

On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies

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The current political landscape seems rife with partisanship and toxic rhetoric. Although this is certainly nothing new, there has been an increase in rhetoric that suggests that citizens take up arms against the government. In the wake of the shooting at a political rally held by Representative Gabrielle Giffords, the media began asking whether violent rhetoric could lead to violent acts and politicians began to call for greater civility in political discourse. This essay examines the rhetoric of Sarah Palin and Sharron Angle to explore the rhetorical implications of a worldview that deeply distrusts the government and considers armed insurrection as an appropriate corrective to a government run amok.

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On January 8, 2011, Jared Lee Loughner took a cab to a political meeting held by Representative Gabrielle Giffords and opened fire. The event was dubbed “Congress on Your Corner” and was meant as a meeting with constituents. Giffords was shot in the head and is currently working on a slow recovery, now able to move her arms and breathe without the use of a ventilator. Twenty people were shot and six died as a result of the shooting.

In the wake of the shooting, media pundits and politicians began questioning whether the sometimes strident rhetoric found in the current political atmosphere may have had something to do with the shooting. Former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin has especially been scrutinized for her statements and strategies. Giffords herself had previously expressed concern when Palin posted a map with crosshairs over the districts of vulnerable Congresspeople: “We’re on Sarah Palin’s targeted list, but the thing is that the way she has it depicted has the cross hairs of a gun sight over our district,” Giffords told MSNBC at the time. “When people do that, they’ve got to realize there’s consequences to that action.”¹

In this essay, I wish to examine the potential consequences of a particular style of violent, revolutionary rhetoric that has emerged from the political right. Of course the idea of revolution is not intrinsic to the right; the leftist 1960s counterculture had also expressed the desire to overthrow what they saw as government tyranny. But much of this discourse was relegated to those on the fringes. It is especially troubling that such sentiments for violent overthrow are now being espoused by the very individuals that seek election to public office. The two cases I wish to examine are Sarah Palin’s use of the term “reload” and Sharron Angle’s use of the term “Second Amendment remedy.” I

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¹ Dan Balz, “Cross Hairs: Crossroads for Palin?” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2011.

suggest that this rhetorical form has severe implications for democratic practice and the nature of political dissent.

Sarah Palin and the Tea Party

Sarah Palin rose to prominence as the Vice-Presidential candidate in the 2008 election. A relatively unknown governor from Alaska who had only begun her term, she quickly galvanized the conservative base with her folksy oratory. In short, she drew on a long tradition of populist rhetoric that values the wisdom of the common man and woman. She was especially fond of referring to herself as a “hockey mom” and Joe the Plumber became a central figure in the McCain/Palin presidential campaign.

Yet more recently her rhetoric has become more strident as she has become a Tea Party favorite. The *Washington Post* reported on Sarah Palin’s post to Twitter in March 2010 “telling conservatives: ‘Don’t Retreat, Instead - RELOAD!’ The tweet referred people to her Facebook ‘target’ map showing the districts of Gabrielle Giffords and other House Democrats in a rifle’s cross hairs.”² This was not merely a onetime occurrence, however. The *Washington Post* reports that “a day after talk radio host Laura Schlessinger quit her show, following criticism for using the N-word repeatedly in a broadcast, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin told her: ‘Don’t retreat . . . reload!’”³ Perhaps this is one reason why Palin’s map of 20 congressional districts marked with rifle crosshairs was particularly troubling.⁴

The *Anchorage Daily News* paints a particularly vivid image of the context of the debate over health care reform: “When Palin’s political action committee last week singled out 20 Democratic members of Congress by using rifle scopes to ‘target’ them on a map, it drew more attention than it might have had it not followed a week of overheated debate on health care: protesters shouting homophobic and racial epithets and spitting at members of Congress about to vote on the bill, and even throwing bricks through their office windows.”⁵ Thus the debate over health care seemed particularly nasty. The *New York Times* reported that members of Congress received death threats, faxes of nooses, broken windows from bricks and pellet guns, vandalism to their homes and those of their families, and even white powder, reminiscent of the anthrax scare in 2001. Although much of this was directed at Democrats, the *Times* notes that even Republicans had some threats and vandalism.⁶

Palin, of course, tried to distance her rhetoric from the vandalism and violent actions taken by those opposed to health care reform: “We know violence isn’t the answer . . . When we take up our arms, we’re talking about our vote. This B.S. coming from the

² Dana Milbank, “A McKinley Moment?” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2011.

³ Rachel Weiner, “Palin Tells Embattled Dr. Laura: ‘Don’t Retreat . . . Reload,’” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2010.

⁴ After the shootings Palin tried to distance herself from idea of crosshairs on the map, with one Palin advisor stating that the icons in question were “surveyor’s symbols” rather than crosshairs. In light of her previous—and, for that matter, current—rhetoric, such a move seems disingenuous. See Dan Balz and Jon Cohen, “Americans See Tone of Debate as Negative,” *Washington Post*, January 18, 2011.

⁵ Erika Bolstad, “Palin Critics Take Aim at Cross Hairs on Her Facebook Page Alaska,” *Anchorage Daily News*, March 28, 2010.

⁶ Michael Cooper, “Accusations Fly between Parties over Threats and Vandalism,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2010.

lamestream media lately about us inciting violence, don't let the conversation be subverted, don't let a conversation like that get you off track."⁷ Yet this seems problematic—if one wishes to speak about going to the ballot box, one says so; one need not code it within the metaphor of taking up arms. Moreover, some may not actually agree with Palin concerning her meaning of the terms. Kathleen Parker, writing for the *Washington Post*, suggests that the current scene of polarization is spawning belief in the need for militant political action: "I hear daily from dissatisfied Americans who feel their duty is not only to protest but to fight if necessary. Here is one recent example, in response to a column I had written about America's true centrist nature: 'Sorry, honey, but we don't need the squishy middle right now. We need the hyper patriots, the combat vets ready to defend the constitution with arms if necessary.'"⁸

This seems to be the main issue concerning the use of violent rhetoric—that some may actually take it seriously. From a rhetorical standpoint, we must begin by asking the question of who would embrace such rhetoric. Edwin Black argues that rhetorical discourses imply an ideal auditor, for whom the discourse is designed, and this implied auditor can often be linked to a particular ideology.⁹ The idea that one would need to take up arms against the government reflects a deep distrust of the government and democratic practice. Stephen Frantzich states that "democracy is the recurrent suspicion that over half the people are right over half the time."¹⁰ Those who would enforce their beliefs and values over the majority through force completely reject such a notion, firmly convinced of their own righteousness.

Richard Hofstadter suggests that there is a particular rhetorical style he refers to as the "paranoid style" with the "central image" of "a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life."¹¹ Within the Tea Party, one can see such conspiracies with accusations that President Obama is actually a closet Muslim who is not really a naturally born citizen of the United States that is hell-bent on creating a socialist state. Yet these are sentiments not merely coming from the fringe. Sarah Palin herself stated: "What I believe that Obama is doing right now—he is hell-bent on weakening America."¹² Such a belief seems oddly reminiscent of Joseph McCarthy's assertions that communists had infiltrated the government: "Populated with evil geniuses and sinister cabalists in unholy alliance, parading as newspapermen, honored Generals, Secretaries of State, and Presidents, all meeting in richly paneled but outwardly innocent barns, pouring over secret documents, engaged in secret plots involving spies, espionage and infiltration, with the ultimate aim of destroying Western civilization, McCarthy's world had a nightmarish quality."¹³ But where McCarthy was content to merely make vague, unfounded accusations, Palin offers a corrective: Reload.

⁷ Bolstad, "Palin Critics Take Aim at Cross Hairs on Her Facebook Page Alaska."

⁸ Kathleen Parker, "Don't Reload. Speak Out," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2010.

⁹ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 112.

¹⁰ Stephen E. Frantzich, *Cyberage Politics 101: Mobility, Technology and Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 93.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 29.

¹² Jennifer Epstein, "Sarah Palin: Barack Obama 'Hell Bent' on Weakening America," *Politico*, January 8, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0111/47222.html> (accessed January 21, 2011).

¹³ James Darsey, "Joe McCarthy's Fantastic Moment," *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 74.

Thus, contrary to her assertions that taking up arms simply means to exercise one's right to vote, her rhetoric suggests that such an action is impotent at best when the individuals that have been elected by the people are set on destroying America. Her ire is not merely leveled at Obama, however. She also expresses distrust in the Republican Party as well: "They've blown it too many times and this to me is kind of like their last chance."¹⁴ Thus, both parties seem unable—and perhaps unwilling—to alter the destructive course that the United States is currently on. With such a worldview, the idea of armed revolution becomes a logical choice.

Sharron Angle and the Second Amendment Remedy

The election of 2010 was largely seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the Democrats who controlled both Congress and the White House. An especially heated race was run in Nevada by Sharron Angle against Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Like Palin, Angle is heavily involved in the Tea Party and shares a worldview of a government run amok. Angle told that *Reno Gazette-Journal* that "the nation is arming . . . What are they arming for if it isn't that they are so distrustful of their government? They're afraid they'll have to fight for their liberty in more Second Amendment kinds of ways. That's why I look at this as almost an imperative. If we don't win at the ballot box, what will be the next step?"¹⁵ As an editorial in *The Economist* dryly observes, "If Mr. Reid wins, she implies, there might be shooting."¹⁶

Angle seems particularly fond of invoking "Second Amendment remedies," but she is far from the first political figure to use the imagery of revolution. Robert Gunderson provides examples of populist orators from the 1890's, including one particularly colorful individual by the name of David "Bloody Bridles" Waite, who was Governor of Colorado. Waite once "talked wildly of the imminence of revolution and asserted, 'it is better, infinitely better, that blood should flow to the horses' bridles rather than our national liberties should be destroyed.'"¹⁷ Thus, like Palin, she draws on a long history of populist oratory reaching back over a century.

What makes Angle's invective against government particularly alarming is that rather than simply railing against abstract entities such as "big government," she began taking aim at specific individuals:

You know, our Founding Fathers, they put that Second Amendment in there for a good reason and that was for the people to protect themselves against a tyrannical government. And in fact, Thomas Jefferson said it's good for a country to have a revolution every 20 years. I hope that's not where we're going, but, you know, if this Congress keeps going the way it is, people are really looking toward those Second Amendment remedies and saying, "my goodness what can we do to turn this country around?" I'll tell you the first thing we need to do is take Harry Reid out.¹⁸

¹⁴ Epstein, "Sarah Palin."

¹⁵ Quoted in "Far over the Line," *New York Times*, June 19, 2010.

¹⁶ "Return of the Prizefighter; Nevada's Senate Race," *The Economist*, August 21, 2010

¹⁷ Quoted in Robert G. Gunderson, "The Calamity Howlers," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26, no. 3 (1940): 405.

¹⁸ "Definition of Recklessness; Angle and Her Dangerous Take on the Second Amendment and Its 'Remedies,'" *Las Vegas Sun*, June 21, 2010.

Although Angle would later argue that she was not advocating Reid's assassination, the subtext is impossible to ignore.¹⁹ As Senate Majority Leader, Reid is a representative of the "tyrannical government" Angle rails against. If one is not to take up arms against such a representative, then against whom should the attack be leveled? But one need not actually name names; demonizing the government as an abstract entity is a potent rhetorical strategy that both attacks the opposition and builds up the true believers. As Richard Gregg notes, "By painting the enemy in dark hued imagery of vice, corruption, evil, and weakness, one may more easily convince himself of his own superior virtue and thereby gain a symbolic victory of ego-enhancement."²⁰ To put it another way, "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil."²¹

Potential Implications of Revolutionary Political Discourse

Taken together, one can see a cohesive rhetorical stance that sees government, especially big government, as the enemy even as these candidates seek to become part of that very government. I suggest that the idea of big government functions as an "ideograph," or a term that contains its own ideology.²² One need not define what is meant by big government, allowing contradictions to abound. For example, one can rail against big government while still maintaining the need for a well-funded military and Medicare and Social Security for retirees, despite the fact that these areas account for about half of the Federal budget.²³ Aging Tea Party activists can claim that the government has no business in health care while still holding on to their Medicare insurance. The ideology of small government does not need to be defined, nor does it have to be realistic; the audience can maintain a sense of ambiguity that allows them to hold seemingly contradictory positions. It is much easier to resort to name calling than to address the issues. More importantly, by pinning the blame on a cabal of individuals bent on destroying the freedoms Americans hold dear, one can avoid addressing valid solutions to the problems at hand.

With a worldview that holds government itself in suspicion, the idea of *big government* as the enemy becomes obvious. One must limit the power of government to limit the amount of damage its agents can do. Steeped in a belief that those in power are driving the nation to the brink of destruction, speakers such as Palin and Angle use the rhetoric of revolution to stir up the anger of patriots against those who hate America. This is clearly a case of "us" versus "them," with the orators on the side of the people and the government against both the speaker and the people. But who exactly are these people? After all, over half of the nation voted for the man accused of attempting to destroy

¹⁹ "Nevada's Angle Retracts Comment to 'Take Out' Reid," *Gainesville Sun*, June 29, 2010. In the same article, however, a Reid spokesman counters, "It wasn't a gaffe, it is a philosophy. She has repeated that language many times."

²⁰ Richard B. Gregg, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 4, no. 2 (1971): 82.

²¹ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951), 91.

²² Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 1-16.

²³ See Office of Management and Budget, "Budget of the U. S. Government: Fiscal Year 2011," U.S. Government Printing Office (Washington, DC: 2010).

America. Even so, Michael McGee suggests that arguing for change in the name of “the people” is a powerful rhetorical strategy, despite the fact that the people exist only as a rhetorical fiction.²⁴ He states that “each political myth presupposes a ‘people’ who can legislate reality with their collective belief. So long as ‘the people’ believe basic myths, there is unity and collective identity.”²⁵ It matters little whether the people truly exist; what matters is that there will be those who hear this discourse and see themselves as patriots called into action to stand against those who seek to harm America.

When orators are hinting at or outright advocating violence as a corrective to the internal enemies in the Federal government, we must turn to the audience to get a sense of where such oratory may lead. Research by M. Kent Jennings and Ellen Andersen found that “the strength of ideological orientations . . . proved to be a strong corollary of attitudes about disruption. Even in a group of activists with decidedly liberal leanings, the intensity of those leanings pushed in the direction of support for confrontation.”²⁶ This suggests that a group of true believers, as would likely be found at a Tea Party rally, would be more likely to engage in confrontational tactics. When the confrontation advocated includes Second Amendment remedies, it is a rather short step to believing that some would take such imperatives seriously.

Yet this is not merely a case of blaming impressionable individuals who are led astray by demagogues. Rather, I would like to conclude by drawing on media effects scholarship by George Gerbner and his colleagues examining how media messages influence us over time. Gerbner et al. posit what they call the “mean world” hypothesis, suggesting that those who view more television news depicting violent crimes tend to believe that the world is a much more violent place.²⁷ I propose that continual exposure to rhetoric that depicts the government as the enemy will foster and reinforce such a belief. Moreover, with this worldview firmly in place, the rhetoric of revolution becomes more convincing. As Dean Barnlund and Franklyn Haiman explain, “When one person or a few people in a group or society possess all the guns, muscles, or money, and the others are relatively weak and helpless, optimum conditions do not exist for discussion, mutual influence, and democracy. Discussion in such circumstances occurs only at the sufferance of the powerful; and generous as these persons may sometimes be, they are not likely voluntarily to abdicate their power when vital interests are at stake.”²⁸ In the worldview put forth by Palin and Angle, the rhetoric of revolution is a call *for democracy*, rather than the overthrow of the democratic practice that left their desires unfulfilled.

It is clear that the shooting that took place at Representative Gifford’s rally was more the work of a mentally imbalanced individual than a political activist. Yet there have been other acts that were inspired by a worldview similar to that put forth by Palin and Angle. In 1992 Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh wrote a letter to the editor of

²⁴ Michael C. McGee, “In Search Of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 235-49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁶ M. Kent Jennings and Ellen Ann Andersen, “Support for Confrontational Tactics among AIDS Activists: A Study of Intra-Movement Divisions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 2 (1996): 331.

²⁷ George Gerbner et al., “Growing up with Television: Cultivation Processes,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 43-67 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 52.

²⁸ Dean C. Barnlund and Franklyn Saul Haiman, *The Dynamics of Discussion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 12.

the Lockport, NY *Union-Sun & Journal* that is eerily reminiscent of Angle's rhetoric: "Is a Civil War Imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that. But it might."²⁹ McVeigh also considered the government to be tyrannical and sought revenge for the attacks on Waco, TX by bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma in 1995. In a letter to Fox News, McVeigh states, "I decided to send a message to a government that was becoming increasingly hostile, by bombing a government building and the government employees within that building who represent that government. Bombing the Murrah Federal Building was morally and strategically equivalent to the U.S. hitting a government building in Serbia, Iraq, or other nations."³⁰

Politicians have long known that outrageous, over the top rhetoric draws attention. But "there is more to democratic persuasion—or at least there ought to be more—than making the news," suggests J. Michael Hogan. "Genuinely democratic discourse must not only attract media attention; it must empower citizens to act."³¹ The logic of rhetoric that proposes Second Amendment remedies posits that any American with a gun can take up arms against his or her government. Whether or not this should actually take place depends on one's convictions that the democratic process is intrinsically broken, that the government is out to destroy America, and that the only way to correct this state of affairs is to take up arms.

I propose that what is needed is less Second Amendment and more First Amendment remedies. Yet such speech comes with responsibility. One still cannot yell "fire" in a crowded theater with the protection of the First Amendment. Like the Second Amendment, such rights are granted with the assumption that citizens are able to wisely exercise them. Right wing demands to demonstrate a causal link between violent rhetoric and violent acts misses the point. Likewise, Palin and Angle's denial that their words have any part in creating a culture of violence denies the power of speech. As Thomas Benson eloquently put it, "Rhetoric can definitely have severe consequences or we wouldn't employ it."³²

This is not a call for a more civil public discourse that perhaps never was. Rather, this is a call for a greater understanding of how a particular worldview can shape the rhetoric that expresses it. One's worldview constrains and guides the available means of protest and whether one views such means as effective. In 1964 Malcolm X argued that because the government was not protecting them, "we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet."³³ Malcolm X still seemed to hold out hope that the ballot could work. Rhetoric that denies that possibility leaves one with only the bullet. Such rhetoric

²⁹ "Letter from Timothy McVeigh to the Union-Sun & Journal," February 11, 1992, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080119111020/http://www.cnn.com/US/OKC/faces/Suspects/McVeigh/1st-letter6-15/index.html> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁰ "McVeigh's Apr. 26 Letter to Fox News," Fox News, April 26, 2001, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,17500,00.html> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³¹ J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 187.

³² Quoted in Kristi Keck, "Weight of Words in Focus After Arizona Shooting," CNN.com, January 11, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/01/11/political.rhetoric/index.html?iref=allsearch> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³³ Malcolm X, "The Bullet or the Ballot," Social Justice Speeches, http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html (accessed January 25, 2011), para 5.

does not bode well for a democratic nation that seeks to solve problems through collaboration and understanding rather than through violence.

Concluding Postscript

As I completed this essay, another incident occurred demonstrating that incendiary rhetoric continues unabated. In a particularly shocking display, a man at Georgia U.S. Representative Paul Broun's town hall meeting on February 22, 2011 asked, "Who's going to shoot Obama?"³⁴ Rather than address the question with the gravity that one would expect of such an occurrence, the audience simply laughed and Representative Broun stated: "The thing is, I know there's a lot of frustration with this president. We're going to have an election next year. Hopefully, we'll elect somebody that's going to be a conservative, limited-government president that will take a smaller, who will sign a bill to repeal and replace Obamacare."³⁵ Although Broun states that he was responding to the follow up question, this response tacitly acknowledges that such sentiments are appropriate and acceptable responses to "frustration."³⁶

On February 25—three days later—Broun issued the following statement:

Tuesday night at a town hall meeting in Oglethorpe County, Georgia an elderly man asked the abhorrent question, "Who's going to shoot Obama?" I was stunned by the question and chose not to dignify it with a response; therefore, at that moment I moved on to the next person with a question. After the event, my office took action with the appropriate authorities. I deeply regret that this incident happened at all. Furthermore, I condemn all statements—made in sincerity or jest—that threaten or suggest the use of violence against the President of the United States or any other public official. Such rhetoric cannot and will not be tolerated.³⁷

Although this is certainly a case of better late than never, one must wonder why it took so long to respond to the incident. Moreover, by refusing to dignify the question with a response, Broun actually provided one, albeit one completely at odds with his later missive. The notion often attributed to 18th century statesman Edmund Burke remains true today: all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. If democracy is to exist as something more than mob rule, one must stand up in the face of violent sentiments, even if directed against one's political enemies. To stand idly by is to provide tacit consent, leaving these beliefs unchallenged. Perhaps our political leaders can take a role in actually *leading* their followers by adapting a sentiment attributed to Voltaire, another 18th century figure: I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it—regardless of your political affiliation. Anything less stands to diminish the potential for democracy.

³⁴ Blake Aued, "Question to Broun: Who's Going to Shoot President Obama?" Online Athens / Athens Banner-Herald, <http://athenscms.com/blogs/2487/> (accessed March 29, 2011).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Paul Broun, "Violent Statements are Unacceptable," Congressman Paul Broun, M.D., February 25, 2011, <http://broun.house.gov/News/DocumentPrint.aspx?DocumentID=226354> (accessed March 12, 2011).