Violence Against Members of Congress and Their Staff: Selected Examples and Congressional Responses

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Questions about the personal security and safety of members of Congress and their staffs have arisen in the aftermath of a recent attack in Tucson, Arizona, and following reports of an increase in the number of threats made against members of Congress.

Two measures have been introduced in the 112th Congress to address issues related to violence against members and congressional staff. On January 19, 2011, Representative Robert A. Brady of Pennsylvania introduced H.R. 318 to amend title 18, United States Code, to punish threats to commit violent crimes against members of Congress. On January 20, 2011, Representative Laura Richardson introduced H.R. 367, the Freedom to Serve Without Fear Act of 2011, which would prohibit the knowing possession of a firearm near a venue at which a member of Congress is performing official duties or campaigning for public office.

Since 1789, available information from official and private sources suggests that there have been at least 21 instances of attacks involving 24 members who were targeted by assailants. There have been 12,013 individuals who have served as Representatives or Senators since 1789. In 11 instances, the attacks were thwarted, or resulted in no serious injuries to members. Another three incidents resulted in wounds to seven members. Finally, seven instances resulted in the deaths of seven members.

It appears that five of the incidents of attacks on members also affected some congressional staff. Four of the incidents resulted in the wounding of congressional staff. Two incidents, a 1998 event in which a gunman entered the Capitol, and the Tucson shooting on January 8, 2011, resulted in fatalities to two congressional law enforcement personnel and one civilian employee of the House, respectively.

This report will be updated as warranted.
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Questions about personal security and safety for members of Congress and their staffs have arisen in the aftermath of a recent attack in Tucson, Arizona, in which a congressional staff member and several constituents were killed, and a member and a number of others, including other congressional staff, were critically injured. Concerns have also arisen following reports of an increase in the number of threats against members of Congress.¹ This report describes legislation introduced in the 112th Congress related to violence against members and congressional staff, provides examples of violence in which members of Congress were the apparent target, and some actions Congress has taken based in part on those incidents.

Legislation in the 112th Congress

H.R. 318

On January 19, 2011, Representative Robert A. Brady of Pennsylvania introduced H.R. 318 to amend title 18, United States Code, to punish threats to commit violent crimes against members of Congress. According to a Dear Colleague letter issued by Representative Brady, the measure would extend prohibitions of threats against the President, Vice President, Presidents-elect, and Vice Presidents-elect to members of Congress and members-elect of Congress.² H.R. 318 was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary. No further action has been taken at the time of this writing.

H.R. 367

On January 20, 2011, Representative Laura Richardson introduced H.R. 367, the Freedom to Serve Without Fear Act of 2011. The measure would prohibit the knowing possession of a firearm near a venue at which a member of Congress is performing an official, representational duty, or campaigning for public office. The measure would also encourage states to adopt prohibitions similar to federal law to protect state and local elected and appointed officials. H.R. 367 was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary. No further action has been taken at the time of this writing.

H.Res. 50

Representative Dan Burton of Indiana introduced H.Res. 50, to provide for enclosing the visitors’ galleries of the House with a clear and bomb-proof material on January 24, 2011. In addition, the measure would provide for the installation of audio equipment to allow floor proceedings to be audible in the galleries. H.Res. 50 was referred to the committee on House Administration. No further action has been taken at the time of this writing.


Violence Against Members of Congress

Since 1789, 12,013 individuals have served in Congress; 10,737 in the House and 1,930 in the Senate. Official records, supplemented from available news accounts, suggest that there have been at least 21 instances of attacks involving 24 members who were targeted by assailants. In 11 instances, the attacks were thwarted, or resulted in no serious injuries to members. Another three incidents resulted in the wounding of seven members. Finally, seven instances resulted in the deaths of seven members.

In these examples, individual members were sometimes the target of violence. In others, members or congressional staff may have been secondary targets in attacks that targeted Congress or other components of the U.S. government. This report excludes members who participated in wars as combatants, or circumstances when members attempted or committed suicide. Several other instances, in which some members voluntarily initiated violent activities, including duels, fistfights, beatings, and other conflicts, sometimes with other members, are excluded from consideration. Also excluded are incidents in which the Capitol was attacked, but no members or staff were reported as injured. Examples include the burning of the Capitol during the War of 1812; the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in which the Capitol and Congress may have been a target; and bombings in the Capitol in 1915, 1971, and 1983. A final group of exclusions

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3 These numbers include 654 members who served in the House and Senate, but do not include the additional 213 nonvoting Delegates and Resident Commissioners who have served in the House. Information about all individuals who have served in Congress is available in the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, a website maintained by the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate at http://bioguide.congress.gov.

4 A chronological list of all U.S. Senators in history is available on the Senate website at http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/chronlist.pdf.

5 Official records and news accounts may not identify all instances in which a member of Congress was involved in violent circumstances.

6 There are also several examples of unsuccessful attempted attacks, including the escape of Representative Charles Pelham of North Carolina, who in the late summer of 1874 was reportedly compelled to escape his district after learning that a group of citizens who disagreed with some of his policy positions had assembled, allegedly to attempt to kill him. See “Terrorism in the South,” New York Times, September 1, 1874, p. 1. In another example, Martin R. Kemmerer on December 13, 1932, brandished a hand gun in the House gallery, and without appearing to target anyone, demanded the opportunity to speak. Kemmerer obeyed the demand of Representative Melvin Joseph Maas of Minnesota to drop his weapon to the floor, and was subdued by two visitors and Representative Fiorello La Guardia, of New York, who entered the gallery behind the gunman while Representative Maas, who caught the loaded weapon, and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts assured other members that the gunman would not hurt anyone. “Youth With Pistol Terrorizes House,” The New York Times, December 14, 1932, p. 44; Robert C. Albright, “Gunman Demands Floor to Plead for Relief,” The Washington Post, December 14, 1932, p. 1; and “House Gunman to be Tried,” The Washington Post, December 16, 1932, p. 8.

7 Senator Huey Pierce Long of Louisiana was the target of two attacks: an attempted bombing in which there were no injuries, and his assassination.

8 For example an assault on Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the Senate floor on May 22, 1856. Two days before, Senator Sumner delivered a floor speech denouncing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Representative Preston Smith Brooks of South Carolina saw the speech as a libel on his state and on Senator Andrew Pickens Butler of South Carolina, to whom Mr. Brooks was related. Representative Brooks beat Senator Sumner with a cane, causing injuries from which it took the Senator three years to recover and return to Congress.


10 The three bombings occurred when Congress was in recess or had adjourned for the day, and the Capitol was largely (continued...)
includes incidents in which members were involved in violent activities or killed, but the circumstances do not appear related to their roles as members.11

Violence Against Congressional Staff

It appears that five of the incidents of attacks on members also affected some congressional staff. In 1905, “Doc” Thompkins, private secretary to Representative John M. Pinckney of Texas, was wounded in a riot in which Representative Pinckney was killed. In 1935, Earle Christenberry, secretary to Senator Huey Pierce Long of Louisiana, opened a package containing a bomb, which did not explode. In a 1978 incident, Jackie Speier, a staff member working for Representative Leo Joseph Ryan of California, was critically wounded by gunfire in an attack in Guyana. Representative Ryan was killed in the attack. Two incidents, a 1998 event in which a gunman entered the Capitol, and the Tucson shooting, resulted in fatalities to two congressional law enforcement personnel, and one civilian employee of the House, respectively.

Instances of violence against congressional staff arguably pose significant challenges. Because they are private citizens who do not receive extensive, sustained public attention, there is no assurance that all instances of violence against them can be identified. Violence against staff that is reported here happened in the course of their official duties. Identifying all who have served Congress in a staff capacity, and then identifying whether they have suffered violence during that service, presents all but insurmountable obstacles to compiling an exhaustive and authoritative inventory of violent incidents. A consequence of these challenges is that the material presented here cannot with authority be said to comprise all of the attacks on members of Congress or staff that have ever occurred.

Table 1 summarizes incidents of violence directed against members or congressional staff. This material should be interpreted with care. Although they have high profiles, and any incident of violence against them is likely to engender considerable attention in contemporary times, it is possible that some incidents of violence involving members have not been captured. It is also possible that available sources, whether official or non-official, provide limited12 or conflicting accounts of a member’s involvement in violent activities.13


12 For example, the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress states that Representative Cornelius Springer Hamilton was “killed by an insane son,” but provides no other detail. See http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H0000106

13 For example, some sources suggest that Delegate Henry Wharton Taylor of Arkansas Territory, who served in the 18th-20th Congresses (1823-1829) was killed in a duel. See the Political Graveyard website, (continued...)
Responses to Violence Against Congress

On at least three occasions, incidents of violence involving members of Congress have led to congressional legislative or administrative responses. These include:

- a prohibition of the giving or accepting, within the District of Columbia, of challenges to a duel, following the death of Representative Jonathan Cilley of Maine. Representative Cilley was killed in a duel with Representative William J. Graves of Kentucky on February 24, 1838, in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

- the enactment of law in the 91st Congress (1969-1970) making it a federal offense to assassinate, kidnap, or assault a member of Congress or member-elect, or to endeavor or conspire to commit such offenses following the assassination of Senator Robert Francis Kennedy of New York on June 6, 1968.

- the initiation of congressional mail screening following the delivery in the fall of 2001 of letters containing anthrax spores to the offices of Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota.

Other instances of violence against members have resulted in discussions of policy proposals. In the wake of an incident in 1932, in which a gunman in the House gallery demanded the opportunity to address the House before surrendering the weapon without incident, Representative Thomas Lindsay Blanton of Texas reportedly demanded that the “galleries be closed to ‘cranks’ and ‘anarchists.’” No change to rules governing access to House galleries was identified. Following shootings in the House in 1954, in which gunmen fired from the galleries into the members on the floor, wounding five, proposals to install transparent shields between visitors’ galleries and the House floor were discussed, but no action was taken. Several decades later, in response to House gallery disturbances, and an incident in the British Parliament, in the 108th (2003-2004) and 110th (2007-2008) Congresses, Representative Dan Burton of Indiana introduced H.Res. 665 and H.Res. 432, respectively. The measures would have provided for enclosing the visitors’ galleries of the House of Representatives with a transparent and substantial...
material. The measures were referred to the Committee on House Administration, and no further action was taken. 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident Type</th>
<th>Members or Congressional Staff Affected</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Circumstances</th>
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</table>
| Shooting      | Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Arizona  
Gabriel Matthew Zimmerman, congressional staff  
Ron Barber, congressional staff  
Pamela Simon, congressional staff | January 8, 2011 | A gunman opened fire at a congressional event in Tucson. Mr. Zimmerman and five others were killed. Representative Giffords, Mr. Barber, Ms. Simon, and at least nine others were wounded. |
| Biologic Attack | Senator Patrick Leahy, Vermont  
Senator Tom Daschle, South Dakota | October, 2001 | The offices of the two Senators received letters that contained anthrax spores. The Office of Attending Physician instituted extensive testing of members, staff, and visitors in the affected buildings, and administered prophylactic antibiotics. No members or staff were sickened. |
| Shooting      | Private First Class Jacob Chestnut, United States Capitol Police  
Detective John Gibson, United States Capitol Police | July 24, 1998 | Russell Eugene Weston, Jr., entered the Capitol carrying a pistol and opened fire. While he eventually made his way to the House Majority Whip’s office, it is not clear that he was targeting any specific member, staffer, or member of the public. After what was reported as approximately three minutes of gunfire, a tourist was injured, and Officer Chestnut and Detective Gibson were killed. |
| Assault       | Senator John Herschel Glenn, Jr., Ohio | October 25, 1989 | Punched on the chin during a television interview, but not seriously injured.                                                                                                                                 |
| Knife Wielding | Senator Edward Moore Kennedy, Massachusetts | November 28, 1979 | A woman brandishing a knife entered Senator Kennedy’s office on Capitol Hill. She was seized by agents of the United States Secret Service after a brief struggle in which one agent was slightly wounded. |
| Shooting      | Representative Leo Joseph Ryan, California  
Jackie Speier, congressional staff | November 18, 1978 | Representative Ryan and four others were killed in Guyana by members of a religious cult. Ms. Speier, who currently serves as a member of the House, was shot five times, and critically wounded. |
| Assault       | Senator Charles McCurdy Mathias, Jr., Maryland  
James B. Young, congressional staff | January 2, 1975 | Mr. Young was briefly held at knifepoint by an individual seeking casework assistance. He escaped without injury and the individual was arrested.                                                                                                                                 |
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>Representative Clifford Davis, Tennessee&lt;br&gt;Representative Alvin Morell Bentley, Michigan&lt;br&gt;Representative Benton Franklin Jensen, Iowa&lt;br&gt;Representative George Hyde Fallon, Maryland&lt;br&gt;Representative Kenneth Allison Roberts, Alabama</td>
<td>March 1, 1954</td>
<td>Three armed assailants who advocated for the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party opened fire on the House floor from the visitors’ gallery. Five members were shot, and subsequently recovered from their wounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>Senator John William Bricker, Ohio</td>
<td>July 12, 1947</td>
<td>Two rounds were fired at, and missed, Senator Bricker in the Senate Office Building by a former officer in the United States Capitol Police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Bombing</td>
<td>Senator Huey Pierce Long, Louisiana&lt;br&gt;Earle Christenberry, secretary</td>
<td>February 19, 1935</td>
<td>A bomb was mailed to Senator Long’s Washington office. Damaged in the mail, it did not explode when opened by Mr. Christenberry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Bombing</td>
<td>Representative Charles A. Eaton, New Jersey</td>
<td>June 22, 1933</td>
<td>A device containing dynamite and nitroglycerin was placed in the vehicle of Representative Eaton at his home. An employee discovered the bomb and neutralized it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombing</td>
<td>Senator Charles Samuel Deneen</td>
<td>March 26, 1928</td>
<td>The home of Senator Deneen was damaged by a bootlegger, but no one was hurt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Bombing</td>
<td>Representative John L. Burnett, Alabama</td>
<td>April-May, 1919*</td>
<td>Part of a larger effort against local state and federal officials in which bombs were sent through the mail. The device intended for Representative Burnett was held by the Post Office for insufficient postage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Massachusetts</td>
<td>April 2, 1919</td>
<td>Struck by a pacifist leading a group that was upset that Senator Lodge did not support the United States staying out of armed conflict. The Senator was not injured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assassination/assault</td>
<td>Representative John M. Pinckney, Texas&lt;br&gt;&quot;Doc&quot; Thompkins, private secretary</td>
<td>April 24, 1905</td>
<td>At a mass meeting in Hempstead, Texas, to petition the governor to enforce state liquor laws, several participants opened fire. Representative Pinckney was killed, and Mr. Thompkins severely wounded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>Representative Robert Young Thomas, Jr., Kentucky</td>
<td>April 7, 1905</td>
<td>Assaulted by a political opponent angered by his remarks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assassination</td>
<td>Representative Thomas Haughey</td>
<td>August 5, 1869</td>
<td>Killed while making a political speech in Courtland, Alabama.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assassination</td>
<td>Representative James Hinds, Arkansas</td>
<td>October 22, 1868</td>
<td>Reportedly shot by a drunken party committee member.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patricide</td>
<td>Representative Cornelius Hamilton, Ohio</td>
<td>March 4, 1867</td>
<td>Killed by son who had exhibited signs of mental illness.</td>
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a. Numerous packages were sent as part of a larger plot. It could not be determined with accuracy when the package was sent to Representative Burnett, or when it was stopped at the Post Office.
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