The nation's caustic political climate has become a suspect of sorts in the rampage that left six dead and a lawmaker critically injured in Arizona. Already, appeals are being heard to tone down the rhetoric.

The captured suspect's motives remain unknown despite his online diatribes betraying resentment of the government and a scattered state of mind. Still, the attack on Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and those who were with has intensified the scrutiny on how much is too much, and how hot is too hot, in political debate.

The problem isn't simply the nature of the vitriole, says Kevin Wagner, an assistant professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. It's also the atmosphere that evolves when those messages are played 24/7 on televisions and computers around the country.

"There was some nasty stuff said about Thomas Jefferson, but in order to get that you literally had to get and read the newspaper of the opposition," Wagner said. Now that message reaches many more, quickly.

"The thing you wonder about is that small number, some people will actually believe the things that are said literally. And with the availability of weapons..."

Among the messages, politicians were reflecting on Sunday: "If ballots don't work bullets will."

That was uttered by Joyce Kaufman, a South Florida radio host who eventually declined newly elected U.S. Rep. Allen West's request for her to be his chief of staff.

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-FL, honed in on that statement on NBC's Meet the Press on Sunday morning when arguing that such rhetoric from politicians and media personalities might encourage some individuals to act violently.

When asked Saturday if he felt his comments contribute to a dangerous tone in politics, West - who on the campaign trail encouraged people to rise up against their "tyrannical" government - said, "What I do and say has no relation to this."

Other elected officials disagreed. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-III. and the second-ranking Democratic leader in the Senate, on Sunday cited imagery of crosshairs on political opponents and Sarah Palin's combative rallying cry, "Don't retreat; reload."

"These sorts of things, I think, invite the kind of toxic rhetoric that can lead unstable people to believe this is an acceptable response," he on CNN's State of the Union.
The attack might be the work of "a single nut," Democratic Rep. Raul Grijalva, whose Arizona district shares Tucson with Giffords' district, said Saturday, the day Giffords was shot. But he said the nation must assess the fallout of "an atmosphere where the political discourse is about hate, anger and bitterness."

Still others cautioned against blaming political rhetoric - or the language and imagery of a particular political group - for the tragedy in Tucson. Republicans were especially sensitive to suggestions that the conservative tea party movement, with its anti-government stances, was contributing to a more poisonous political environment,

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., noted Sunday that the suspect in the Tucson rampage was connected to Internet postings that included Marxist and Nazi literature.

"That's not the profile of a typical tea party member, if that's the inference that's being made," Alexander said on CNN.

Everett Wilkinson, who is chairman of the South Florida Tea Party and the state's coordinator, noted that the party has had hundreds of events and rallies with "very little or no violence."

"I don't think the shooting near Tuscon had anything to do with political rhetoric," Wilkinson said. "I think it had to do with a very disturbed and unstable person."

Conservative blogger Erick Erickson took the argument further, saying that the media and left wing commentators are putting the conservatives in danger by implying they were complicit in the Arizona shootings, The New York Times reported.

"By perpetuating the lie - by even treating it as a legitimate topic of consideration to revisit the accusations of violence and hate the media tried to run with prior to the November election - that the right and the tea party incited this evil act, the left and media may very well incite violence against the right," the Times quotes Erickson's blog.

Meanwhile, Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, who ran as a tea party favorite, said on Meet the Press on NBC: "I just hope we can have some civility and move forward. You have extremes on both sides; you have crazy people on both sides. Your job as a leader is to talk to people in a rational way to bring down the rhetoric."

Staff writer Sonja Isger, The Associated Press and The New York Times contributed to this story.