



Salena Zito

BUTLER



The Untold Story of the
Near Assassination of Donald Trump
and the Fight for America's Heartland

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Near Assassination of Donald Trump
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**CENTER
STREET**

Nashville – New York

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For my family: Mom and Dad, for leading by
example;
Shannon and Glenn, for being a shining example
of what it
means to raise good kids and for your ridiculous
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father to my grandchildren; and finally my
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Eleanora, Milo, Louisa, and Rocco, who are my
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**CENTER
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Introduction

They Shoot Presidents in Butler

George Washington was less than pleased.

It was December 26, 1753, well past dusk and the temperature had dropped dramatically as darkness fell. Thanks to the drop in temperature, the mix of sleet and snow would make travel perilous in the deeply forested wilderness of what is now present-day Butler County.

But Washington and his guide Christopher Gist were left with little choice; they had to move, and move quickly.

They needed to make their way to the forks of the Ohio River. Days later, Washington, then a young major in the Virginia militia, would write in his journal that fear coursed through his veins and spurred the urgency of their flight after he was nearly killed by an assassin's bullet that whizzed past his ear just hours earlier.

Both he and Gist knew his assassin would be back to finish the job.

At twenty-one years old, Washington was on his first diplomatic mission, with direct orders from the Crown tucked in his saddlebag to basically tell the French to get off King George II's land or face war with England.

In 1753, the British and French Empires were in the early stages of clashing over their colonial possessions. Britain's North American colonies were mostly packed along the Atlantic coastline and then moved westward toward the Allegheny Mountains.

France's colonial holdings were in the center spine of the country that began in New Orleans and ran up along the Mississippi River into the Great

Lakes region toward the St. Lawrence River.

Both empires claimed control of the vast expanse of what was then known as the Ohio Country, which began in present-day western Pennsylvania and West Virginia and spread due west across the states of Ohio and Indiana.

Washington was at the center of that clash of royal aspirations, which were largely spurred by greed in the form of an immense royal grant to the Ohio Company, whose largest investor was Robert Dinwiddie, Virginia's royal (lieutenant) governor and the man who sent Washington on the mission.

The young Virginian's destination was Fort Le Boeuf, just fifteen miles south of Lake Erie. In Washington's possession was a note from London, signed by King George II, that read: "If the French were found to be building forts on English soil, they should be peacefully asked to depart. If they failed to comply, however, we do hereby strictly charge and command you to drive them off by force of arms."¹

The trip from Virginia had been a daunting 250 miles of untouched wilderness. It involved scaling high ice-crusting ridges, slogging through thick brush, swamps, and dense forests with mounds of heavy snow, and navigating icy waterways. The journey was as difficult as one could imagine, not just because of the terrain but also because of a weather system that had pummeled Washington and Gist the entire way.

Washington arrived at Fort Le Boeuf on December 11. The fort system was rudimentary at best, made of scrap bark and planks and consisting of four buildings. The young soldier and French commander Capt. Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre had a cordial, diplomatic conversation despite Washington's delivery of the Crown's demand that the French vacate the Ohio Valley immediately.

Saint-Pierre made clear that he was not intimidated by the British and retained every right to arrest their traders who were poaching on French territory. "As to the summons you sent me to retire, I do not think myself

obliged to obey it.”²

Four days later, Saint-Pierre handed Washington a sealed message for Dinwiddie. It was then that Washington discovered that, although Saint-Pierre had filled Washington’s canoe with a generous amount of supplies for the journey home, the French commander had also bribed Washington’s Indian guides with food and drink to stay behind.

Washington was furious. He had not only been deceived by Saint-Pierre; he had also observed enough during his four-day wait for the commander to respond to Dinwiddie to know that France was building a large-scale fort system throughout the disputed territory. He also observed that they were building a formidable military operation, which was prepared to defend the land the French would take over.

Washington and Gist set off, anxious to deliver the news to Dinwiddie. However, their horses were so debilitated by the journey to Fort Le Boeuf that the men had to abandon them and continue on foot.

On the journey toward the outpost known as Murdering Town (in present-day Butler), they were heavily burdened by their backpacks. Along the way, they encountered several French Indians who quickly—probably too quickly, in hindsight—offered to help get them to the forks of the Ohio River. The battering snow and sleet, freezing cold, and rough terrain had worn Washington down, and when one of the Indian guides offered to carry his backpack, he took him up on it.

Gist, a skilled surveyor and frontier guide, immediately sensed something was off about the situation. He wasn’t wrong. As soon as the group came to a clearing, one of the Indians sprinted ahead of them into a meadow and then turned to face the two men before firing point-blank at Washington from fifteen paces.

The exact amount by which the French-aligned Indian missed Washington is unclear. Washington’s diary entry is vague, but the intent was obvious. The Indian guide wanted the young Virginian dead.³

If muskets had contained rifling—grooves inside the barrel to make a

bullet travel more accurately—270 years ago, everything in the world would have changed at that moment.

There would have been no skirmish several months later in present-day Fayette County, Pennsylvania, between Washington's regiment and French soldiers—a skirmish that led to the first shots fired in what would quickly escalate into the French and Indian War. It was a war that ultimately led to the Revolutionary War, when the British Crown tried to tax the colonists to pay for debt incurred during the first true world war.

There would have been no General Washington, no President Washington, and we might not have the country we call America today if that bullet had been only an inch closer.

Chapter 1

One Inch Away

BUTLER, Pennsylvania

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

I felt the velocity in the same split second that I heard the four gunshots. My eyes were fixated on former president Donald Trump, who stood a mere few feet away from me on an outdoor stage in front of the podium. It was July 13, 2024. I was in the buffer zone with my daughter, Shannon Venditti, and my son-in-law Michael.

Shannon looked over at me and asked, “Why are there fireworks?” I knew they weren’t fireworks and, subconsciously, she did too. We are gun owners. Shannon didn’t want to think this could be happening; a mother of four, she didn’t want to believe we were in the line of fire. I heard her yell to Michael, “Did you trip on the speaker wires and cause them to spark?”

My gaze never left the president. Everything happened simultaneously, seemed to happen in split-second layers. I saw him flinch. He grabbed his ear. I saw the blood streak on his face as the bullets cut across the stage, and he ducked down below the podium.

“Get down, get down, get down!” a male voice shouted from behind me,

directed at the president.

My initial thought was that the podium would not protect him—please, someone get there to protect him. Please let no one be hurt. It never once occurred to me that I might be one of them.

I was frozen, still staring at the president seconds later, when we heard a second round of four shots. By then, President Trump was surrounded by a sea of navy-blue: at least a half dozen Secret Service agents formed a protective shield around him.

From the huddle, I could hear a female agent say, “What are we doing? What are we doing?” Then, “Where are we going...” and the sound of her voice was muffled.

Michael shouted as the second four shots went off: “Those were gunshots!” He tackled Shannon to the ground and dropped on top of her. The next thing I knew, I was knocked off my feet and shoved to the ground by lead Trump press advance man, Michel Picard III. Hovering over me, he held me down, his knees pressed against my shins. My face landed in the dirt and gravel, and the rest of my body covered my daughter.

“Are you okay? Are you okay?” Picard shouted at the three of us. Then he lowered his voice and took a deep breath. I could hear him slowly exhale to regain control.

“Stay down. I got you. Stay still, stay calm,” Picard said. His voice was soothing, but his hands told a different story; he was shaking hard. I watched him look down at his hands as he tried to stifle the adrenaline.

I was still just feet away from the president. From my vantage point, I could see the huddle of blue suits surrounding him; I saw his bloody face between the gaggle of men and women around him. An agent said, “Go around to the spare, go around to the spare... hold, hold, when you’re ready, on two.”

Or maybe he said, “When you’re ready, on you.” I wasn’t sure.

Time seemed to stop. Everything that was happening around me occurred in slow motion. The crowd, eerily, was not screaming, not really. In fact, it sounded like they were still cheering. On the ground, with gravel

digging into my legs and arms, I could hear only one woman screaming. Her screams were primal—I don't know if she was hurt, if someone she loved was hurt, or if the trauma was too much for her. It seemed like she was moving around in the stands behind me, moving toward something that was across from me.

Her screams were gut wrenching.

One or two of the last four shots sounded like they came from a different-caliber gun.

I could hear President Trump talking back and forth with members of his detail, who were still tightly circling him. At least three male voices were talking. One said, "Ready. Move up."

A different one said, "Go, go, go!"

But they remained crouched down. Another agent said, "Hawkeye's here, moving to the spare."

"Spare, get ready. Spare, get ready," said the agent who, from my vantage point, seemed to be the lead.

At least two, maybe three of the agents then shouted, "Shooter's down. Shooter's down—are we good to move?"

A male voice answered, "Shooter's down. We're good to move."

A female agent asked, "Are we clear?"

Someone said yes, they were clear, and to move. Their protective circle became mobile as they stood up with Trump, keeping a circle around him. I heard Trump say, "Let me get my shoes, let me get my shoes."

An agent said something like, "I got you, sir," and Trump said again, "Let me get my shoes on."

I could see Trump's silhouette, and it looked like he was trying to put on his shoes, which one of the agents had knocked off. An agent told him, "Hold on, sir, your head is bloody."

Trump was insistent. "Let me get my shoes."

A female agent relented. "Okay."

As they slowly started to move, I heard Trump say, "USA! USA! USA!"

The detail raised him to face the crowd. He lifted his fist, pumping the

air: “Fight. Fight. Fight.” His voice was raspy. The crowd erupted in joy and relief.

An agent urged, “We got to move, we got to move.”

They exited the stage, and I saw him raise his fist again three times. The crowd was now shouting “USA! USA!” as he and the agents headed toward where I was lying on the ground. A Secret Service agent in full camouflage crouched over me, looking into my eyes, and aimed his AR-style rifle directly at me as the president made his way toward me. The agent and I exchanged glances, but I was oddly not afraid.

Trump and all the agents moved past me. I could barely see his face, but I saw enough to notice the blood running down his cheek. Picard hadn’t moved. He was still on top of me, in a protective stance, and I could feel his knee digging into my calf. I thought, *That’s going to leave a mark*. Shannon and Michael were still underneath us.

Shannon and I both tried to take photos, but Picard and Michael were having none of it. “We don’t know if there is another shooter,” Picard said firmly, so we didn’t move.

Trump did not have his MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat on as they moved him past me. I saw his hat fall at some point while they were huddling. An agent miraculously grabbed the hat before it touched the ground and was still holding onto it while holding onto the former president.

The hat’s rescue was short-lived. When the group passed us, the hat slowly fell, landing in the gravel by my face.

I turned just enough to see past the loudspeaker that was behind us and watched the agents help Trump get into a vehicle, which they then surrounded. The motorcade paused for a moment, and then he was gone.

I thought back to the early morning. None of what had been planned that day had the three of us in the buffer zone by the president. I let out what I thought was going to be a deep sigh, but it somehow turned into that kind of little laugh you have when your day has gone haywire.

Shannon said, “Are you okay?”

I laughed just a little bit again; it felt like the only release I had in me at

that moment. “Yeah, I’m okay. Remember when the thing I was most worried about this morning was getting here on time?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Michael said. “It almost cost me a beef jerky.”

The morning started thirty-six miles away at my home in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. It was only 6:09 a.m., but the sun was already streaming through my kitchen window and the temperature was inching toward 79 degrees Fahrenheit. I checked the weather for the day and saw that the temperature was forecast to peak in the late afternoon at 93 degrees. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

Not ideal conditions for a day I would be spending with Shannon and Michael and about fifty thousand other people, standing in a treeless field that for seventy-five years had been home to the Butler Farm Show. We would be in the sun for hours, waiting for former President Trump to hold his first big western Pennsylvania rally of the 2024 election cycle.

I was scheduled to interview Trump that day. Shannon is a photojournalist, and my son-in-law was coming along to carry the tripod and lighting so that she and I could stay somewhat presentable for the interview.

Shannon and I had agonized the night before about what we could wear that would be proper for a presidential interview but also not leave us drenched in sweat. In the end, we were dressed properly and drenched in sweat a half hour after we got there.

Chris LaCivita, one of Trump’s campaign managers, told me earlier in the week that I would get five to seven minutes with Trump before the rally started. *That’s fine*, I thought. I had interviewed Trump before, and “five to seven minutes” with him usually meant twenty minutes. He loves to talk.

That thought reminded me to double-check that I had my notepad with my top three questions I wanted to ask him:

FIRST: Mr. President, there are thousands of people out there waiting to see you. If you win in November, what will you say to them four years from now that you were able to deliver to them after winning the presidency?

SECOND: What was going through your mind during your debate with President Biden as he faltered over and over again?

AND THIRD: If Biden were pressured by his party to drop out, what approach, if any, would be different if you find yourself running against Kamala Harris?

I stuffed the notebook in my purse. They weren't the kind of questions that got the clicks newspapers crave, including my boss, but I was looking for the answers that voters were seeking.

I wasn't nervous about the interview. I had interviewed Trump several times before. The most famous interview was a freelance job I did for the *Atlantic* in September 2016 at a Marcellus Shale event in Pittsburgh, when I said to him, "Voters take you seriously but not literally, whereas my profession takes you literally but does not take your candidacy seriously."

That interview happened several days after I had accepted a buyout offer from my longtime job at the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*. I had to knock on several doors of major newspapers before the *Atlantic* agreed to hire me.

I had also interviewed the president at different rallies across the country, including one in nearby Erie and at the White House. We had always conducted a good back and forth in our conversations. And besides, interviews rarely rattle me. I had been interviewing presidents on both sides of the aisle, or those who were running for the White House, for decades. It's just what I do.

What I *was* nervous about, though, were the logistics of this day.

Really nervous.

My greatest anxiety is always: Will I get to the event in time? With a Trump rally, you have to factor in large crowds, parking challenges, and long