

At Trump Rally, Local Police and Gunman Were in Same Warehouse Complex

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BUTLER, Pa. — While a gunman was climbing onto the roof of a warehouse less than 500 feet from where former President Donald Trump was speaking Saturday, three law enforcement snipers were positioned inside the same complex of buildings, looking for anything amiss in the crowd.

The director of the Secret Service said the local forces were in the very same building, an account suggesting that the gunman was essentially on top of them. A local law enforcement official told The New York Times on Tuesday that was not the case and that the local officers were in an adjacent building.

The discrepancy in their accounts is just one unsettled element in the effort to determine how security broke down and allowed a 20-year-old with a semiautomatic rifle to open fire in a rapid barrage that left Trump hurt, one man dead and two other people at the rally gravely wounded.

That this simple matter — whether law enforcement used the same building as the gunman — is still not easily resolved three days after the shooting shows that divisions are emerging among the law enforcement agencies after a would-be assassin came close to felling the Republican presidential nominee two days before the party's convention.

The Secret Service director, Kimberly A. Cheatle, set off the back-and-forth in an interview with ABC News on Tuesday morning, her first public appearance since the assassination attempt. She said that local officers were inside the building used by the gunman, Thomas Matthew Crooks, 20, of Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, on Saturday evening. If so, that meant the gunman could have scaled a building even as snipers were stationed inside it.

“There was local police in that building — there was local police in the area that were responsible for the outer perimeter of the building,” Cheatle said.

Several local law enforcement agencies immediately put out statements saying they were not in the same building as the gunman. That led to the Secret Service making a statement on social media saying that it valued local law enforcement.

While local law enforcement officers are used for additional security in an event like a campaign rally, it was the Secret Service's job to determine the security plan and keep the protectee — in this case, Trump — safe.

“The safety and security of a protectee falls on the shoulders of the Secret Service, period,” said John Cohen, a former law enforcement official who has worked with the Secret Service for years at both the state and federal levels.

“You have a former president who was close to being assassinated,” Cohen said. “There’s nothing more illustrative of the threat that we’re facing.”

Cheatle did say in the interview with ABC: “The buck stops with me. I’m the director of the Secret Service. It was unacceptable, and it’s something that shouldn’t happen again.”

Concerns about violence going into the 2024 election have been elevated as the country has seen a rise in threats of political violence — and in some cases actual attacks — on government officials, lawmakers and election workers.

On Tuesday, it was reported that the U.S. intelligence agencies were tracking what they considered a potential Iranian assassination plot against Trump before Saturday’s events, believed to be unrelated to Crooks. The intelligence had prompted the Secret Service to enhance security for the former president before Saturday’s outdoor rally, but not enough to stop a gunman from shooting at him.

At the heart of the dispute between the Secret Service and local agencies is a warren of warehouses, adjacent to the rally site, the Butler Farm Show grounds, and who was responsible for securing them.

The cluster of buildings, owned by manufacturer AGR International, stood just north of the stage. The one closest to the stage was a one-floor building with a few windows and a sloped roof. Immediately behind it, and slightly offset, was a two-floor building with more windows. More warehouses lined up behind those.

The Secret Service had determined that the entire warehouse complex should be outside its most secure perimeter and thus delegated to local law enforcement to sweep and secure.

The gunman used the roof of the one-story building closest to the stage from which to fire his AR-15-type weapon.

But agencies are offering different accounts about which building local law enforcement used as a staging area and a perch for the three local officers called counter snipers. These officers were watching over the crowd as it gathered in the secure zone, a local law enforcement official, who was not authorized to give public statements, said in an interview with the Times.

It was the two-floor building, the one behind the warehouse used by the gunman, where those snipers were stationed by the windows, the official said.

After the gunman made it to the roof of the one-story warehouse, a local officer was hoisted by another officer up the building's wall and over the parapet, only to lock eyes on the gunman, Sheriff Michael T. Slupe of Butler County and a federal law enforcement official said.

The gunman pointed his weapon at the officer, who immediately retreated, the officials said. Shortly after, the gunman began firing at the rally, and a Secret Service sniper shot and killed him.

Jim Pasco, executive director of the National Fraternal Order of Police, said he was frustrated with the narrative of the local police having responsibility in one place and the Secret Service in another.

"That's nonsensical," he said in an interview. Local law enforcement officers are additional resources that are vital to the Secret Service's security mission, he said, likening the agency to the general contractor for presidential-related security events.

"It doesn't matter who the subcontractors are," he said. "Your name is on the truck."

The Secret Service, in a social media post Tuesday, said it was not criticizing its local law enforcement partners in Butler, calling the officers courageous. "Any news suggesting the Secret Service is blaming local law enforcement for Saturday's incident is simply not true."

One point of general agreement: No one from law enforcement was on the roof of any of the AGR warehouse buildings Saturday.

In her interview with ABC, Cheatle said no officers were stationed atop the roof itself because it would not be safe.

"That building in particular has a sloped roof, at its highest point," she said. "And so there's a safety factor that would be considered there, that we wouldn't want to put somebody up on a sloped roof. So the decision was made to secure the building from inside."

Former Secret Service agents said that agents do take up positions on roofs more steeply sloped than that one — indeed, Secret Service snipers were perched on a steeper roof behind Trump at the same event. But they said the agency also weighed safety and sometimes opted to block access to sloped roofs instead of putting someone on top.

"The bottom line is, the roof should have been posted and utilized as an observation post with police officers on it," said Joe Funk, a former agent who protected Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton.