

Trump Assassination Attempt Further Shakes American Democratic Framework

By Don Sutherland

A sunny Saturday afternoon in Butler, Pennsylvania became another dark moment in American history. A 20-year-old gunman wielding an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle from a distant rooftop fired shots at former President Trump as the former President addressed a campaign rally. The former President suffered a non-life-threatening injury to his ear, but one attendee was killed and two others were seriously wounded.

In the bigger picture, the gunman had taken shots at American democracy itself. The heinous act took place at a time when the nation is deeply polarized, its constitutional framework is fraying, its legal system is faltering, and public confidence in its institutions is lacking. At the same time, on account of its political choice not to address gun violence, the nation is awash in firearms. That's a toxic mix.

In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, one has already witnessed bad faith actors trying to exploit the situation for advantage. Russia issued propaganda blaming the Biden Administration for creating the societal context in which the attack took place. Rep. Michael Collins (R-GA) tweeted, "Joe Biden sent the orders." Some opponents of Trump charged that the assassination attempt was "staged." An AI-manipulated image from the scene displayed smiling Secret Service agents.

The nation and its people now face a seminal question: Will the country come together to begin to overcome its current divisions or will this event harden and widen those divisions?

More immediately, the assassination attempt will likely have profound implications for the Presidential campaign. How the candidates message the voters will be impacted. Whether the new messaging impacts the ability of the campaigns to raise important, if not profound, issues remains to be seen. But in the larger scheme of things, how the nation responds relative to its divisions is the more consequential matter.

Within the current societal and political context, overcoming the nation's divisions will be challenging. But it is not impossible.

In his April 11, 1865 public address following the conclusion of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln spoke about the demanding task that lay ahead:

By these recent successes the reinauguration of the national authority—reconstruction—which has had a large share of thought from the first, is pressed much more closely upon our attention. It is fraught with great difficulty. Unlike a case of war between independent nations, there is no authorized organ for us to treat with — no one man has authority to give up the rebellion for any other man. We simply must begin with and mold from disorganized and discordant elements.

Lincoln urged:

Let us all join in doing the acts necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between these States and the Union, and each forever after innocently indulge his own opinion whether in doing the acts he brought the States from without into the Union, or only gave them proper assistance, they never having been out of it.

That is the task today even as a bitter Presidential campaign proceeds. How the nation's leaders and people handle that task will drive the nation toward either a better future that results from healing or even closer toward an inflection point beyond which its democratic framework ultimately collapses.