Monday, July 15, 2024 / Is this us?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Even before this past weekend, this election was bonkers.

SCORING <Second Personage – BMC>

SEAN: First of all, it’s a straight up rematch – the rematch from hell, the rematch no one wanted. Former president versus current president. Newly convicted felon versus father of newly convicted felon. The two oldest major-party candidates to ever run for the top job. Record-breaking old men. One guy facing more legal challenges than every other president in history combined. The other guy facing relentless calls to step down from just about every corner of his own party, but saying he’s gotta stick around because American democracy’s on the line.

We had had seen anything like it before... *before* this past weekend. Before a kid in Pennsylvania tried to kill Donald Trump.

SCORING OUT

[BEAT OF SILENCE]

SEAN: America just dodged a bullet, and *maybe* we can learn something from it.

That’s on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

KEN THOMAS (*Wall Street Journal* reporter): So my name is Ken Thomas. I'm a White House reporter with *The* *Wall Street Journal*.

SCORING <Floating in Ovals>

KEN: I've covered politics a long time. This is my third White House, and I did cover President Trump for a couple years when he was president. I got a flight to Pittsburgh on Saturday morning and drove up to Butler, not expecting a lot of news that day. When I arrived, it was like any other Trump rally I had covered in the past. You know, there's, there's almost a festival-like quality to a Trump rally. And it was no different in Butler.

SCORING OUT

KEN: When he took the stage, it was around 6:00. And it was just a typical arrival, like anything else.

*<CLIP> RALLY NATSOUND: “GOD BLESS THE USA”*

KEN: You know, we heard Lee Greenwood's “God Bless the U.S.A..” You know, that's one of those Trump anthems that we've heard over the years. And, you know, he just went into his remarks and the remarks were just very typical. You know, he talked about the need to take back our country.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, BUTLER RALLY: And we’re going to take back our country. We’re going to take it back.*

KEN: And he started talking about immigration. It was nearly… it was maybe like the nine- minute mark or so. And he said… he was pointing to some of the immigration statistics, and they had a sort of a presentation on the screens that showed data related to border crossings and immigration.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: That’s a little bit old, that chart. That chart’s a couple of months old, and if you really want to see something that’s sad, take a look at what happened…  
[SHOTS]  
[SCREAMING, UNDER]*

KEN: And that's when we heard the sound of gunfire. I heard three shots initially. It was like a pop, pop, pop. And then it was quickly followed by a series of shots. I was in the press area just below the risers. That's where, you know, the news crews set up their cameras to film. I think most reporters knew that something was wrong. You know, I saw some reporters drop to the ground to protect themselves. I kind of got low myself. When we saw, you know, the the Secret Service rush to Trump, I think that that was when everyone knew, you know, this is this was going to be a day we wouldn't forget.

AMBIENT SOUNDS FROM CHAOS

KEN: I think in the first few minutes, there was just this murmur of uncertainty within the crowd. I mean, I remember hearing one man yell, ‘Did he get shot?’ The crowd then definitely responded when they saw Trump emerge by the lectern with the Secret Service. And he raised his fist defiantly.

*<CLIP> <fade up> TRUMP: Wait. Wait. Wait.   
[TRUMP RAISES FIST]  
[CROWD CHEERS]*

KEN: And it was like they knew, you know, he, he was going to be okay. They were able to rush Trump off the stage pretty quickly. You know, I just tried to rush over – as, as many of the reporters there did – to sort of the edge of that media pen. And we just started interviewing bystanders who, you know, had been in the crowd and had witnessed it all. And many of them were, were just struck that they had seen blood on, on the president's ear. And, you know, sort of cheek area. As people were leaving, the Secret Service pounced. And, and they just started clearing the area. You know, I remember this agent just shouting, you know, ‘This is an active crime scene.’ You know, basically, ‘You have to just pack up your gear and leave.’

AMBI FADES OUT

SEAN: I know we've been promised investigations, but it feels like any way you slice it, this is a pretty extraordinary failure on the Secret Service’s part. In the hours that follow – and now, days – what have we heard from law enforcement and the Secret Service and about how this happened?

KEN: Yeah, I think at first I was just shocked that something like this could have happened. I've been to a million events in which the Secret Service runs things. You know, it's a very routine process. We go through magnetometers. If you set off the magnetometer, you're wanded, you know, with a handheld system, and your bags are searched. And everyone in the crowd did that. But, you know, as we're learning, the alleged shooter was on a roof roughly 140 yards away. It was certainly outside the security perimeter. But, you know, it's been standard practice since the Kennedy assassination that any time you have a protectee, they search buildings, and… nearby and make sure there isn't some kind of elevated place where a shooter could try to inflict harm on a president or, you know, somebody who's protected by the Secret Service. There seems to have been a real breakdown in that. And I, I think the, the investigations that will follow, I think we expect all, you know, both, independent investigations – I'm sure Congress is going to look into this. My sense is that the focal point will be on how the shooter managed to get on that roof and, and how was it possible those nearby buildings were not fully checked off, you know, that there was, there was no way that anybody could have gotten nearby.

SEAN: What have we found out about the shooter and, who knows, his possible motive since Saturday?

KEN: We're still trying to piece that together. A group of my colleagues did an initial deep dive into Thomas Matthew Crooks. He was 20 years old, from Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, which is not far from Butler.

*<CLIP> FOX 4: Officials found bomb-making materials inside Crooks’ vehicle and home. Although the FBI has deemed this an attempted assassination, it could not immediately locate any writings or social media posts to point to a motive <fade under>*

**[[[THIS SECTION ONLY IN PODCAST:** KEN: You know, the, the portrait that we have put together so far is someone who was fairly quiet. We know that he took advanced classes in high school. We have reporting that there were times that he was bullied.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS 4, CROOKS’ CLASSMATE: He was bullied almost every day.  
REPORTER: In what way? Can you explain?   
CLASSMATE: I mean, he would sit alone at lunch. I mean he was just an outcast. And you know how kids are nowadays… <fade under>*

KEN: But the, you know, some of the classmates we spoke to said that he wasn't particularly outspoken about his political views. And so I think there is a real mystery here as to what the motivation was. You know, why he would have done something like this. The people who knew him just seem to be stunned as to, you know, why he would do something like this.**]]]**

SEAN: What does Donald Trump say in the immediate aftermath? And in the, let's say, what, 36 hours since?

KEN: Well, Trump posted on, on his Truth Social site that he was okay. He, he actually confirmed that a bullet had, you know, pierced his, his ear. That he had had this close call. But I think what we're hearing from Trump is, you know, calls for unity. He has talked about how he hopes this is something that brings people together. That, you know, the country needs to come together, put faith in, in justice and in God. And so he has really tried to project this sense that the country needs to lower the temperature a bit. And that is certainly something we've heard from President Biden.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Look, there is no place in America for this kind of violence. It’s sick. It’s sick. It’s one of the reasons why we have to unite this country. We cannot allow for this to be happening. We cannot be like this. We cannot condone this.*

SCORING <Users Lose Drugs>

KEN: I think what's difficult for both of these leaders is that this is something that's happening in the summer of an extremely difficult campaign, in which, you know, there have been just very, very charged words traded back and forth. Republicans were quick to note that, you know…

*<CLIP> REP. MIKE JOHNSON (R-LA): Well, I mean, look. President Biden himself said in recent days: “It’s time to put a, a, a bullseye on Trump.” I mean, I know he didn’t mean what is being implied there. But that kind of language, on either side, should be called out. And, and we have to make clear that this is part of our system. We can have vigorous debate. But it needs to end there.*

KEN:~~.~~ And, you know, during the Republican convention, I think the assassination attempt will hang over the convention in Milwaukee and there will be calls for unity. I mean, Trump certainly seems to be scrapping his, his speech later in the week and will be trying to emphasize the need for, for the country to come together. But I think it's an open question on how long that will last. This is just a very difficult and rough campaign. And I think both parties feel like the stakes have never been higher. And it's just hard to imagine that these calls for unity will last very long.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: That was Ken Thomas from the *Wall Street Journal*. WSJ dot com.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. Next on *Today, Explained* we’re gonna ask if there’s anything we can learn about ourselves and our country in this trying moment. And I promise there is.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Erik Nisbet. He’s a professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois who studies how the public views political violence. And even though he studies this stuff he was not ready when his phone buzzed on Saturday.

ERIK NISBET (Northwestern University professor): At first it was disbelief. My hope was that it was someone shooting off firecrackers or some such. It quickly turned to sadness when I found that it was [an] actual assassination attempt. People had been killed and injured, and that President Trump - his ear had been grazed by a bullet.

SEAN: I notice that Joe Biden has spoken about three times in about 24 hours about this assassination attempt on his opponent, which… which, for the president, is a lot of times. He doesn't speak that much. The first time he said, ‘this isn't us.’ The second time he said, ‘this isn't us.’ The third time he said, ‘this isn't us.’ But I think students of history might recall that this is kind of us. But let me ask you, is this us?

ERIK: Unfortunately, it's us, but there is something different in this historical moment. What's different over the last 10 years, is that political violence is no longer just political violence, it's partisan violence. It's violence that's focused on and centered around our political identities as Democrat and Republican. You know, previously, political violence was actually pretty symmetrical on the left and the right. Um, it was focused around more general ideologies. focused on maybe single issues. Now, political violence, the trends in recent years, are focused on more, ‘I am a Democrat, and thus I have… support violence against Republicans’ or vice versa. And it has – in at least in terms of the number of violent acts tracked by the FBI and domestic terrorism databases – has been more right-leaning in recent years than left. Notwithstanding the act we saw on Saturday, the targets of political violence and the perpetrators of political violence have been more on the right.

SEAN: What do you think accounts for that shift? The shift towards more partisan political violence and more violence from the right than the left?

ERIK: A few different factors:

SCORING <Basic Barbara>

ERIK: One is the rise of this political sectarianism, right? Where we're incredibly tribal and where our political identities have become almost mega identities. They supersede all other sort of social or cultural identities that we have, right? For some people. This is combined with these perceptions and rhetoric of dehumanizing the other side, right? ‘The other side is immoral. and an existential threat to our group, to our identity…’ And if the other side is immoral, not human and a threat, then violence becomes almost morally justified. ‘I still can be a good person and engage in violence.’ And that's how many of those around January 6, for example, viewed themselves: They were good people. They were righting a wrong. And violence was justified in that case.

*<CLIP> INSURRECTIONIST: What really made me want to come was the fact that I had supported Trump all that time, that I did believe the election was being stolen. And Trump asked us to come.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Yeah. What is this political shift in, in the types of violence we're seeing and the reasons behind it doing not just to the victims of the violence, but to our country?

ERIK: When we look at political violence, obviously it's a tragedy when individuals are injured or killed, right? But from a larger perspective, a more aggregate perspective, political violence threatens our democracy in a few different ways. First of all, we have to differentiate between political violence conducted by individuals versus collective political violence. When I talk to national security experts, when I talk to political scientists, what keeps them up at night is not the lone wolf, like we saw on Saturday, it's what they saw on January 6, when they saw a group of individuals, uhh, engaging in a large mass violent activity, right?

SEAN: Mmm.

ERIK: And that could possibly happen on the left or happen on the right. The other aspect of how political violence negatively impacts our country is really in terms of shaping, um, our political discourse and who… who are our political leaders. So there is research that focuses on what role do political threats, threats of violence against elected officials. And the research shows that threats have grown exponentially against elected officials, not only among Congress and at presidential level, but state, local, all the way down to the proverbial dog catcher.

<CLIP> *CNN:* *CNN reviewed more than 500 federally prosecuted threats to public officials. In the last decade, at least 40 percent were politically motivated.*

ERIK: Surveys of elected officials nationwide have shown about 20% of Democrats and Republicans alike report receiving some form of political threats, violent threats, whether they be online or otherwise.

*<CLIP> UNIDENTIFED THREATENING MAN: When we come to lynch your stupid lying commie ass, you'll remember that you lied on the f ing Bible, you piece of shit.*

*<CLIP>  UNIDENTIFIED THREATENING MAN: Yeah, you don't have to get back with me, but I really believe what we used to do to traitors is what we should do today.*

ERIK: The research that shows us what is the impact of these threats towards our elected officials — And they also just, mind you, disproportionately focus on women and people of color. — is that elected officials are less likely to seek higher office or run for reelection. They're less likely to actually address controversial issues. They shy away. And they're less likely to engage and interact with the public. So this really shapes even how our politics function and who we have to vote for and what issues they decide to actually address because of these threats of political violence.

*<CLIP> FORMER REP FRED UPTON (R-MI): Our offices may be closed a little bit in the next couple of days because of the threats. We don’t know how serious they are, but there were more than one.*

SEAN: How relieved were you to see that the president was only slightly injured on Saturday? How much worse do you think this would have been for this country had he actually been critically injured or killed on Saturday?

ERIK: Much worse. Violence begets violence, okay? And one of the drivers of political violence is what we call meta perceptions. If a Democrat thinks Republicans are violent, they're more likely to engage in violence themselves and vice versa. It's, ‘if they pull a knife, we pull a gun.’ And so acts of political violence actually will beget violence because it makes each group more willing to engage in violence as sort of a self-protective function. And that becomes like a self -reinforcing spiral.

SEAN: How much do you think the former president, whose life was just threatened, has escalated the rhetoric, the polarization, himself? I mean, he did famously encourage people to stage an insurrection on the Capitol.

ERIK: I think it's hard to pin it on one individual. I think you have to look at a larger sort of information environment.

*<CLIP> PBS, CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE JERONE DAVIDSON (R-MS): When this rifle is the only thing standing between your family and a dozen angry Democrats in Klan hoods you might just need that semiautomatic.*

ERIK: And I think one of the things driving right-wing political violence in the United States is sort of this group -based cues where they target, often, immigrants or other out -groups. And Republicans have, you know, after the assassination attempt, have pointed to Biden, Biden's rhetoric, at least specifically, about his claiming that Donald Trump is a threat to democracy as inciting violence.

*<CLIP> REP. LAUREN BOEBERT (R-CO): Everyone who has called him a fascist, everyone has called him a threat to democracy, who said that he should be put in a bullseye, as Joe Biden said… < FADE HERE>*

ERIK: And I would say there is a meaningful difference when you, because where the rhetoric on the right often talks about Biden and Democrats as a threat, as a group, to “us”, right, as a group, right, where it's a threat to, you know, white Americans, it's true Americans, you know, that type of rhetoric versus when Biden often talks about Donald Trump as a threat to democracy, he at least is trying to say, ‘He's the threat to all of us.’ It's a little more inclusive in terms of the way that that rhetoric is framed.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Too much of what is happening in our country today is not normal. Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans represent an extremist that threatens the very foundations of our republic.*

SEAN: So, I mean, it feels like Democrats are in a tough position here. Donald Trump does abuse our democratic norms and is therefore a threat to our democracy. These are facts. And yet, because they say that now, they're being blamed for escalating political violence in this country. And yes, this man did attempt to kill Donald Trump. So how do we talk – as we begin the RNC today – how do we talk about the very real stakes of our election and escalate violence or be accused of escalating violence?

ERIK: That is a really good question. I've been thinking about that most of the weekend. Um, you know, part of it, how we got here is like, you know, obviously there is extreme right-wing rhetoric from Donald Trump and others. I don't think Democrats are blameless here because it's almost like the boy who cried wolf. **[[[THIS SECTION ONLY IN PODCAST:** Every election, you know, if you go back to like Bush, right, or Romney has been, ‘They're a threat.’ It's like, you know, I think a lot of Democrats miss you know, former President Bush, right?

SEAN: I don't miss the wars.

ERIK: Or, you know Cheney, right? Cheney was this evil, right? The ultimate evil, right?

SEAN: And now he's posting videos saying, don't vote for Donald Trump, he's a threat to our democracy.**]]]**

ERIK: So, you know, Democrats are now saying, ‘Well, we really do have a threat to democracy.’ And some people are like, ‘Well, you've said that every election cycle one way or another. Is that actually true or not?’

SEAN: Mmm.

ERIK: And so, you know, there is, yes, there is credible evidence that Donald Trump is a threat to democracy. What Democrats have to do is To point out that the best way to deal with the threat to democracy is not through violent action, but rather through the ballot box. That engaging in violence, the medicine is worse than the disease.

SCORING <Luke Takes A Train 5/9>

ERIK: We do need to understand that we all are Americans and that that should be our sort of mega identity that supersedes any partisan differences. it's just not only our political leaders, it needs to be all of us communicate and embrace that. Because once we see each other as existential threats and return to violence to solve our political differences, our democracy is done.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Erik Nisbet. Professor of policy analysis and communication at Northwestern University.

This episode of *Today, Explained* was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and Peter Balonon-Rosen. They had lots of help from lots of people, including Miranda Kennedy, Matthew Collette, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Patrick Boyd, and Andrea Kritinsdottir.

We’ll have more for you tomorrow.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**