expiation—via personal avowal. John Boehner (R-OH), the Speaker of the House of Representatives, put it simply: “Today we are called here to mourn. . . . We know that we gather here without distinction of party. The needs of this institution have always risen above partisanship. And what this institution needs right now is strength—holy, uplifting strength.”30 This sort of consolation features compensatory rhetoric, where grief from loss is assuaged by celebration of the fallen as heroic.31 Thus, in these still uncertain days, Giffords was recollected by key figures like House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) “as a brilliant and courageous” public servant who had “brought to Congress an invigoration—the thinking of a new generation of national leaders.”32 Conversely, anger can inspire the channeling of grief into gritty defiance. In this spirit, the attack in Tucson was denounced as “cowardly” no less than seven times throughout the congressional discussion surrounding Resolution 32,33 yet time and again speakers also urged their audience to respond to this cowardice by reaffirming and enacting with fresh vigor the principles of “democracy and representative government” that Giffords’s assailant had threatened, including “the open exchange of ideas between legislators and the people to whom they are accountable.”34

Importantly, some also recognized that Congress itself might have been at least partially complicit in the tragedy. Although the motivation of the shooter was murky, Steny Hoyer (D-MD) still found the tragedy’s implications for Congress clear: “It is a time for us to reflect on the heightened anger being projected on our public debate and the daily denigration of those with whom we disagree. And it is appropriate, therefore, that the wrenching, shocking, senseless violence of that day compel us to reflect on our own responsibility to temper our words and respect those with whom we disagree, lest the failure to do so give incitement to the angriest and most unstable among us.”35 For the moment, partisanship ceased; it became unthinkable.

The call for watching one’s tongue in the interests of democracy, however, only partially carried the discussion that day; a sense of sadness drifted onto the floor, as well. A creeping melancholy, expressing loss and regret, characterized much of the conversation, especially among Giffords’s close
colleagues. Trent Franks (R-AZ) called the shootings “a reminder to all of us of the brevity and delicate nature of this earthly life.”36 Ed Pastor (D-AZ) stated, “We are all reaching toward our God in prayer, contemplation, and silent whispers.”37 David Schweikert (R-AZ) spoke with a “heavy heart” of “the tragedy” that had rocked the nation.38 Sander Levin (D-MI) summed up the situation well when he characterized those assembled as being in a state of “disbelief,” the horror of the event made all the more heartbreaking because Giffords so clearly “epitomizes what a public servant should be, fully dedicated, principled, caring and reaching out to all.”39 Consolations reached toward tragic reference. John Larson (D-CT) waxed poetic, evoking Shakespeare’s Othello: “Something beautiful died in Tucson, Arizona, this past Saturday.”40

Thus, in consolation, rhetoric moves to elevated memory, even as aesthetic comparisons prepare the political grounds to forget. Violence raises the specter of mortality, even within an assembly of the powerful, and in a broken world, colleagues part ways, it seems. Giffords was a member of Congress still, but it was clear to her friends that things would never be the same. Of course, the representative was still struggling for her life; she would have to continue to work within and against these consolations in re-establishing a genuine public presence.

Bipartisan consolation and vows shifted to dramatic gesture on the evening of the president’s State of the Union address less than two weeks later. Since the Reagan administration, these televised speeches had served as a national stage for partisan theater: Congress would mime responses to the president’s remarks, with those assembled either standing and cheering or sitting and scowling depending upon party affiliation, divided both symbolically and literally by the aisle. Yet on January 25, 2011 the drama changed. The act of violence directed against one of its members had reminded Congress of its need to portray self-respect and act with decorum; thus, the curtain lifted to reveal politicians of opposing parties sitting side by side throughout the room, abandoning their traditional partite seating arrangement.41 Obama acknowledged the new mood from the podium: “There’s a reason the tragedy in Tucson gave us pause. Amid all the noise and passion and rancor of our public debate, Tucson reminded us that no matter who we are or where we come from, each of us is a part of something greater. . . . We are part of the American family.”42
In the days and weeks following the attack, Giffords’s prospects for survival improved; however, the trauma to her brain left her with a limited ability to communicate. Her escape from near death was heralded as a marvel, but the press soon turned to daily discussions about injuries and treatment. Doctors admitted that, given the nature of her injury, a timetable for recovery could not be set, nor indeed could an outcome be predicted with any certainty. Soon, Gabby (as she was affectionately called) was whisked by air to Memorial Hermann–Texas Medical Center in Houston, whose Institute for Rehabilitation and Research works to address the needs of those who suffer brain impairments. As the representative began the long road to recovery, her chief of staff, Pia Carusone, prepared the public by speaking to the ongoing work of rehabilitation, painting a realistic portrait featuring both the successes and the challenges of Giffords’s therapy months after the shooting. “She is borrowing upon other ways of communicating,” Carusone explained, “using facial expressions,” “pointing,” and “gesturing.” Her assessment of Giffords’s status tempered the optimism that had been present in the media: “Add it all together, and she’s able to express the basics of what she wants or needs. But, when it comes to a bigger and more complex thought that requires words, that’s where she’s had the trouble.” The congresswoman’s therapeutic journey was clearly under way, but the process was to be slow and undeniably difficult.

On May 16, 2011, Giffords’s husband, Mark Kelly, commanded the space shuttle Endeavor in its final flight, with Gabby in attendance at liftoff—an occasion that would ultimately be viewed as an act of courage on both their parts. The progress of Giffords’s recovery was confirmed by pictures of her taken near the launch site with short hair and a radiant smile; however, those same photos also confirmed the obvious changes in the quality of her life. Days later, she underwent cranioplasty surgery to reconstruct the portion of her skull that had been removed following the attack to permit her brain to swell. The press celebrated both the shuttle launch and the brain surgery as marker events that defined the representative’s limited but meaningful personal agency.

Representative Giffords moved into public view on her own in August of that year. The Republican Party was holding the nation hostage by threatening to bring government to a halt unless it got its way on the debt ceiling.
Congress, it seemed, had forgotten its bipartisan vows and commitments to civility rather quickly. Gabby left rehab in Houston and traveled to Washington to help rescue the government from this threatened deadlock. As she slowly entered the House floor, she was greeted with “loud, sustained applause and a standing ovation by her colleagues, who huddled around her to give hugs, kisses and handshakes.” Refusing help, Giffords cast her ballot, then waved and softly thanked her fellow representatives. Reports disclosed that she had been monitoring the debate and, like most Americans, was “extremely disappointed at Washington’s inability to confront the debt ceiling issue.” Nancy Pelosi said that everyone was “shocked” at the appearance, and that Giffords’s voting was “above and beyond the call of duty”; Pelosi also affectionately noted that the occasion allowed her to share some “girl talk and . . . girl hugs” with her friend. Gabby’s appearance gave rise to an unexpected expression of unity, even joy, in the House. However, even as everyone celebrated Giffords’s return, their silence on her future spoke volumes.

Later that year, Gabby and her husband released a book—*Gabby: A Story of Courage and Hope*—authored with the assistance of Jeffrey Zaslow. The text assembles into narrative the representative’s rich personal life story and experiences, with prose smoothly worked out, but Giffords’s own developing voice is not absent. In a short final section, she expresses what it has been like to live a transformed life: “Long way to go. Grateful to survive. It’s frustrating. Mentally hard. Hard work. I’m trying. Trying so hard to get better. Regain what I’ve lost. Want to speak better.” She concludes simply, yet powerfully, promising, “I will get stronger. I will return.” Her expression embodies her condition. Sentence structure is condensed. She transmits direct, compelling feeling, memorably. Lyrical resonance is invoked. Published reports on her speech therapy had conditioned readers to expect modified address, but slick reports by the press and the burnished language of biography had left less than a full sense of who the agent had become. Gabby’s frank, charged, searching words at the end of the book spoke in the compelling voice of a newly changed life.

**A FAREWELL TO CONGRESS**

The entry and exit points of a career shape how a public agent becomes known and is remembered. Congress had engaged in acts of consolation,
thus fashioning a heroic frame for the representative’s departure, even if it was to be only a temporary one. Giffords’s own goodbye, however, was thoughtfully delayed. She allowed time to pass and rehabilitation to take its course. When the moment was right, her farewell rhetoric came as a decorous act unfolding in three parts.

Giffords began her official discourse of departure on January 22, 2012 when she publicly announced her intent to resign through a carefully prepared, personal YouTube video that addressed her Arizona constituents directly. The video includes a short speech from the representative, during which she is sometimes shown speaking on camera and is at other times present as a voice-over. While music plays gently in the background, images of Gabby as a vibrant woman appear alongside icons familiar to her constituents, as vivid pictures of her state’s scenery and citizens roll across the screen. “Arizona is my home—always will be,” she begins her address. Her story unfolds: “A lot has happened over the past year. We cannot change that, but I know on the issues we fought for we can change things for the better: jobs, border security, veterans. We can do so much more by working together. I don’t remember much from that horrible day, but I will never forget the trust you placed in me.” She says that she must leave office to work on her recovery, but that her “spirit is high,” and she promises that, one day, she “will return.” In the video. Giffords uses short, direct, spare prose to express her feelings. She also preserves her characteristic nonpartisan posture, but moves her appeal from the level of civic friendship to a more personal connection. Between her happy, recollected experiences of the past and the engrossing, unfinished work that lies ahead, the present opens as an interstice within which Giffords and other Arizonans must travel different roads, at least for a while.

Two days after the video was released, Giffords appeared amid the congressional audience assembled for Obama’s State of the Union address on January 24, 2012. Her appearance—the second marker of her extended goodbye—performed an answer to the unspoken question of just a year prior: “What will become of her?” The forum was filled with Washington’s finest, men and women stylishly coiffed and posed with vigor; so Giffords rejoined this group, attractive to the cameras still but also fragile and vulnerable. Unlike his 2011 speech, Obama’s 2012 State of the Union address contained no specific reference to the Tucson shootings. However, an embrace in the crowd between president and congresswoman,
applauded by colleagues and captured on video, spoke with warm eloquence of Giffords’s unique place in American life.53

Gabby’s formal resignation, the third part of her farewell, occasioned another dramatic appearance the day after the State of the Union address: on January 25, 2012, her official departure from office was articulated by a letter of notification read on the open floor of the House. As the session got under way, representative after representative took the floor to express admiration and affection for the departing congresswoman.54 Steny Hoyer, addressing the quiet person ringed by friends standing in the well, spoke for the House when he said, “Gabby, we love you. We have missed you”; “I miss you,” Giffords quietly replied.55 Hoyer repeated her words to the audience, and then waxed enthusiastic: “Mr. Speaker, God has blessed Gabrielle Giffords, and he has sent a blessing to all of us in [her] person.”56 The feelings were tangible. Giffords’s close friend, Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), read aloud the resignation letter that was addressed to Speaker John Boehner, thus performing the written text as a sort of prosopopoeia. Wasserman Schultz voiced the words efficiently—as if Gabby herself were speaking fluidly again, just as in days of old. The businesslike missive offers thanks to Giffords’s constituents for allowing recovery time and praise for her staff, but it moves quickly to add, “I know that now is not the time” to fully return to politics; “I have more work to do on my recovery before I can again serve in elected office. . . . Every day, I am working hard. I will recover and will return, and we will work together again,” the letter concludes.57 Her resignation gave official notice, but it may also be read as a blossoming of the congresswoman’s agency. It met—even exceeded—the dictates of decorum, but it was spoken with such force as to embrace respect and civic friendship. Thus, this proper goodbye provided a powerful remedy to the consolatory farewells of a year before. Giffords resigned with dignity, in her own time, and on her own terms.

**BREAKING THE SILENCE**

Farewells linger. Consolations relieve suffering but invite regrets. Questions of “what if” haunt. The body takes its own time. Doctors had announced in the summer following the shooting that Gabby was recovering and that her communication abilities would return in time, yet it remained uncertain exactly how that recovery would unfold; as she continued the slow process
of rehabilitation, Dr. Gerard Francisco explained, “What was normal months ago isn’t normal now and what’s normal now won’t be normal months from now.” The swirl of politics continued. Its pace picked up for the 2012 election. Nearly six months after her resignation, Giffords returned to the game in partnership with her husband, Mark Kelly, who had at this point retired from his career as an astronaut. Giffords’s reentry into politics was modest; a private dinner with some 300 friends and acquaintances was held in Washington, D.C., where she and Kelly hinted about the possibility of forming a political action committee (PAC). Just a few months later, in September 2012, the “Gabby PAC” was indeed founded, promising to “support candidates who are dedicated to working hard for commonsense, bipartisan solutions that strengthen our communities and our entire country.” The PAC rallied behind Ron Barber, a former district director who was shot in the Tucson attack. It worked against the grain, but the committee’s bipartisan aspirations could not compete with excitement generated by negative red-meat advertising. Few contributions came in.

Renewal of public life sometimes depends upon an accidental gathering of events complemented by agile response. Untimely rhetorics such as these are thus created by ingenuity exercised across a series of oddly associated episodes. Moreover, the gathering of ingredients for a singular rhetoric can be a collaborative affair. Mark Kelly cracked open a small space for Gabby’s return on September 17, 2012: in the midst of election squabbling, he chose the forum of a news editorial to call attention to public dissatisfaction with the national legislature. Announcing that he and his wife had partnered with the National Institute for Civil Discourse, he asserted that Congress was suffering from a “confidence crisis” due to partisanship and incivility; the government was producing unnecessary stalemates and counterproductive outcomes, he claimed. Thus, Giffords and Kelly’s rhetoric turned from celebrating the virtues of bipartisanship to challenging congressional practices.

The September editorial was only the first such expression. On November 8, 2012, Kelly further stoked the flames at the sentencing trial for Giffords’s shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, when he spoke directly to the defendant from the witness stand: “Your decision to commit cold-blooded mass murder also begs of us to look in the mirror. This horrific act warns us to hold our leaders and ourselves responsible for coming up short when we do, for not having the courage to act when it’s hard, even for possessing the
wrong values. We are a people who can watch a young man like you spiral into murderous rampage without choosing to intervene before it is too late,” he asserted. Why is this the case? “We have a political class that is afraid to do something as simple as have a meaningful debate about our gun laws and how they are being enforced.” Instead, politicians “look at gun violence, not as a problem to solve, but as the white elephant in the room to ignore.” The mixed metaphor notwithstanding, Kelly’s charge of cowardice could not have been clearer. He urged Congress to recognize its own complicity in the attack, specifically in terms of the country’s failure not only to resolve gun violence but to even engage the problem at all: “As a nation we have repeatedly passed up the opportunity to address this issue. After Columbine; after Virginia Tech; after Tucson and after Aurora we have done nothing.” Belatedly, the Washington Post recognized this silence, drawing attention to the issue of gun control having been discussed in only a single presidential debate question during the 2012 campaign.

On December 14, 2012, reports of a shooting massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, filled the airwaves; Obama called this a “heinous crime” and vowed meaningful action. The second-term president, “wiping away tears” as he delivered a statement in response to the assault, said that “we’ve endured too many of these tragedies in the past few years,” and “as a country, we have been through this too many times.” Obama’s fourth such event, the tragedy at Newtown’s Sandy Hook Elementary School passed others in its magnitude—20 young student victims and six adults. The Newtown attack reanimated discussion of the Tucson shootings, suddenly seen as but a short time ago. Quickly, the press woke up to gun violence as an issue. Short histories were assembled. Law professor Adam Winkler speculated that Newtown offered a potential “tipping point” in attitudes toward gun control and finally making policy change possible.

From time to time, elections exclude salient policy items from the national agenda. Almost 80 people were killed in mass shootings in the United States in 2012, yet no politician centered on this problem as part of a campaign. The National Rifle Association (NRA) had done its work effectively, with rhetoric backed by well-funded sources that could target politicians who failed to toe the line on gun policy. As Steve Lopez put it in the Los Angeles Times, “lawmakers remain cowed.”

Kelly and Giffords were not running for office, however. The former astronaut extended his November editorial in a Facebook post critiquing
the NRA’s post-Newtown stance (which was, to paraphrase, that “a good
guy with a gun would have saved the children”); the organization “chose
narrow partisan concerns over the safety of our families and communities,”
he wrote.73 That it took a gun-owning, tragedy-inflected American astro-
naut of unquestionable courage (and with no apparent political ambitions
that might be threatened by speaking out) to breach the calcifications of
public debate speaks eloquently to the degree to which issues of violence had
been silenced as a political issue.

Quickly, Kelly and Giffords were on the move, visiting Newtown and
talking with local and state leaders. They were not always welcome; DebraLee Hovey, a Republican member of the Connecticut House of Representa-
tives, posted her own message on Facebook, warning, “Stay out of my
towns!!”74 Still, the pair was not to be dissuaded, and soon, a joint op-ed
from Giffords and Kelly was published in USA Today announcing the
formation of a new PAC called Americans for Responsible Solutions. Their
rhetoric invoked cultural sources of pluck—“determination and ingenu-
ity”—that Americans have drawn upon successfully before.75 Common
sense is not guaranteed in the political process, the editorial warned; either
money speaks or silence returns. This rhetorical act, then, marked the start
of a new phase for Giffords and her reformulated agency, which played out
through this and other forms of public address over the next few months.

PUBLIC ADDRESS, JANUARY–MARCH 2013

Oratory is a form of direct address; persuasion aims to influence opinion,
shape judgment, and prompt action. Newspaper editorials, like the one
Giffords published in partnership with her husband to launch their cam-
paign against gun violence, serve these functions well. Moreover, such
direct address frequently becomes dissembled to aphorisms that then may
circulate widely, sometimes with commentary, extending the rhetor’s reach
that much more.

Gabby Giffords and Mark Kelly chose the second anniversary of the
Tucson shootings to return to the public stage by way of their aforemen-
tioned editorial announcing the inception of Americans for Responsible
Solutions. The missive carried the former representative’s unmistakable
voice: “America has seen an astounding 11 mass shootings since a madman
used a semiautomatic pistol with an extended ammunition clip to shoot me
Congress’s response? “Nothing at all.” Traditionally, the nation has shown “ingenuity” in developing policy by balancing rights and freedoms against the safety and needs of the people; in this case, “we’re not even trying,” she lamented. In March 2011, Obama had penned his own editorial calling for a “common sense” solution to gun violence; Giffords and Kelly’s commentary implicitly suggested that such common sense does not come easily. Americans must gather, they argued, to level the playing field such that dialogue can unfold between those who advocate for gun rights and those who have suffered tragic consequences resulting from the abuse of such freedoms. “We have experienced too much death and hurt to remain idle,” their editorial concluded. “Our response to the Newtown massacre must consist of more than regret, sorrow and condolence. The children of Sandy Hook Elementary School and all victims of gun violence deserve fellow citizens and leaders who have the will to prevent gun violence in the future.” The message circulated widely, in printed and virtual forms.

Giffords swiftly became “a leading voice of the gun control moment in America,” seizing upon “increased pressure on the gun lobby in the wake of . . . Newtown.” The language of “gun control” was also replaced by a newer appeal, which goaded politicians to do what politicians are supposed to do: search for ways to mitigate an ugly problem. Mark Takano (D-CA), in a statement acknowledging the second anniversary of the attack in Tucson, explained, “While I realize that there is no single solution for preventing mass shootings, I refuse to believe that our current system is the best we can do.” The memories of the fallen, together with Giffords’s inspired public service, filled Takano with a sense of determination and hope. Mark Kelly continued the campaign, appearing on Anderson Cooper 360°, where the Gulf War veteran, former Navy pilot, and former NASA space shuttle commander argued that “common ground” existed between gun owners and the vulnerable public.

Giffords and Kelly’s January 2013 initiative centered on animating citizens in social networks who would voice the issue. Politics creates unusual allies. New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg worked with his coalition, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, to drive conversation about gun violence at the local level. Other groups came together, including “One Million Moms for Gun Control,” which sponsored a march. Sandy Hook was featured as a major impetus for such campaigns, but the appalling number of deaths occurring regularly in cities such as Chicago implied that the
problem is much more complicated than publicly imagined. Gun celebration days also occurred to counter such advocacies, and the debate would manifest in alternative cultural expressions as well. Congress was getting its own collective will together, building enough agreement to hold hearings on the issue. At the very least, gun violence had finally made it onto the public agenda, marking a distinct success for the movement.

Giffords and Kelly continued the pressure, appearing together on Diane Sawyer’s program (for the second time) on January 8, 2013. The 2013 Sawyer interview features a lead-in where a voice-over reports, “In the two years since [the Tucson massacre], it’s estimated more than 57,000 adults and 5,000 children have died from a gun in the United States.”82 The magnitude of such numbers is usually masked by the drama surrounding those few select events to which the media and public devote attention. This interview broadened memory visually. In the segment, Kelly sits beside Giffords, facing the news anchor. Questions for Giffords are phrased smartly, such that a one- or two-word answer will suffice. The dialogue has a poetic quality, and Giffords expresses her feelings directly while also giving cues that she fully understands what is being asked of her. The interview is gentle but not condescending. In this forum and elsewhere, Giffords expressed both her anger and her resolve in response to the continued tragedy of gun violence in America—forceful emotions that underscored a will for change.

The Giffords-Kelly partnership was not without precedent. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence had pushing Congress to implement a ban on assault weapons decades earlier. A presidential aide, James Brady was disabled when he was shot in an assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan. James and his wife, Sarah, turned this life-altering event into a successful public campaign in support of restrictions on firearms.83 They appeared together at events; he as a living reminder of the stakes of the issue and she as an energetic, articulate voice to handle debates. The Giffords-Kelly team appeared to learn from these efforts and extend their own presence across the fundraising matrices that influence circulation of messages in blended old and new media. What was also new in this case was that these private citizens were publicly working in sync with the presidency. Shortly following the Sawyer interview, Giffords and Kelly joined the president and vice president at the White House for a public statement.84 Surrounded by a flock of children, Obama announced “a sweeping set of
proposals to ban automatic weapons, limit magazines to 10 bullets, introduce universal background checks for all firearms buyers and increase scrutiny of mental health patients.” Direct action was promised. The highly publicized event certainly captured the attention of the pro-gun lobbies; NRA leader Wayne LaPierre declared that the “fight of the century” was on. In the meantime, weapons flew off the shelves in gun stores, as many feared that new legislation would make it far more difficult for the public to secure weapons in the future.

Giffords followed the presidential address with an appearance at a U.S. Senate hearing on gun violence shortly thereafter. Although congressional hearings do not usually begin with witness testimony, Giffords provided just such a testimonial statement at the outset of the session. Again, she spoke her mind, choosing her words precisely to set forth facts, evaluations, anticipations, injunctions, and duties. Her speech worked through restricted, measured enunciation to form a clear, moving statement. “Speaking is difficult,” she admitted, “but I need to say something important”: “Violence is a big problem. Too many children are dying”—“too many children,” she repeated with emphasis. Thus, private anger was transformed into public need by the simple, direct expression of the magnitude of harm. The camera covering her talk focused upon a set of handwritten notes from which she was speaking. Her claims were printed in verse form; indeed, these short, rhythmic sentences looked almost like lyrics for a song. The recorded semiosis of notes, speech, pictures, and forum went viral and were later released by her PAC. The moment seemed to mark Giffords’s renewal of agency as well as sum her development of a singular rhetoric.

**Heroic Achievement and a Profile in Courage**

Presidential address, congressional hearings, media interviews, and blogging networks all circulated the positions espoused by Giffords and Kelly, as well as those voiced by the NRA; soon, public opinion coalesced to form overwhelming support for Congress to act. Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Pat Toomey (R-PA) proposed a bill that was far from Obama’s original gun control initiative, but it offered something of a compromise: extending the current requirements for background checks so that they would apply to “gun shows and Internet sales,” but exempting sales and transfers between “family members and friends.” The NRA went ballistic, asserting that the
bill represented a slippery slope and that Second Amendment freedoms should trump any legislation. The “common sense” initiative had anticipated this. Gabby and Mark traveled the halls of Congress, confronting those who once idealized her life with the realities of a politically charged advocacy.

The Senate vote failed to clear the threshold necessary to defeat a filibuster. Gina Daschbach reported that, “of the 45 senators who voted against the background check, 42 received money from the gun lobby”; clearly, money speaks. Giffords expressed her reaction vehemently in the New York Times: “These senators made their decision based on political fear and on cold calculations about the money of special interests like the National Rifle Association, which in the last election cycle spent around $25 million on contributions, lobbying and outside spending.” Their fears are nothing, she reminded the public, compared to the true and visceral terror the children killed at Sandy Hook surely felt before they were so brutally slain. Vowing to never give up, Giffords wrote bluntly, “I am asking every reasonable American to help me tell the truth about the cowardice these senators demonstrated.” The self-styled personae of U.S. senators bespeak an honor culture; there are few more damning charges than personal cowardice for such men and women. Political scientist Kristin Goss offered analysis that confirmed why such a stinging indictment was fitting, however, explaining that “the typical pattern with gun policy is: a terrible thing happens, the country gets outraged and demands action, nothing happens, and we go back to the status quo.” She observed, “That’s not happening this time,” citing the “huge effort by gun control activists to keep pushing.” Nonetheless, as with Obama’s “common sense,” it would take more than platitudes to fight determined, well-moneyed interests.

The vote for gun control was not yet ripe, but Gabby’s civic achievements were undeniable. On May 5, 2013, the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation honored Giffords by naming her the recipient of the 2013 Profile in Courage Award. Caroline Kennedy, in presenting the award, described Gabby as “a woman who inspires the entire world,” and who “has turned a personal nightmare into a movement for political change.” Kennedy noted that, while many might have retreated to private life following a trauma such as hers, Giffords “perseveres not just for herself, but for Newtown, and Aurora, for Chicago and Tucson.” In this case, the claims of heroic virtue were well chosen. Giffords accepted the distinction with modesty. “I believe we all
have courage inside," she said, adding, “I just wish there was more courage in Congress.”

**CONCLUSION: RHETORIC AND VIOLENCE**

On the third anniversary of the Tucson shootings, Giffords confessed in the *New York Times* that, in the time since the attack, she had spent day after day “learning how to talk again, how to walk again”—all the “gritty, painful, frustrating work” of rehabilitation. She asked, “If simply completing a normal day requires so much work, how would I ever be able to fulfill a larger purpose?” This essay has traced her recovery of agency through rhetorical travels that reached toward a full range of articulation. The trajectory of her discourse may be understood as an untimely rhetoric, a sequence of expressions out of sync with conventional expectations and practices. Her career cut short when she became the target of an assassin’s bullet, Giffords struggled to acquire, experiment with, and master novel, expanded possibilities of address. Against these life conditions, the consolations of Congress framed her as a heroine, thereby producing striking bipartisan moments (albeit with a civility that did not stay) but also constraining her public life. With similar good intentions, the press pushed her into the role of victim and patient. Yet over and against these frames, she managed in the space of a year to reappear decisively in Congress, vote independently, and end her term as a representative with dignity.

Her fuller return to public life was gradual and tentative at first, using as its vehicle a PAC that would allow her to continue to pursue policy change, simply in a new role. Mark Kelly began to change the pace of her political re-entry when he called on Congress to account for its partisan antics; then, he fought to end the spiral of silence on gun violence during the campaign season. Giffords and Kelly’s blended agency unfolded as they joined forces in the expression of a singular rhetoric. Together, the two moved rhetorically from being defined by a traumatic event to expanding the articulation of gun violence as a public issue. Giffords would uniquely voice (with stubborn insistence and distinct expressivity) the need to remember and do justice to victims of gun violence—messages that became amplified across visits with victims, memorials, op-ed writing, television interviews, the Internet, and groundbreaking testimony in Congress. Her long campaign reminds us that, in dealing with the issues of agency, the resources of
Polyhymnia often need to be mobilized fully. Giffords’s discourse could have been and frequently was subordinated to the labeling of others who would identify her as a retired official, a victim of tragedy, or a rehabilitating subject. She worked with and through these attributed roles to voice her own status, intentions, and issues as an active—not passive—agent in many forms and forums. Untimely rhetorics may find no single, perfect mode of address, and agents possess no perfect prescribed patterns; thus, any agent requires many determined acts of ingenuity to build resources and invent new connections sufficient to express with dignity the gravity of an issue that has been obscured by silence, sentiment, or politics. Agency was achieved in this case by the inspired embodiment of a variety of cultural forms, from personal expression, to the drama of appearance, to oratorical address.

The issues under discussion in this controversy remain unresolved, of course, and this study offers but a single case for consideration. However, the all-too-rare open discussion of gun violence that ultimately appeared in the wake of the Tucson tragedy is important to note; moreover, its difficulties in sustaining attention suggest that political indifference and the distraction of consolation remain powerful obstacles to social change. Just as “Occupy Wall Street” stretched boundaries to place issues of wealth and poverty before the public, so Mark Kelly and Gabrielle Giffords undertook vigorous and imaginative action to make sure violence was discussed. In this case, I believe that Polyhymnia serves to call critical attention to the variety and power of cultural resources that enabled Giffords to avoid being written off from politics and to return, on her own terms, in several distinct rhetorical acts to reclaim her public life. When the bonds of language are sundered by violence for political leaders and common citizens alike, rhetoric discovers its limits and yet is called upon to transcend and transform its practices.

Recently, Giffords extended her voice even farther by joining with Roxanna Green, the mother of Christina-Taylor Green (the nine-year-old girl who died in the Tucson massacre). “The grief of the parents of children killed in Newtown—like the families of those killed in Tucson—doesn’t diminish with anniversaries. It takes no holidays. It is not diluted by the passage of time,” they editorialized for the *Newtown Bee*, extending sympathies in the summer of 2013 at the one-week anniversary of yet another fatal shooting, this time in Santa Monica, California.102 Their untimely rhetoric seals into memory urgencies unaddressed by the awkward efforts of the
American government to restrain its own incivilities and respond meaningfully to what seems to be a growing culture of gun violence in the United States. In the end, Giffords’s rhetoric draws into stark relief contrasts between the banality of partisanship, yoked to remorse, and the hopeful resources of civil courage.

NOTES


3. Dione, “Gabby Giffords.”


8. Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). A rhetoric outside its time moves in fits and starts in contingent ways through events; criticism analyzes such a rhetoric as it comes into being against the tides.


16. Jeffrey Walker, “Aristotle’s Lyric: Re-imagining the Rhetoric of Epideictic Song,” College English 51 (1989): 5–28. Early English lyrics were invented by poets at the juncture of several languages and constituted enduring textual expression of sentiment. The lyric in classical Horatian form admits of expression, too, but also is known to make its point.

17. To expand on Burke’s triumvirate as described here, these symbolic forms of address distinctively position poet, dramatist, and orator with both the possibilities and challenges of expression. “Lyric” is defined as a type of discourse “expressing and evoking a unified attitude towards a momentous situation more or less explicitly implied,” as per Kenneth Burke, Essays toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950–1955, ed. William H. Rueckert (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007), 20. “Drama centers in an action, whereas the lyric aims to arrest some one mood or moment,” as per Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (1945; rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 41. Oratory carries most directly “the notion of address” to audiences, as per Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 281.


24. In his work, Gregson Davis finds “lyric argument” to move through genuine expression to imply or assert a claim that calls for reflection on the present; see his *Polyhymnia: The Rhetoric of Horatian Lyric Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

25. A conceit is “an ingenious comparison between things seemingly unlike,” as per *The Literary Encyclopedia*, “Conceit” (by David Reid), March 21, 2002, http://www.litencyc.com/php/topics.php?rec=true&UID=213 (accessed February 18, 2014). Giffords was perfected into a hero by surviving her would-be assassin’s onslaught; the conceit of the fallen hero, which was imposed upon her and which she worked to reshape, thus became both a resource for and a barrier to her recovery of agency in public life.


29. *Expressing the Sense*, H 144.


32. *Expressing the Sense*, H 145.


34. *Expressing the Sense*, H 146.

35. *Expressing the Sense*, H 146; emphasis added.


40. *Expressing the Sense*, H 147.


45. Montini, “Gabrielle Giffords’ Staffer Talks.”


48. Dwyer, “Gabrielle Giffords Returns.”


64. Kelly, “Statement at Hearing.”


70. Fields and Jones, “Gun Debate.”


76. Unless otherwise noted, all citations in this paragraph refer to Giffords and Kelly, “Fighting Gun Violence.”


81. For more information on this organization, see http://www.mayorsagainstillegalguns.org (accessed February 18, 2014).


83. See http://www.bradycampaign.org (accessed February 18, 2014) for more about their initiative.


86. MacAskill and Pilkington, “Fight of the Century.”


88. Robillard, “Handwritten Testimony Photo.”


93. Giffords, “Gun Lobby’s Grip.”
94. Giffords, “Gun Lobby’s Grip.”
96. Kelly, “Giffords’ Group.”
98. Tackeff, “Profile in Courage Award.”