

In Senate testimony

Top Secret Service, FBI officials maintain lone gunman narrative, attack “conspiracy theories” in Trump shooting

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On Tuesday, July 30, the acting director of the Secret Service, Ronald Rowe, and the deputy director of the FBI, Paul Abbate, testified for more than three hours before the Senate Judiciary and Homeland Security committees on the attempted assassination of Donald Trump on July 13 at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania.

This was the fourth time federal law enforcement officials testified before congressional panels since 20-year-old Thomas Matthew Crooks fired at least eight bullets from an AR-15-style rifle at the rally platform, grazing Trump in the ear and killing one attendee and wounding two others. Crooks, who was able to fire unimpeded from a factory rooftop offering a clear sightline some 140 yards from the platform, was shot and killed by a Secret Service countersniper.

The hearing, the first before a Democratic-led panel, came just eight days after then-Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle refused to give any details on the security failures of the Secret Service and local law enforcement in the Trump shooting at a hearing before the House Oversight Committee, leading to bipartisan demands that she resign, to which she complied the following day, July 23.

When FBI Director Christopher Wray testified at a previously scheduled, normally routine hearing before the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, July 24, he adopted a more forthcoming posture. However, he provided no explanation for the failure to prevent the shooting, could not explain Crooks’ motives for the attack, and maintained the narrative adopted by federal officials from day one—that the shooting was the work of a lone gunman and there was no evidence of accomplices or co-conspirators.

This has understandably fueled suspicions, entirely justified, of a wider conspiracy and cover-up, quite possibly involving elements within the Secret Service, the FBI and other intelligence and police agencies. It is all the more

inevitable given the history of presidential assassinations and assassination attempts in the US, and the revelations of complicity within sections of the state apparatus that followed official attempts to uphold a “lone wolf” narrative and deny a wider plot.

At Tuesday’s Senate hearing, the witnesses, and particularly Acting Secret Service Director Rowe, were explicit in declaring their mission to be dispelling talk of a conspiracy and upholding the lone wolf assassin theory.

In his opening statement, Rowe began by admitting “a failure on multiple levels.” While noting “multiple ongoing investigations,” he declared, “However, I will not wait for the results of those findings to assess where we failed that day...”

Without actually explaining the failure, he gave a partial timeline of Crooks’ movements on the rally day—including flying a drone some three hours before the rally and taking a distance sighting with a rangefinder—and said:

I regret that information was not passed to Congress and the public sooner and with greater frequency. I fear that this lack of information has given rise to multiple false and dangerous conspiracy theories about what took place that day. I want to debunk these conspiracies today...

Rowe went to say, clearly in response to speculation within the public, “No order to delay or ‘stand down’ was given.” He added, “At this stage of the FBI’s comprehensive investigation, there are no indications that the assailant acted in concert with co-conspirators or that his attack involved foreign influence.”

According to the partial timeline Rowe gave the

committee, the Secret Service and state and local law enforcement were closely surveilling a “suspicious person” near the AGR building at least 15 minutes before Trump took the stage and 26 minutes before the shooting began. According to the timeline, Crooks had already been photographed and been seen flying a drone and using a rangefinder. Why, then, was Trump not delayed from going onstage? Rowe neither raised nor answered this question.

Nor did he address two other obvious and unanswered questions: (1) Why did the Secret Service exclude the AGR building from its security perimeter surrounding the rally platform, and (2) why was no law enforcement officer stationed on the roof of the building before or during the rally?

In his opening statement, FBI Deputy Director Abbate made clear that “providing details about an ongoing investigation” is “not typical” FBI practice. He quickly added, “Thus far, although absolutely nothing has been ruled out, the investigation has not identified a motive nor any co-conspirators or others with advance knowledge.”

Abbate fleshed out the timeline of the shooting in further detail, including the significant fact that after the attack, the authorities recovered three improvised explosive devices (IEDs), for which Crooks had a detonator on his person at the time of his death. Two were recovered in his vehicle. One, perhaps significantly, was found in his family’s residence.

He also reported on two, apparently conflicting, series of social media posts that had been found and tentatively attributed to the shooter. He told the committees:

Something just recently uncovered is a social media account, which is believed to be associated with the shooter in the 2019 to 2020 timeframe. There were over 700 comments posted from this account. Some of these comments, if ultimately attributable to the shooter, appear to reflect anti-Semitic and anti-immigration themes, espouse political violence, and are extreme in nature.

However, Abbate also cited a separate account on the right-wing social media platform Gab with an opposite point of view. *Time* magazine wrote on Tuesday:

Gab CEO Andrew Tobra previously took to X to discuss the account, saying that the person behind it ultimately made only nine posts, but that those posts “expressed support for President Biden’s COVID

lockdowns, border policies and executive orders.” Abbate said officials have also been unable to verify that it belongs to Crooks.

The questioning from Democrats on the committees was generally friendly, as well as from most Republicans, with the exception of confrontational exchanges between Rowe and Senators Josh Hawley of Missouri and Ted Cruz of Texas. The prevailing sentiment was expressed by Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who urged Rowe to “dispel the conspiracy theories.”

One striking characteristic of the congressional hearings thus far, as well as the media coverage of the assassination attempt, is the virtual silence on Thomas Crooks’ parents, particularly his father, Matthew Crooks. The latter is a gun enthusiast and registered member of the far-right Libertarian Party. One might think this would at least warrant a closer look at the father’s connections.

Instead, the press repeatedly cites official sources as saying merely that the family is cooperating with authorities and “there is no indication” that they had prior knowledge about the shooting.

In Deputy FBI Director Abbate’s testimony on Tuesday, however, there was a significant discrepancy with the testimony given the previous week before the House Judiciary Committee by FBI Director Wray. The latter reported that Matthew Crooks had sold the weapon used in the shooting to his son last October. However, Abbate told the Senate that the father had given the weapon to his son before Thomas Crooks left for the Trump rally site on July 13, ostensibly thinking his son was headed to target practice at the Sportsman Club.

Then there is the fact that one IED was found at the Crooks residence.

Little attention has been paid to a report in *USA Today* that, according to a website breach reviewed by the publication, Mathew Crooks, the father, made a purchase in 2020 from Botach, a website that “describes itself as one of the leading retailers of tactical supplies used in law enforcement, the military and home defense.”



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