Rep. Giffords’ departure a blow to democracy

By Leonard Pitts Jr. The Miami Herald

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In a democracy, nothing is supposed to matter more than the will of the people.

So it was painful to watch last week as the will of the people was overturned and one of Arizona’s duly elected representatives was forced from office. It wasn’t a recall vote or scandal that did it. No, the people’s will was overturned by a gun.

After a year of upbeat bulletins and proclamations of her miracle recovery, the decision by Rep. Gabrielle Giffords to leave Congress comes as a bit of a blow. In a video she explains that she needs to concentrate full time on her rehab. Giffords speaks clearly, but with a sometimes odd cadence, as if picking her way through an unfamiliar language — evidence of the brain injury she sustained when she was shot in the head last year at a constituents event in Tucson. Twelve other people were wounded, six killed.

This episode joins a long list of elections overturned and social movements derailed by men with guns, as in the shootings of Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley, Huey Long, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, the Kennedy brothers, George Wallace, George Moscone, Harvey Milk, Martin Luther King, Jr. Somehow, people who should never have guns never have trouble getting them. John Kennedy’s assassin, a disaffected former Marine who had once defected to the Soviet Union, bought his by mail order. King’s assassin, a wanted fugitive, bought his over the counter.

Jared Loughner, the man now in jail for the Tucson massacre, was able to legally obtain a gun despite the fact that he was a mentally deranged man who had been rejected by the U.S. Army and kicked out of a community college. Which suggests that, while Loughner may be unbalanced, American gun laws are downright insane.

And they will likely stay insane, so long as our politics remain a hatefully polarized affair where the two “sides” glower at one another like boxers in their respective corners and “compromise” is a dirty word.

After all, the solution here is not rocket science.

We need meaningful background checks on all gun purchases — no loopholes. A mentally unstable man should not have legal access to a gun, period.

We need to ban fully automatic weapons from private use. The hunter who needs a gun that fires hundreds of rounds a minute isn’t much of a hunter.

We need to encourage gun safety classes so that poorly secured firearms stop ending up in the hands of little children.

At the very least, we need to have a serious national dialogue about these and other possible solutions.

But we won’t. Too many on the political left still seem to harbor a fantasy of getting rid of all guns and refuse to distinguish between responsible gun owners and those criminals or deranged people who have no business with firearms. Too many on the political right still harbor the paranoid delusion that any talk of gun control is code for confiscation by jackbooted thugs riding black helicopters.

So nobody talks. Nobody listens. Meantime, our unwillingness to get serious about an epidemic of gun violence brings us the equivalent of 11 Columbine massacres every week — three 9/11s every year. Every once in awhile, as now, it even overturns an election. The carnage goes on, and on.

And sadly, that, too, reflects the people’s will.