

Donald Trump: I survived shooting because I had God on my side

Former president accepts Republican nomination with a speech that began with a call for unity before he went on the attack

Hugh Tomlinson, The Times July 20th 2024

Donald Trump said he had “God on my side” when he escaped death by millimetres in an assassination attempt last week, as he accepted the Republican nomination for president. “I’m not supposed to be here tonight,” Trump told a packed crowd during his speech at the Republican convention in Milwaukee, as he gave a dramatic account of the shooting. “Yes you are! Yes you are!” they chanted back.

“If I had not moved my head at that very last instant, the assassin’s bullet would have perfectly hit its mark, and I would not be here,” Trump, 78, said as images of the shooting played on a screen behind him. “There was blood pouring everywhere, yet ... I felt very safe because I had God on my side.”

With his wounded ear bandaged from the shooting at his rally in Pennsylvania, Trump issued a call of unity to a divided nation, pledging to be a “president for all of America, not half of America”, as he targets a landslide victory in November’s election. At the climax of his speech, Trump was joined onstage by his family as red, white and blue balloons cascaded from the ceiling of the arena and thousands of supporters chanted: “Four more years!”

“The discord and division in our society must be healed. As Americans, we are bound together by a single fate and a shared destiny,” Trump told the crowd. “We rise together, or we fall apart.”

The former president paid tribute to Corey Comperatore, the former firefighter who died shielding his wife and daughter during Saturday’s shooting.

He paused his address to kiss Comperatore’s fire helmet, which had been placed on stage in tribute alongside his jacket.

The speech marked the climax of the four-day Republican convention, which has drawn thousands of party members from all 50 states. Throughout the week, speakers have praised the former president and attacked President Biden’s record on immigration, inflation and crime.

The address came as Biden, 81, clings to the Democratic nomination in the face of unrelenting pressure to drop out of the race from party leaders, who fear he is leading them to certain defeat in November.

The attempt on Trump’s life has dominated the week, with convention speakers and the former president alike hailing his escape as divine providence. Several supporters wore bandages on their ears in a show of support for their wounded leader.

Before the speech, Trump had promised that he would jettison his usual incendiary rhetoric after his brush with death, but swiftly went on the attack. He called Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic former House speaker, “crazy” and accused Democrats of “destroying our country” by “weaponising” the justice system against him.

He again claimed his opponents were “cheating on elections”, falsely maintaining that his 2020 defeat to Biden was rigged. “I am the one saving democracy for the people of our country,” he said.

Trump mentioned Biden only once, which appeared to be when he went off-script, as he denounced the president’s failure to curb the immigration crisis on America’s southern border. Trump vowed to “stop the invasion that has spread misery [and] crime”.

Claiming that foreign terrorists were pouring into the country, Trump said he would introduce the “largest deportation operation in the history of our country” if he took back the White House. “The damage that Biden has done ... is unthinkable,” Trump went on, claiming that “Americans are being squeezed out of the labour force” by foreign labour and saying: “I will bring back the American dream.”

When he accepted the Republican nomination in 2016 and 2020, Trump still faced dissent from the party. The 2024 convention, by contrast, has underscored that Trump’s grip on the Republican Party has never been greater heading into the final weeks of the campaign.

Former rivals such as Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor, and Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor, who were crushed by Trump in the Republican primary race earlier this year, were invited back this week to bend the knee and offer their endorsement.

The former White House aide Peter Navarro arrived at the convention straight from prison, where he had served a four-month term for refusing to testify against Trump before a congressional committee, emphasising that loyalty to the former president would be rewarded.

Even Trump’s pick for vice-president, the Ohio senator JD Vance, is a former critic who once called the former president “America’s Hitler”. Now a devoted loyalist, Vance, 39, is the heir apparent to Trump’s MAGA movement, at the forefront of a new generation of young, right-wing Republican leaders.

The mood at the convention throughout the week has been buoyant, with the Trump campaign increasingly confident of winning a landslide in November as Biden’s re-election bid implodes after his disastrous debate performance three weeks ago. While Republicans are in lockstep behind Trump, the Democrats are in disarray as party leaders urge Biden to drop out of the race.

Looking abroad, Trump said that the withdrawal from Afghanistan under Biden was “the greatest humiliation in the history of our country” and accused his rival of sowing “war, weakness and chaos”.

“The world is blowing up around us ... I didn’t have wars. I could stop wars with a telephone call,” Trump said. He and President Zelensky of Ukraine are set to speak on Friday for the first time since Trump left office in 2021.

Trump also spoke warmly of the North Korean despot Kim Jong-un. “We got along ... I think he misses me,” he said.