Trump rally shows limits of airport-style security at political events

Threats are harder to detect and prevent at outdoor events.
A shooting at a rally for former President Donald Trump in Butler, Pa., left the Republican presidential candidate and two other people injured and one person dead. The assailant, Thomas Matthew Crooks of Bethel Park, Pa., was killed by Secret Service. With mass shootings, the perpetrator rarely survives.

Like any political rally of this type, emotions are high, and all participants are supercharged to support their candidate. This precipitates the need for security, ensuring that no one enters the event with items such as firearms and knives that can lead to attacks, injuries and deaths.
Yet, in this case, the shooter was outside the rally venue, on a rooftop identified as a possible security vulnerability. In fact, it is believed that authorities were alerted to the presence of Crooks on the rooftop before the shooting. Unfortunately, this did not lead to detainment, leading to the horrific outcome.

What went wrong?

Airport security-style checkpoint screening works at airports because the goal is to keep bad actors and threat items from entering the secure side of airports. There is a well-defined area that is being protected, which the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is charged to safeguard.

Other vectors into airport secure areas exist, such as the perimeter around the airport footprint. These are hardened with perimeter fences, patrols and remote camera surveillance that collectively serve to secure the airport and air system. Yet, no matter how much a venue is hardened, vulnerabilities always remain. Recall the 2017 shooting at the Fort Lauderdale airport, when a shooter discharged his firearm in the baggage claim area, considered a less-secure part of the airport.

Political rally venues typically are not as well defined and contained as the secure side of an airport. Saturday’s Trump rally was held outdoors, making it exceedingly difficult to monitor all possible threat vectors that could attack the participants.

Moving forward, what are possible solutions?

Before holding a political rally that could attract unpredictable rogue attacks, the entire gestalt of the venue must be assessed. Indoor venues provide a more controllable area to protect. For outdoor venues, any lines of sight from which a bad actor could reach participants creates the risk of a shooting along these vectors.

Then there is the issue of drones infiltrating the air space around the venue. Given how rapidly such attacks could occur, a drone attack on an outdoor venue, albeit highly unlikely, should not be dismissed.

Moving such rallies indoors makes sense. It provides Secret Service and other security personnel with the greatest opportunity to control threat items and potentially bad actors from wreaking harm during such events.
If personnel control is needed, limiting attendance to those who preregister for the event would be prudent. Some airports are now permitting non-flyers to enter the secure side of airports, providing a model for how to control access safely.

To go one step further, those with TSA PreCheck status (through the many avenues by which it can be gained, including being active military or holding Global Entry) would elevate the security of the event significantly for those who do not preregister. This might not be a popular idea, given that attaining such status requires background checks that could exclude some participants. It would, however, raise the level of security far above what can be achieved by physical screening alone.

This year’s campaign is guaranteed to elicit significant visceral responses, which will make every political rally a potential crime scene.

Now, though, the element of surprise has been eliminated, with heightened security now guaranteed at all such events. But the choice of venues will be an important consideration moving forward.
Simply put, open-air events carry risks that can be mitigated by moving people indoors. This might not be the preference for candidates. It will, however, give the Secret Service and security personnel the greatest opportunity to keep all participants safe.

It is easy to throw the Secret Service under the bus for what happened in Butler. Given the environment that agents had to secure and the daunting task they faced, it is amazing that there were not more injuries. They should be commended for what they accomplish every day to keep our elected officials safe.

What occurred in Butler might be an isolated event that hopefully will not be repeated during this campaign or any future campaigns. Steps can be taken to reduce such risks. Choosing the venues wisely can make security easier to attain and keep everyone engaged and, most important, safe.

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