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THE VIEW

Trump shooting shocks nation amid tumultuous presidential campaign



UBNOW STAFF

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The attempted assassination of former president Donald Trump has roiled an already tumultuous presidential campaign, sending shockwaves through the nation that UB researchers say are unlikely to abate anytime soon.

The shooting, in which one person was killed and two others seriously wounded, occurred Saturday at a rally in Pennsylvania. Scant details have emerged about the motive of the alleged shooter, a 20-year-old man killed by U.S. Secret Service personnel.

In the immediate aftermath, officials have sought to calm the nerves of a frayed nation while Trump and President Joe Biden recalculate their campaign strategies.

Jacob Neiheisel, associate professor of political science, described the shooting as a “horrific event” that nonetheless could help Trump in the near term.

“For one, coming so closely as it did to the convention, Trump is going to have a lot more eyeballs on the [Republican National Convention]. Secondly, I think that this mobilizes Trump supporters. Anyone who was on the fence about him but was somewhat leaning in that direction, is now all in,” Neiheisel says.

He adds: “Moreover, I think that this cuts into Biden’s efforts at mobilizing his own side. Campaigns are rife with militaristic language. Now, any such language from Biden or his surrogates is going to be scrutinized and decried by Trump’s people as risking another event like the assassination attempt on Saturday.”

Lindsay Hahn, assistant professor of communication, studies the effects of mass media on people’s conscience and actions. She recently authored a study examining the root causes of mass shootings by reviewing 55 years of statements from perpetrators.

“In emergent situations like this, it is understandable that everyone — reporters and news consumers included — wants to know why the attacker did what they did. But reasons for attacking are sometimes complex, and motives ascribed to a shooter by law enforcement, news media or speculation on social media do not always accurately capture the shooter’s reasons for attacking,” she says.

“The only thing that accurately captures an attacker’s reason for attacking are words from the shooter — and so far, we have no evidence that the shooter communicated his reasons for attacking,” Hahn says.

It has been reported that the gunman, Thomas Matthew Crooks, was a registered Republican who once donated to a Democrat-aligned political action committee. Hahn says it’s important not to read too much into these details.

“We have to remember that a shooter’s political affiliation or any other personal characteristic is not by itself indicative of a motive. Put simply, that a shooter was politically affiliated does not mean their attack was politically motivated even if it appears to be so. For instance, [President Ronald] Reagan’s shooter was motivated by an ill-conceived attempt to get close to Jodie Foster, and Reagan, he believed, was just a conduit to her.”

There have been reports that Crooks was bullied while growing up.

Amanda Nickerson, director of the Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, is an expert on school crisis prevention and intervention, with a particular focus on violence and bullying. Citing a 2019 U.S. Secret Service report, she notes that “a history of bullying has been implicated in mass shootings in schools.”

But what role bullying may have played in the shooting is unknown and may never be known, she adds.

Steven Dubovsky, professor emeritus of psychiatry in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says Saturday’s assassination attempt signifies a more violent and dangerous political landscape that’s been emerging in the U.S.

He notes that multiple societal elements — such as the rise of social media blurring truth and fiction, social and political polarization, a lack of accountability among public leaders and other factors — have helped normalize violence, aggression and less civil public discourse.

“All of this becomes much easier when people join in mobs with common beliefs in their moral superiority, feeling supported in their violent intentions not only by each other, but by politicians, pundits and entertainment figures who tell them that their behavior is justified,” Dubovsky says.