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SHORT COMMENTS

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Situation?*

By Irina Tsukerman, National Security Lawyer and Geopolitical Analyst

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How Will the Assassination Attempt on Trump Impact the US Political Situation?

By Irina Tsukerman, National Security Lawyer and Geopolitical Analyst

The attempt on Donald Trump's life by the 20-year-old Thomas Matthew Crooks in Butler, Pennsylvania is just the latest in the string of past successful and attempted assassinations of US presidents and presidential candidates. Trump allegedly survived another attempt in 2016, and since then there were other incidents of political violence that briefly caught and held the national attention before the country and the media quickly moved to the next controversy, including the attempted killing of the Republican representative Steve Scalise. Many words were dedicated to the issues of gun violence, mental health, radicalization, stochastic terrorism, and social polarization but in the end none of these previous incidents had a long term impact on the political outcomes or long-term policy shifts in the US, either because some of them were mere demonstrations of ongoing trends that equally manifested themselves without results in incidents such as school or other mass shootings, or because they were not perceived as a real demonstration of any specific political trends.

The Democrats and Republicans have consistently blamed each other for heated rhetoric, dehumanization of the political openness, and willingness to condone or whitewash political violence or threats thereof out of political expediency, but there is no hard evidence showing the causation between the escalation in hateful political discourse and the motives of the would-be assassins. At best, it can be said, that the highly polarized social and political climate could contribute to a more sensitive mental states or trigger outbursts of anger and instability.

There is no question, however, that none of the recent political attackers had their own distinct motives for pursuing this course and did not merely repeat the political attacks on their targets. Crooks joins a long line of individuals willing to commit evil and radical acts without necessarily being tied to any specific broader movement, political cause, or foreign interest. In Crooks' case, there is evidence in fact, that while he indeed prepared for his attack on Trump with advance planning and research, his interest may have been in merely using the attention around Trump's presence to mastermind a mass shooting along the lines of an attack by the

school shooter Ethan [Crumbley](#). It may very well be that the planned was not political in nature but merely used a political rally as a convenient platform for an act of attention-seeking murderous mayhem, expedient due to the nature of the event. Other evidence, however, showed that Crooks was also looking into the circumstances of JFK's assassination. Regardless, the ultimate motivation may have been personal ego and self-aggrandizement. If Crooks had been pushed over the edge by online trolls or real-life political operatives, so far the evidence is absent.

Still, while the motives of the would-be killer may not have been political, the impact certainly was in many ways. First, the incident arguably provided Trump with an opportunity to present himself as a strong and vigorous leader, pumping his fist in front of cameras while covered in blood. The image became iconic and went viral quickly, also offering Trump an opportunity to insert personal narrative into his speech at the Republican National Convention mere days later. If nothing else, this image and the general projection of power and authority under difficult circumstances consolidated Trump's own base and attracted the disaffected Republicans out of the woodworks. Even if the photo will have no impact on the Democrats or most of the independents, even if at least some voices that otherwise would have stayed out of the election come out to vote for Trump, that could certainly make a difference in key swing districts, where the gap between Trump and whoever ends up being the Democratic nominee is particularly narrow. The assassination effort took back the narrative from the focus on Biden's mental health issues and gave Trump a bump in the polls. Of course, with Biden announcing withdrawal, that advantage could be erased by the political realignment inside the Democratic Party. Former President Obama, who is seen as a significant influence on the Biden administration, held out on endorsement, but finally endorsed Kamala Harris, while the Democratic Party is scrambling to unify behind a candidate before a self-imposed deadline for changing names on the ballot.

Harris's successful fundraising spree is already putting pressure on the Republicans, while the assassination effort, for lack of clear evidence of links to foreign perpetrators, is receding into the background. The discussion of the political violence appeared relatively short-lived as other events superseded the initial national shock. It is not clear what will happen in terms of the Democratic nomination process, but for Trump to reclaim the limelight

quickly and decisively, he would need to move beyond ridiculing the outdated story about Biden's mental status or Kamala Harris's favorability ratings and attack her candidacy by association with Biden's poor record on many issues.

Instead, Trump seems obsessed in reviving and riding assassination attempt story, in a way that is not working well with the evolving political dynamics. For instance, he brought up the condemnations of the attacks by world leaders, including, curiously a "beautiful letter" by China's Xi, and the PA's Mahmoud Abbas. Amid his other recent praise of Chinese leadership – both Xi and surprisingly Mao, including during his 90-minute speech at the Republican National Convention, Trump is going out of his way to tie the condemnation of political violence to his claim to deal making superiority, indicating that this unified response to the attempted assassination could be some sort of common ground for diplomacy with these actors. In that sense, Trump is stepping away from a previously hawkish position on China and on Palestinians, instead apparently presenting an image of a potential reconciler of divisions capable of appealing to his critics.

This approach is unlikely to work. More than that, it could damage Trump's prospects. Average listener outside the most devoted core of Trump's base is likely to perceive such comments either as self-serving or as elevating authoritarian leaders at the expense to some of Trump's supporters and personal credibility. Others [see it](#) as a sign of a long-term policy turn towards reconciliation with China and the Palestinians, and the rise of the libertarian-isolationist coalition. In the best case scenario, this tactic could help Trump recruit some of the RFK Jr. supporters, and left-leaning libertarians and isolationists. In a more likely scenario, these comments will alienate as many voters as they will attract. In short, it is a risky and ad hoc intuitive strategy without necessarily any scientific research to back it, if in fact it is meant to be a serious political calculation.

In short, Trump's camp may become a victim of its own success. GOP worked hard to highlight Biden's limitations in terms of mental capacity and it worked, while providing Trump with a positive foil in terms of the failed assassination. However, Trump overplayed his hand by focusing almost exclusively on Biden's limitations and missing an opportunity to capitalize on his ratings boost by attacking the Biden administration record. As a result, he is losing momentum in the elections overall, the ratings bump may not offset the aggressive

fundraising and unified front by the Democrats, and Trump is additionally misusing the good will over the political violence against him by using to promote adversarial leaders.



Irina Tsukerman, is a national security lawyer and geopolitical analyst based in the US. Her interests include information warfare, energy security, cybersecurity, big tech and innovation, emerging transnational threats, and Great Power Competition. She is a member of several legal associations and committees focused on these issues. She is also the President of Scarab Rising, Inc., a security and geopolitical risk strategic advisory, and regularly appears on international media to discuss US politics and foreign policy, Russia/Ukraine conflict and related issues, the Middle East and Africa, and other concerns. Irina's writings have been translated into over a dozen languages. She is also a frequent contributor to various academic conferences.