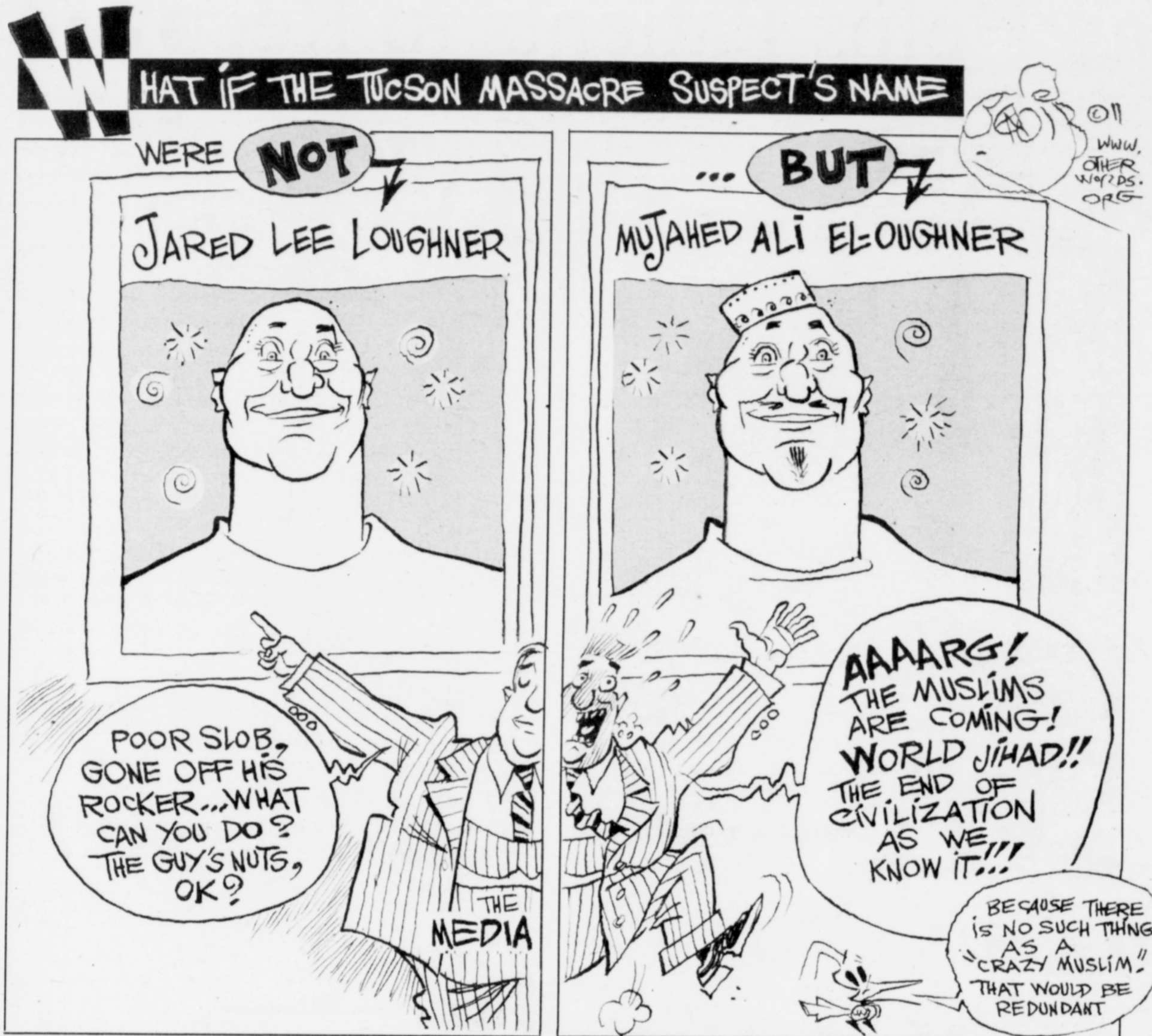


# OPINION



## What if the Gunman was Named Mohammed

BY PHYLLIS BENNIS



The repercussions of the attempted assassination in Tucson of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, in which six people were murdered and 13 wounded, continue to resonate. The discussion--and discussions about the discussion--continues. Meanwhile, we're failing to have a meaningful debate about how we can achieve real changes that would make a repeat of this tragedy impossible.

That would mean standing up to the National Rifle Association and working to enact real, stronger gun-control laws. It would require making mental health care truly accessible for those who so desperately need it. And ending all hostile, eliminationist rhetoric, especially gimmicks that feature crosshairs over congressional districts, "second amendment remedies," and offers to "shoot a fully automatic M-16" as a campaign souvenir.

It's hard to predict if U.S. political discourse will become less toxic and more civil because of this outrageous attack. President Barack Obama's funeral oration at the Tucson memorial hit all the right notes. He urged all who listened to live our lives and transform our country into the nation that nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green was just beginning to claim as her own. It was a powerful moment.

He didn't say a word about the alleged gunman Jared Lee Loughner, or about the possible consequences of the vitriol and violence that has infected contemporary political debate. Maybe that was a good call. Certainly Loughner is mentally disturbed, and while there's no question his delusional rants reflect some of the right-wing tirades all too common on the Internet, it's certainly possible those ideas had nothing to do with his targeting of a politically moderate congresswoman.

What if things were just a little bit different? What if the alleged gunman was named Ali Mohammed in-

stead of Jared Lee Loughner? What if he had been a mentally ill Muslim Arab immigrant instead of a mentally ill white, Christian-Jewish, native-born U.S. citizen? What if his delusional rants seemed to channel not those found-on-the-Internet right-wing rants about the gold standard and government invasion, but rather those found-on-the-Internet calls for violent jihad?

Would we still be so careful not to place any responsibility on those who spew hateful, violent rhetoric? Would we still be so certain that there's no link between violent rhetoric and the response of an unstable mind? When Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City federal building, which at the time was the worst terrorist act ever committed on U.S. soil, the immediate assumption was that an Arab and/or Muslim terrorist "had to be" responsible. For the few days after the bombing, before McVeigh was captured, initial media reports were packed with experts who were certain the attack bore all the hallmarks of "Middle Eastern terrorism." Then

white Christian American citizen McVeigh was caught. Oops. Sorry.

Did anyone even bother to check whether would-be underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab might actually be mentally ill or unstable? How about Maj. Nidal Hasan, the army psychiatrist accused of shooting 13 people at Fort Hood? Does it matter? Or do we simply assume that anyone who carries out an act of violence inspired by some warped version of Islam is "sane," but that anyone who may have been inspired or influenced by "don't retreat, reload" rhetoric while on a shooting spree--but who maybe looks and talks a little more "like us"--must be inherently deranged?

Think about it. What if things were just a little bit different? What if the Tucson shooter's name were Ali Mohammed? What would be our response to the Tucson shootings then?

Phyllis Bennis is the director of the New Internationalism project at the Institute for Policy Studies.



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