COMMENT

CHARLIE KIRK'S MURDER AND THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

After a shooting with obvious political resonance, news about the perpetrator's motives rarely brings clarity.

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September 11, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photograph from Getty

Three thousand people attended the Turning Point USA event at which Charlie Kirk spoke on Wednesday, on an outdoor green at Utah Valley University. The sheer size of that crowd—in the morning, at a school in a suburb of Provo, and even if some were there to protest—is just another piece of evidence that Kirk, in his years-long campaign to inspire a hard-right turn among people in their teens and twenties, had built a formidable movement. There was a Q. & A. portion, and someone asked how many transgender Americans had been mass shooters in the past decade, to which Kirk replied, "Too many." The person next asked, "Do you know how many mass shooters there have been in America over the last ten years?" Kirk said, "Counting or not counting gang violence?" Then, in videos, there is a single, audible crack, and Kirk's body jerks and then goes limp. In the audience, heads turn: someone had shot him, apparently from an elevated position about a hundred and fifty yards away. Soon, Kirk's spokesman announced that he had been killed. He was thirty-one, and left behind a wife and two young children. President Trump, a close ally, ordered all flags flown at half-staff until Sunday evening.

Kirk's death was brutal, and tragic. It also had the effect that terrorists aim for, of spreading political panic. In the immediate aftermath of a killing with obvious political resonance, there is a period of nervous foreboding, as the public waits for news of the perpetrator's identity and for any hints of what might have motivated the terrible act, and braces for the recriminations to come. But, as often as not, information brings no clarity. We have a fairly good sense of the politics that motivated Luigi Mangione, the accused killer of the UnitedHealthcare C.E.O., and James Fields, who sped his car into a crowd of counter-protesters at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, killing a young woman.

But attempts to define the political motives of Thomas Crooks (who tried to kill Trump last summer, in Butler, Pennsylvania), or of Cody Balmer (who has been charged with firebombing Governor Josh Shapiro's official residence, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in April), or even of Vance Boelter (the longtime anti-abortion activist who, in June, allegedly killed one Minnesota state lawmaker, along with her husband, and tried to kill another) quickly become ensnared in the problems of their apparent mental illness or a more basic incoherence. Robin Westman, who stands accused of shooting and killing two children at a Catholic church in Minneapolis last month

(and whose transgender identity was the focus of many right-wing media reports), had written "Kill Donald Trump" on some weapons, and neo-Nazi slogans ("Jew gas" and "6 million wasn't enough") on others, and expressed alignment with the Sandy Hook shooter, Adam Lanza. The motives were strange and idiosyncratic enough that they couldn't easily be blamed on any one partisan side.

The effect of these violent acts on politics has been easier to track. Shortly after the news of Kirk's shooting, the former Obama Administration official and liberal pundit Tommy Vietor echoed a common sentiment when he wrote on social media, "Political violence is evil and indefensible. It's a cancer that will feed off itself and spread." If that is right—if violence is contagious—then that is because each act generates its own responsive pattern of fear. The news itself in recent years has been a catalogue of the ubiquity of political aggression and anticipatory dread. In 2022, a man arrived at Brett Kavanaugh's home with a Glock and padded boots; later that year, a man broke into Nancy Pelosi's home and tried to murder her husband with a hammer. Threats against members of Congress have also escalated significantly in the past decade. The Republican senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, said at a conference this summer, "I'm oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice, because retaliation is real." After the shootings of lawmakers in Minnesota, the Democratic congressman Greg Landsman told the *Times* that every time he went out on the campaign trail he was haunted by a vision of himself lying murdered. "It's still in my head. I don't think it will go away," he said.

What politicians can control is how they respond. Speaking from the Oval Office on Wednesday evening, Trump denounced his perceived enemies. "For years, those on the radical left have compared wonderful Americans like Charlie to Nazis and the world's worst mass murderers and criminals," he said, and vowed to find those he deemed responsible for "political violence, including the organizations that fund it and support it." Unlike Barack Obama, who sang "Amazing Grace" at a funeral after the mass shooting at Charleston's Mother Emanuel church, Trump made no gesture toward common national feeling; he limited his litany of victims to those with whom he is aligned. The man sitting at the Resolute desk and blaming his enemies for political demonization—for acting "in the most hateful and despicable way"—had earlier in the week promoted a new campaign of ICE raids in Chicago with a social-media post featuring himself as Robert Duvall's character in "Apocalypse Now" and the tag line " 'I love the smell of deportations in the morning . . .' Chicago about to find out why it's called the Department of WAR." That aggression, combined with Kirk's shooting, seemed to be literalizing the culture war, in real time.

The footage of Kirk's murder is horrifying. His head flops; blood gushes from his neck. At a press conference afterward, the university's police chief, who had just six officers to protect the crowd of three thousand, said, "You try to get your bases covered, and unfortunately, today, we didn't." It is hard to blame him. The ubiquity of weapons and the ease with which just about anyone can get them has made the protection of human lives increasingly difficult. That the threat of political violence is so endemic is one reason that what was once true of Trump's movement is increasingly true of the country: it is distrustful, and feeling imperilled. In Utah, the people closest to the stage threw themselves to the ground quickly, and then so did hundreds of others, as they realized what was happening, in a wave that moved outward from Kirk. It was a visual manifestation of fear, spreading. ♦

Published in the print edition of the September 22, 2025, issue, with the headline "Politics and Fear."