Amercians are, sadly, accustomed to gun violence. In 2010, there were 11,078 homicides by firearms in the United States.¹ Shootings occur daily across the nation, and most people pay little attention to them unless they occur in their own neighborhoods, involve people whom they know, or are particularly heinous or unusual. However, one particular instance of gun violence rocked the nation at the start of 2011, when Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) was shot and badly wounded during a public event meeting her constituents outside a supermarket in her district in Tucson. The congresswoman survived the shooting, but six other people did not. The dead included U.S. District Judge John Roll, Gabriel Zimmerman from Giffords’s staff, and four other citizens: Phyllis Schneck, Dorwan Stoddard, Dorothy Morris, and Christina-Taylor Green, a nine-year old child.² The 24-year-old shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, was arrested at the scene. Loughner was later diagnosed with schizophrenia, but after being compelled to accept therapeutic drugs, he was eventually ruled fit to stand trial. Loughner pled guilty to the crimes and was sentenced to seven consecutive life sentences in prison plus 140 years without the possibility of parole.³

At Loughner’s sentencing hearing, Giffords’s husband Mark Kelly read a statement confronting the shooter with details of the damage he had inflicted:

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Her life has been forever changed. Plans she had for our family and her career have been immeasurably altered. Every day is a continuous struggle to do those things she was once so very good at. . . . There’s more. Gabby struggles to walk. Her right arm is paralyzed. She is partially blind. Gabby works harder in one minute of an hour—fighting to make each individual moment count for something—than most of us work in an entire day.

Kelly acknowledged that Loughner was mentally ill, but he declared that he was nonetheless “responsible for the death and hurt inflicted on us all.” Kelly’s claim that Loughner was accountable for his actions was more than a demand for justice motivated by his personal loss; he expressed a view consistent with the practices of the U.S. criminal justice system. As Nicholas Kristof wrote, “Psychiatric disorders are the only kind of sickness that we as a society regularly respond to not with sympathy but with handcuffs and incarceration.” A 2010 study by the National Sheriff’s Association and the Treatment Advocacy Center claimed, “Nationwide in America, more than three times as many mentally ill people are housed in prisons and jails as in hospitals.”

The Tucson violence, much as many mass shooting incidents had done before, sparked an intense and vitriolic debate about gun violence and mental health in the United States. What was different about this debate, however, was that the discussion not only focused on the issue of access to guns, and subsequently the desirability and effectiveness of policies that might prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands, it also focused on the possible political motivations of the shooter. Most people recognized that Loughner was mentally ill, but they offered conflicting opinions about whether he focused his rage on the congresswoman because he was inspired, and perhaps pushed over the edge, by a culture of political incivility reflected in the polarized and sometimes hate-filled political discourse on talk radio, cable news, and in online forums.

Representative Giffords was a moderate Democrat representing a closely contested political district in Arizona. Although she had a history of reaching across the aisle on many issues, she ultimately voted with her party in support of the Affordable Care Act (which conservative critics labeled Obamacare), arguably the most hotly contested legislation of the past two decades. This choice truly provoked the ire of those on the right in her district and beyond, and conservative activists targeted her during the 2010
campaign, when she was deemed vulnerable because of this vote. Giffords won a close election following a hard-fought campaign that included many especially negative attack ads, but even after the election was over, the conservative rage provoked by the passage of the health care reform act continued to simmer. Because Giffords was such a visible focus of this (rhetorical) rage, liberals almost immediately claimed that the political conservatives bore at least some responsibility for the (material) violence directed against her. As one would expect, conservative voices spoke out to refute charges that their political messages or campaign strategies might have contributed to this terrible tragedy. Indeed, many of these advocates claimed that the idea that conservative arguments sparked the violence was preposterous, and that these were merely cheap attempts to take advantage of a tragedy and turn it into political gain to stifle conservative voices and thus silence opposition to the policies advocated by the Obama administration and the Democrats in control of the U.S. Senate.

As the public debate unfolded, it came to focus on what national standards, values, or even notions of human decency and respect should be demanded of those who would seek to communicate their political positions in the public forum. The debate also turned, as had many before, on the shooter and his responsibility for his own actions. Loughner proved to be severely mentally ill, which of course complicated this debate about his ability to control his impulses and understand the web of his own complex emotions. Questions of responsibility, blame, justice, and civility swirled across the national stage, demanding at the very least that politicians, scholars, and pundits (if not all Americans) take a long, hard look at their discourse and its effects. The essays in this issue all address varying aspects of this public debate. In addition, the essays have implications for the rhetorical discourses and public responses that attended other massacres that came either before or after the violence in Tucson.

In the first article, the editors of this volume (Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan) consider the conservatives’ responses to the charges that their uncivil discourse might have contributed to the violence. The paper uses a dramatistic critical framework, drawing upon the theories of Kenneth Burke to examine how conservative arguments in the dispute tended to emphasize certain aspects of the Burkean pentad to shape their response while simultaneously ignoring other elements. The result, we argue, is a body of messages that lacks narrative coherence, but more
importantly, we suggest that the discourse is inadequate because it has difficulty accounting for the shooter’s agency and culpability for his actions given his particular mental state. The conservative arguments, we believe, are thus unable to provide a transformative redemption that would lead to a satisfying resolution for the pollution and disruption to the social order created by the violence, or that would respond to the demands for public policies that might better protect society from similar acts of gun violence in the future.

In the second essay, Beth L. Boser and Randall A. Lake look specifically at former vice presidential candidate and former governor of Alaska Sarah Palin’s rhetoric in responding to the accusations that her discourse was especially responsible for sparking the violence against Giffords and, more generally, diminishing the standards for civil discourse in American politics. Boser and Lake lay out the case that was made against Palin by those in the national media, citing the various statements, advertisements, and online communications from “Mama Grizzly” that made use of guns, military metaphors, and violent images in rallying her constituents against Giffords and other Democrats. In response, Palin produced an eight-minute video reply on YouTube. Boser and Lake examine this video as a potential example of *apologia*, or self-defense. They argue, however, that the video is not a very satisfying, sufficient, or effective response because Palin casts herself in value terms that are so abstract they do not confront the concrete material facts or conditions that are shaping the public controversy. Boser and Lake thus use Palin’s response as a springboard to investigate some of the classical precepts of rhetorical theory—including the categories of forensic, deliberative, and epideictic rhetoric—as well as interpretations of constitutionally protected speech, offering compelling insights about the academic and pragmatic implications of rhetoric such as Palin’s.

David A. Frank, in this volume’s third essay, examines President Barack Obama’s memorial address delivered in the wake of the Tucson massacre and compares it with the eulogy that he gave almost two years later on behalf of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Connecticut. Frank argues that in the Tucson speech Obama draws on the book of Job from the Bible and characterizes the evil of the shooter as ineffable and unknowable; thus, his discourse fails to explain the causes of the violence, nor can it offer any pragmatic solutions in response to the tragedy. In the
Sandy Hook speech, however, Obama turns to a different section of the Bible, citing Second Corinthians. In this speech, Frank notes, Obama is not merely interested in comforting the victims; he is also willing to assess blame for the gun violence and to set the conditions for legislative and/or executive action to curb future acts of gun violence.

The fourth essay in the collection, by G. Thomas Goodnight, looks specifically at Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the unique role that she plays in helping to put a face on this incident and other similar gun tragedies. Giffords does not simply disappear after she is shot; her assailant fails to silence her voice, and Goodnight argues that her struggles to reclaim that public voice during her rehabilitation become powerful symbols of the suffering and loss caused in the United States by gun violence, and also of the polarization and dysfunction that characterizes the contemporary political culture in the nation. Goodnight sees this shooting as a case of “untimely rhetoric”—discourse that challenges shared conventions, is profoundly revealing of character, may rupture the routines of life, and unsettles the political practices that shape society. Giffords’s suffering initially promotes a sense of shared loss across the political aisle that many celebrate as a hopeful sign that civility can indeed be reclaimed in the Congress. Yet when Giffords and her husband, Mark Kelly, refuse to quietly disappear and accept their reduced role in public life, and when they again insert themselves in the arena as advocates for policies that would limit easy access to guns, that dream of civility proves impossible to sustain. As a suffering victim, Giffords may even achieve greater power and influence in the public forum than she possessed before her injuries. This new effectiveness reignites the partisan opponents of gun control, thus demonstrating the insincerity and inadequacy of the immediate responses that had seemed to herald a new era of comity in American politics.

In the fifth and final article in the issue, Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O’Rourke argue that two different senses of civility were demonstrated in the immediate wake of the Tucson violence: first, civility as manners, which entailed a discussion about the need for politeness and decorum; and second, civility as political friendship and respect—the type of civility that was demonstrated when Representative Giffords’s colleagues from both sides of the aisle stood up to praise her in public speeches and media interviews. Stuckey and O’Rourke claim, however, that neither of these forms of civility is sufficient to create healthy democratic deliberation and
that furthermore they risk silencing those without power or influence in society. Instead, Stuckey and O’Rourke propose a deeper type of civility that they see as focused on creating and sustaining a genuine political community of identification and shared social purpose. They argue that this type of civility would maximize the opportunities to search for places of agreement, while also urging citizens to be mindful of the need to listen to and respect disagreement, as well as acknowledging the differences in power that lead to disappointment and resentment.

Although it is our intention to invite readers to engage each of these essays on their own terms and with open eyes, there are some common themes and messages here that we believe unify these essays. First, all of these authors seek to find useful lessons from the violence in Tucson—often by speculating about or highlighting examples of rhetorical forms that might serve us better in the future. In short, each essay takes critical analysis as its starting point, yet is also interwoven with an advocacy for solutions that would offer at least the possibility that we could reconstruct the political sphere and encourage elected officials to come together to propose, debate, and adopt policy solutions to help prevent, or at least reduce the frequency of, future incidences of gun violence.

Second, all of these essays probe the issue of civility itself. To what extent is civility an essential element of deliberative public discourse in a democracy? In what cases might demands for civility silence those without power or influence in a society? Certainly these questions are not new for rhetorical scholars; they have been continuing concerns in our field since at least the 1960s, yet the persistence of the issue speaks to its importance. These essays offer specific suggestions as to how critics might approach questions of civility, and in so doing they offer hope that a deeper, more meaningful notion of civility can be understood, theorized, critically examined, celebrated in practice, and nourished through pedagogy.

Third, all of the essays in this volume share the perspective that communication is not only integral to democratic governance, it is in fact the very stuff of democracy. Democratic government exists because we engage in political talk to express our opinions, investigate alternative policies and ways of thinking, and make our electoral choices. Democratic government can thrive only if our political talk binds us into communities of shared purpose, commitment, and action. James Madison fretted in the Federalist Papers, especially the tenth, about the danger that citizens would focus too
much on their narrow self-interests and as a result be drawn into divisive political factions. In recent years, it seems that Madison’s worst fears have been realized, as there has been a growing tendency in the United States and in many other democratic nations toward more hyperpartisan political discourse. Candidates hire consultants who develop strategies to motivate their party base—often by driving wedges deep into the cracks created by party lines—and the flow of money into politics has only intensified the use of campaign messages and strategies intended to inflame voters’ passions. Although such tactics may motivate an otherwise apathetic voting public, they also make it more difficult for elected officials to come together to find solutions to public problems. As Roderick P. Hart, Jay P. Childers, and Colene J. Lind argued, “Extreme partisanship encourages voters to huddle together and dismiss the other side, letting the instinct of compromise shrivel up with them.”

Each of the essays in this volume contributes perspectives that would help rehabilitate and reform politics by emphasizing the contributions that scholarship in communication studies can offer to improve public deliberation and strengthen our civic community. From its very inception, one of the most important goals of the speech (now communication) discipline was preparing the citizenry for democratic life. Moments of tragedy, crisis, and calamity such as the violence in Tucson provide opportunities for critical reflection and soul-searching. Such opportunities should not be ignored nor easily forgotten as time passes. We hope that the essays in this volume provide insights that will profitably shape conversations in the academy and beyond.

NOTES


4. Rufca, “‘Done Thinking about You.’”
5. Rufca, “‘Done Thinking about You.’”
7. Kristof, “Mental Hospital Called Jail.”
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