

Palin use of 'blood libel' unsettling to Jews

by [Nicole Neroulias](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

Four days after an assassination attempt critically wounded a Jewish congresswoman and killed six others, Sarah Palin on January 12 accused "journalists and pundits" of manufacturing a "blood libel" that seeks to link her and other conservatives to the massacre.

The "blood libel" language unsettled many Jewish groups, who say the term has been used for centuries to justify persecution of Jews.

"Blood libel" is often traced to a passage in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jews calling for Jesus' death say, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). Later it related to the notion among some Christians that Jews used the blood of non-Jews, particularly Christian children, in their rituals.

In the eight-minute video statement Palin expresses sympathy for the victims and their families and goes on to object to "the irresponsible statements from people attempting to apportion blame for this terrible event."

Palin has been widely criticized for showing a map with some congressional districts—including the district of Arizona Democrat Gabrielle Giffords, who was shot in the head in Tucson—marked by the crosshairs of a gun. Last March, Giffords herself warned that such imagery has "consequences."

Without mentioning the crosshairs map, Palin said it is "reprehensible" to try to forge a link between conservative politics and the deadly shooting. "But,

especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn," she said.

While

Palin was not the first to use the term following the shooting—Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds wrote about "The Arizona Tragedy and the Politics of Blood Libel" in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 10—her celebrity brought it to national attention.

Within

hours, "Blood Libel" and "blamePalin" were trending on Twitter, and several Jewish groups called Palin's language troubling and inappropriate.

Palin, interviewed January 17 on Fox News Channel, rejected suggestions that she did not understand the historical significance of the phrase.

"Blood libel obviously means being falsely accused of having blood on your hands and in this case, that's exactly what's going on," she said. Palin said she agreed with calls for civility. She said that "peaceful dissent and discussion about ideas, that is what makes America exceptional."

Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, supported Palin's right to defend herself against critics who sought to tie her to the Arizona shooting but said her use of a phrase "so fraught with pain in Jewish history" was unfortunate.

"We hope that Governor Palin will recognize . . . that the term 'blood libel' brings back painful echoes of a very dark time in our communal history when Jews were falsely accused of committing heinous deeds," said Jeremy Ben-Ami, head of J Street, a left-leaning lobby group.

The Republican Jewish Coalition did not respond to requests for comment, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor

(R.,Va.), the country's highest-ranking Jewish elected official, did not comment.

Jonathan Sarna, the dean of American Jewish historians at Brandeis University, said the term traces its roots to the claims that Jews used the blood of Christian children to make matzo, which he noted is ironic since Jewish law prohibits the use of blood in rituals.

In Israel, the term is used to describe "any claim that is totally without foundation," which might be a good debate tool but one that ignores the term's historic violent origins, he said.

"To hear the term applied by a deeply believing Christian is a first for me," Sarna said. "It totally removes the accusation against Jews from all of its original horrific original context." —RNS