

Inside the mind of an American shooter

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Detectives are examining internet records to work out what led Thomas Matthews Crooks to shoot Donald Trump (Image: i Design Team)

Big Read

Forensic psychologists say ideology is not as important as people think in most assassination attempts

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What went through the mind of Thomas Matthew Crooks as he drove to a shooting range for one final practice session with his gun? And the next morning, while he was buying 50 rounds of ammunition plus a ladder? And later that day, when he sat in his car with a homemade bomb in the boot, drove an hour north to a political rally, and then clambered onto a rooftop with his AR-15 assault rifle?

What was the 20-year-old thinking when he squeezed the trigger and fired his first bullet toward Donald Trump's head?

It's hard to imagine. And we can never know for sure, especially because Crooks was killed within seconds, shot by a counter-sniper stationed at the Butler Farm Show fairground in Pennsylvania last Saturday.

The media have called him an "elusive enigma", while Melania Trump labelled Crooks a "monster". But detectives are trying to understand the man and his motivations – not just in those two final days, but in the weeks, months and perhaps even years leading up to his assassination attempt.

They have unlocked his phone and are analysing his internet browsing history (which included the FBI director, the US attorney-general and a member of the British Royal Family, who has not been named – as well as dates for the Republican and Democratic

national conventions).

It's work that could help psychologists improve their detailed threat assessment criteria, which are used by authorities to try and catch would-be killers of major public figures before they strike.

This is harder than it sounds, because each case is unique. There are some trends, but they are neither universal nor very specific, and many common-sense assumptions turn out to be wrong.



More than a dozen guns were found at the Bethel Park home of Thomas Matthew Crooks in a police search after he shot Donald Trump (Photos: Getty)

Take Crooks' political beliefs. He was not a Marxist like John F Kennedy's murderer Lee Harvey Oswald. Despite making a \$15 donation to a progressive committee the day Joe Biden became president, it seems he didn't support the Democrats. He was registered as a voter for Trump's own party – the Republicans – and was said to have often espoused conservative views at school.

This surprised many people, but not the experts.

Even in cases of people trying to kill presidential candidates, "there's generally an absence of ideological motivation," says Dr Reid Meloy. The forensic psychologist, who has worked for the FBI and the UK's Home Office while specialising in targeted attackers, has found that motives tend to be "largely personal". They're often based on grudges and grievances rather than political beliefs.

Another common thought, Meloy tells i, is that those who want to kill famous people are usually seeking fame themselves.

This used to be more common. But studying 56 incidents in the US between 1995 and 2015 – with targets ranging from politicians such as former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords to celebrities such as Paris Hilton, and from musicians including Tupak Shakur and Madonna to journalists, judges and athletes – Meloy and his colleague Molly Amman found just a single case in which achieving notoriety appeared to be a primary motivation. That was the murder of Gianni Versace by serial killer Andrew Cunanan in 1997.

Meloy explains that although many modern assassins are highly narcissistic, in recent decades this has tended to stem from or manifest in “a sense of personal grievance and entitlement that they could carry out their attack”. It’s typically about feeling power, not a desire to go down in history.

This is a “very interesting psychological shift” from 20th-century cases, he says. “Their narcissism has shifted to a much more entitled, grandiose, personal grievance – ‘I have justified the right for me to do this in my mind.’”

“There’s generally an absence of ideological motivation”

Dr Reid Meloy



Donald Trump was lucky to survive with just a wound to his ear after being shot by Thomas Matthew Crooks (Photos: Getty)

Meloy cannot provide any diagnosis for Crooks without access to his files and does not want to risk biasing the investigation. But he says that what’s been reported in the media so far about his background and behaviour is not “inconsistent with our knowledge of public-figure assassins, specifically individuals that have attempted to target the President”.

Accounts from various former schoolmates, colleagues and neighbours give us a vague picture of Crooks, though the recollections can be contradictory. Crooks was either “bullied so much in high school” or “never got picked on”, depending on who you believe. Some said that he was a “loner” who seemed “a little weird”, but others recalled a “nice kid” who was “quiet” and a “retro nerd”. He appeared to be “incredibly intelligent” and was “very passionate about history”, but was also an “outcast” who wore “hunting outfits to school”. He “wasn’t really fit for the rifle team”.

Crooks was apparently keen on chess and had achieved a two-year college degree in engineering science. His parents are social workers. He had a job in the kitchen of a care home, where he told his boss he needed last Saturday off because he had “something to do”.

Overall, nobody expected someone like him to do something like that. The person who tried to kill America’s last and perhaps next president was a “normal boy”, in the words of an old classmate.

From the stereotype we have of 'high-school shooters', many now expect that any gunman will have been bullied at school. Although this is often the case, Meloy says it's worthless as a predictor. Millions of people are abused in classrooms and corridors, but a tiny proportion of them make attempts to kill using firearms.

"What is important," Meloy explains, "is how they cope with that in their mind. Psychologically, how do they deal with it?"

"Typically these individuals are not psychotic when they carry out their attack"

Dr Reid Meloy



Lee Harvey Oswald posed with a rifle and a Marxist newspaper a few months before assassinating US President John F Kennedy during a drive in Dallas in 1963 (Photos: Getty/Wikimedia Commons)

Busting myths about assassins

In 1981, John Hinckley Jr shot the newly inaugurated Ronald Reagan outside the Hilton Hotel in Washington. Hinckley wasn't angered by the Republican's policies on Russia or taxes. He shot the President because he thought it would impress the actress Jodie Foster, who he'd been stalking after seeing her in the film *Taxi Driver*.

That year, the US Secret Service held a meeting dedicated to "the prevention of assassination". This led to detailed research into attacks on prominent people stretching back decades, culminating in a seminal paper based on 74 incidents, published in 1997.

It revealed that 86 per cent of culprits were men. Only one-sixth had previously been arrested for a violent crime. Many had delusional ideas, but few suffered from hallucinations. Two thirds were "social isolates". Half were single, a quarter were separated, divorced, widowed.

They were usually intelligent, often depressed. Most were not members of radical groups. The average age was 35, but the range extended from teenagers to septuagenarians. And although many famous people are fearful of stalkers, aspiring assassins were typically unknown to their victims.

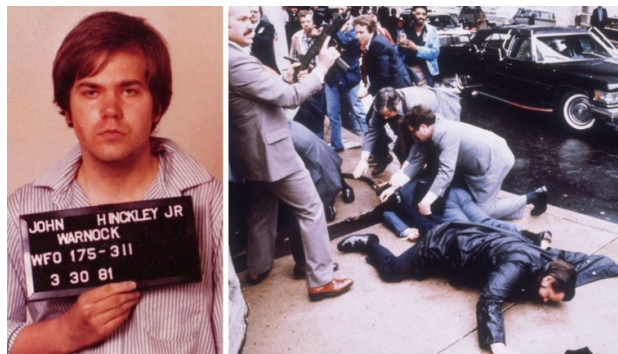
Perhaps the most disconcerting insight was just how difficult it can be, even for experts, to identify a potential killer in advance. Whatever stereotypes and genuine trends exist, the study concluded: “There are no accurate – or useful – descriptive, demographic, or psychological ‘profiles’ of American assassins.”

It also busted a myth that assassination attempts are always “a product of mental illness or derangement”.

This remains true today, says Meloy. Although public-figure attackers are more likely to be suffering from issues than the general population, “the majority do not have a prior psychiatric diagnosis,” he says. “Typically these individuals are not psychotic when they carry out their attack, or prior to carrying out an attack.”

“There are no accurate – or useful – descriptive, demographic, or psychological ‘profiles’ of American assassins”

US Secret Service study



John Hinckley Jr injured President Ronald Reagan and three others in a shooting in 1981
(Photos: Getty Images / Wikimedia Commons)

The 90s study found that these incidents, “almost without exception, are not sudden, impulsive acts. Assassination is the end result of understandable, and discernible, process of thinking and behaviour.”

So instead of trying to pinpoint which types of people are most likely to become assassins, researchers focus on potential red flags that can be spotted during a three-stage “pathway to violence”.

“They are usually multi-problemled individuals. There’s typically lots of failures in social, familial, occupational areas,” says Meloy. “If everyday life is very difficult and angst-ridden for them, they will withdraw into a new dark identity and may fantasise about becoming an assassin or becoming a shooter or a mass attacker... It can be fuelled on the internet, because there’s lots of material for them to learn all about this: they study previous attackers, weapons and tactics online.”

This “skill-building” process often feels fulfilling, says Meloy. “The paradox that’s very difficult for other people to grasp is that the person starts to feel better emotionally.

“It may start out as just a vague, chaotic revenge fantasy. But over what can be several years, that incubates and begins to crystallise and they start to think about actually doing it.”

Describing the second step, he says: “This feeling of being victimised by other people becomes a self identity of being a soldier or a warrior... It could be from a personal grievance or attached to an ideology, like becoming a jihadist.” This is when they are likely to hint at their thoughts, or just say them outright, on social media.

It’s reported that Crooks had written on a gaming platform that 13 July, the day of his attack, “will be my premiere, watch as it unfolds”.

Next, Meloy says, the planning becomes more specific, “like the purchase of a weapon, going to a shooting range, and thinking: what other paraphernalia am I going to bring to the crime? How am I going to obtain it? What’s my what’s my access point? How can I get there? What’s the level of security?”

This fits with Crooks. After Trump’s rally was announced, he scoped out the location prior to the day of his attack, sources have told CNN.

The third stage is “a time-action imperative: I must act, and I must act now”, says Meloy. This might be triggered by sensing an opportunity – like a presidential nominee giving a rally at a nearby fairground, perhaps.

Meloy says that most assassins attack in their local area rather than travelling hundreds of miles. He is wary of speculating on Crooks but says: “Maybe he considered the mandated time and the place: Saturday morning, an hour from my home. That could contribute to this last-resort stage.”

He adds: “I’m very interested to see if this young man appeared in any of the databases of a person of concern, and whether there was any prior contact by local or federal law enforcement with this young man. Typically that kind of data doesn’t come out until later in the investigation. But if it’s there, it will surface.”

“They are usually multi-problemed individuals”

Dr Reid Meloy



Jason Kolher is among the former classmates of Thomas Matthew Crooks to have described what he was like (Photo:Aaron Josefczyk/Reuters)

Similarities with mass shooters

Attempts to shoot US presidents have remained rare, occurring only once every few decades. Perhaps that's because the US Secret Service has usually done a good job of protecting leaders.

On the other hand, mass shootings – usually defined as the killing of four or more people by a gunman in a public place, separate to terrorism, gang violence and family murders – are much more common in the States. For many people, these now seem “as American as apple pie,” says Prof James Densley, co-author of *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*. He is British but has made the US his home for two decades, lecturing in criminology at Metro State University in Minnesota.

Experts have found similarities between the typical perpetrators of both types of crime. Looking at political assassination attempts throughout US history, Densley found that all but one are male, all but one were in their 20s, all but one used a gun. Many also felt alienated and were suffering a mental-health crisis. “On that level, there is a commonality with mass shooters,” he tells [i](#).

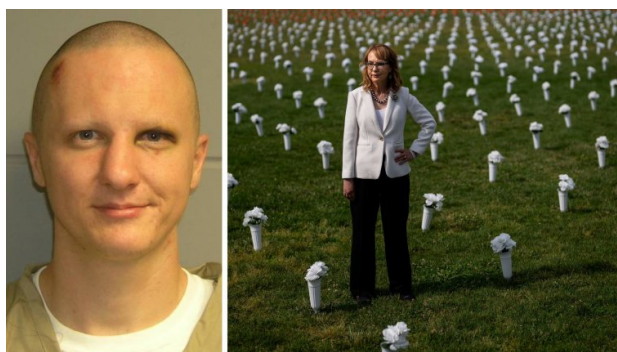
There are also key differences. For example, most people who target public figures intend to survive afterwards, whereas mass shooters generally expect or even want to die – either by killing themselves or being shot by police.

“You don't get away with a mass shooting,” says Densley. “There's something different about the mindset of: ‘This is going to be my last act and my final day, and I'm going to go out with a bang.’ That tells you something about where these people are in their lives.”

It's not yet known if Crooks planned to escape. But Densley says: “If you are going to take a sniper position and fire down into a crowd at a political rally with a former president and current candidate speaking, that's really only going to end one way and it's going to be your death.”

“Before they pulled the trigger, this ‘monster’ was somebody’s son”

Prof James Densley



Former US congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, seen here at a memorial to victims of gun crime, was shot by Jared Lee Loughner in 2011 – she survived but six others died, including a senior judge (Photos: Getty/Wikimedia Commons)

He says the reactions of those who knew Crooks also fit what we typically hear from friends and family of a gunman after a mass shooting. “There’s often a sense of: we knew something was wrong, but we didn’t know it would lead to this... Even the parents of the perpetrators will say, ‘I knew there was something wrong with my son. He wasn’t like other kids, he had issues, he had things going on – but never in a million years would I have thought he would pick up a gun and murder his class’.”

This widespread disbelief that an apparently ordinary human could be capable of either a mass shooting or can lead to them being written off as a “monster”. But Densley says “this label is a barrier to prevention”, because it stops people accepting that someone close to them is at risk of turning violent.

“There’s no question these people have done something monstrous. In many cases, they’ve perpetrated some of the worst crimes in history and ever imaginable. But when we use those labels, it just explains away the problem. It doesn’t get us any closer towards solutions,” he argues.

“Before they pulled the trigger, this ‘monster’ was somebody’s son, somebody’s brother, somebody’s colleague, somebody’s classmate. If we’d identified them as that human being before they became the ‘monster’ we know them as now, we could have diverted them.”

Public-figure attacks are not unique to the US; think of Labour MP Jo Cox’s murder by white supremacist Thomas Mair in 2016. The same is true of mass attacks, as we saw with the UK’s Dunblane school massacre in 1996.

But Densley says that per person, the US “has about six or seven times its share of mass shootings” compared to what might be expected demographically.

“There’s no question that it is quite a uniquely American phenomena.”

It's too simple to say that people carry out "copycat" attacks, he believes, but deeper societal factors have become a "self-fulfilling prophecy" since the Columbine High School massacre of 1999.

"For an entire generation growing up in this country, they go to school and practice active-shooter drills, they see armed guards and metal detectors on the way into their classrooms. It's a constant reminder of: this happens here. They are truly ingrained into the psyche and the culture of the US.

"There is now a script or a narrative around this form of crime if you are a disgruntled, alienated young man. They have become a way that some Americans resolve their problems. You can't say that about anywhere else."

Reading about Crooks and looking at criminological patterns, Densley says: "It makes you wonder if this was somebody who was thinking to themselves, 'I might perpetrate a mass shooting' – and then learns there's a political rally right there, just an hour away."

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