

# What Doesn't Kill Presidents, Strengthens

COMMENTARY

By **David Paul Kuhn** July 14, 2024



Ronald Reagan's legend began after he was shot. With his doctors soon to operate, he quipped, "I hope you're all Republicans." He told his wife, "Honey, I forgot to duck." The coolness reinforced his image as America's new leading man.

"One of the political axioms, I have always felt, was you concentrate on your strength," Reagan's longtime strategist, Richard Wirthlin, once told me.

The shooting accentuated an impression. Reagan had shown poise under fire. He was still a new president when he was shot in 1981. Public approval would only modestly, and fleetingly, rise. But the impression lasted.

The image of Donald Trump with streaks of blood across his face, punching the air, betrayed an instinctive stage presence Reagan would have envied. Rallygoers leapt at the sight of Trump's fist. Soon they chanted, "U—S—A! U—S—A!"

This impression, too, will last. And it changes the presidential race. Trump rising, so soon after a bullet grazed his ear, will further spotlight his opponent's frailty. If President Biden stays in the race, he will have to demonstrate presidential vigor, ever more. If he bows out, the new Democratic nominee will now have to personify strength to neutralize Trump's strength. It was Bill Clinton's insight, that strong and wrong beats weak and right.

Trump was already slightly ahead in key states. It is not that the horse race will significantly shift. The electorate is too polarized. But his supporters will be inspired to stand with him, more – to turn out his vote, more.

Reagan was always aware of his image. As the car pulled into the hospital, Reagan stepped out. He adjusted his coat and pants, as was his wont. With that, an advisor presumed he was fine. The moment he escaped the media glare and entered the hospital, Reagan collapsed. The bullet missed Reagan's heart by an inch. For Reagan, his survival reaffirmed his belief that providence was on his side.

Other men had been there. Theodore Roosevelt was also seeking to regain the presidency when he was shot in 1912. There was a famous failed attempt on Andrew Jackson. America is haunted by the attempts that did not fail.

Of course, Roosevelt did not win another term. Republican loyalties were too riven in 1912. They are not today. And those considering Trump will now see more of what they likely thought considerable in him. The strongman is stronger.

*David Paul Kuhn is a political analyst, veteran political reporter, and the author of "[The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution](#)."*