

Political Violence Feeds on Itself

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Trump helped normalize the idea that some political differences can't be settled through democratic means.



Illustration by The Atlantic. Sources: Olivier Douliery / AFP / Getty; Justin Sullivan / Getty.

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Before supporters of Donald Trump tried to overturn his election loss in an insurrection on January 6, 2021, American presidential politics had gone largely undisturbed by violence for decades. The Secret Service and other law-enforcement agencies had been able to protect presidents and major-party nominees from physical harm. Transfers of power had been peaceful after even close, bitter elections. But the country has clearly entered a grim new cycle. In July, a bullet fired by a would-be assassin struck Trump's ear at a rally in Pennsylvania. This month, authorities [thwarted another gunman](#), who had been hiding in the bushes near one of Trump's golf courses in Florida as the former president and current Republican presidential nominee [played an unscheduled round a few hundred yards away](#).

Throughout history, political violence has tended to feed upon itself; groups that believe their opponents

are seeking power by [extralegal means](#) have been more likely to turn to violence themselves. Some aspects of modern life exacerbate the risks. Social media allows extremists to summon like-minded people; the ready availability of dangerous guns increases the ability of individual bad actors to do serious harm. Unfortunately, law enforcement can prepare only so much for [the varied threats that the nation may face](#) from the right, the left, and people with idiosyncratic or even incoherent ideologies.

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Earlier this month, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it would [designate](#) the January 6, 2025, electoral-vote certification at the Capitol as a “national special security event,” or NSSE—a classification that typically calls for extensive planning of security measures that usually include heavy police and National Guard presence, extensive surveillance, street closures, and other measures. This decision went largely unnoticed, but in the past, no one had thought precautions of that magnitude necessary. No losing presidential candidate before Trump had ever riled up a mob to interfere with a proceeding that had previously been viewed as a mere formality.

The NSSE designation is a sign of how limited the options are, and it carries some costs. The presidential inauguration on January 20 is always treated as an NSSE. In effect, the federal government and the District of Columbia will be on high alert for a month—with no guarantee that the precautions taken will be adequate to thwart the unpredictable plans of opportunistic assailants.

In security planning, American experts and public officials use a war-gaming technique often called [red teaming](#) to assess how to deal with adversaries with a known intent. If the expected enemy is, say, a Chinese spy or Russian ransomware hacker, some Americans—the red team—are assigned to emulate how the attacker would behave. A second group, the blue team, then has to come up with defensive measures. But this is a far harder task when the threat could come from any number of directions.

At the center of the recent trend toward political violence is Trump. Although he has in recent months become the most vulnerable target of political violence, he has been its most prolific instigator for the past several years, as I and others [have previously argued](#). Those concerns are still valid. He promotes chaos and confusion. He tells [religious allies](#) that if he wins this year, they will never have to vote again. He floats the possibility of [imprisoning his political enemies](#). He threatens mass deportations of undocumented immigrants using [military force](#). He dehumanizes immigrants who have come here legally by [falsely claiming](#) that they are stealing and eating pets, leading to unrest and threats against them.

In short, Trump has helped normalize the idea that some political differences are too large to be settled by democratic means. Surviving an assassination attempt hasn’t convinced him of the need to de-escalate. Indeed, he’s doing the opposite. Trump [claimed](#) in his debate with Kamala Harris that “I probably took a bullet to the head because of the things they say about me”—an apparent reference to the vice president and her supporters. If Harris wins, Trump will almost certainly not concede; he will claim it was rigged and seek to confuse certification by supporting state election boards who refuse to follow the law, [creating chaos](#) at the January certification, as he did in 2021.

[Read: Trump is no Gerald Ford](#)

But if Trump wins a close election by pressuring state and local election boards—or indeed if he wins unambiguously—many Americans who supported Harris will surely rally to oppose his return to power. Even if the overwhelming number of them intend to do so peacefully, people with violent intentions may slip into their midst, perhaps at the behest of [foreign or domestic forces eager to sow disruption](#). One survey conducted this summer by the University of Chicago researcher Robert Pape [indicated](#) that—contrary to past findings—the percentage of people supporting violence against Trump was larger than the percentage of people supporting pro-Trump violence.

In practice, though, some perpetrators of political violence lack a clear worldview. Trump’s first would-be assassin, FBI officials have indicated, had [previously shown an interest in public violence](#) and may have settled upon the former president because he was a [geographically convenient](#) target. The suspect in the

second attempt, who lived a life very much on social media, once supported Trump and [then didn't](#). His most dominant [ideological commitment](#) was to the Ukrainian war effort.

The United States has experienced—and escaped—cycles of political violence within living memory. Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated amid the upheavals of the late 1960s; in the mid-'70s, President Gerald Ford [survived two attempts on his life](#). America's democracy proved resilient because enough people ultimately came to understand that the price of violence for everyone would be far greater than the political benefits for anyone.

Fortunately, the Democratic Party has no leader equivalent to Trump who embraces threats as a political strategy. Yet the former president has poisoned the atmosphere so much that even a sound electoral defeat for him would not immediately reduce the danger of violence.