

U.S.

The Emergence of the High-IQ Political Attacker

In a shift from the past, more accused violent assailants have striking academic records. 'We're seeing a new breed of individual.'

By Zusha Elinson

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Investigators on Sunday were in a neighborhood of Torrance, Calif., where the suspect accused of trying to assassinate President Trump at a media gala lived. DAVID SWANSON/REUTERS

An Ivy League grad. An aspiring engineer who scored 1530 out of 1600 on his SAT. A 4.0 high-school student with a prestigious college scholarship. And now, a Caltech grad.

America's growing rogue's gallery of high-profile alleged violent attackers is notable for a glaring reason: In a shift from recent decades, they are young men who have excelled in academics, at times at the highest levels.

From Luigi Mangione, the accused UnitedHealthcare CEO killer, to Cole Allen, the 31-

year-old accused of attempting to assassinate President Trump at a media gala Saturday, they are confounding the typical profiles of assailants.

“We’re seeing a new breed of individual now who could have gone on to become president of a university or run a business, and yet they felt like this was their calling,” said Mary Ellen O’Toole, a retired FBI profiler who heads George Mason University’s Forensic Science Program. “We are seeing an evolution.”

Mangione has pleaded not guilty; At Monday’s hearing, Allen’s federal public defender stressed that he is presumed innocent.

The mass shooters who have terrorized America over the past three decades have typically been suicidal young men who struggled to succeed in academics, work or love. They were often motivated by a desire for infamy. Some in the current crop of alleged political attackers are motivated by something else, said Russell Palarea, president of the threat-assessment firm Operational Psychology Services.



Luigi Mangione attending a December pretrial hearing in New York City with lawyer Karen Friedman Agnifilo.
CHRISTIAN MONTERROSA/POOL/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

“This is more about some ideological principle that they decide to use violence to force a movement or to get the public talking,” said Palarea. “Grievances that are more complex or more ideological or philosophical are ones where we may see more high-

functioning, intellectual individuals committing attacks.”

Allen, charged Monday with trying to assassinate Trump, graduated from the California Institute of Technology, one of America’s most rigorous schools, and went on to complete a master’s in computer science. Shortly before he allegedly opened fire outside the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, he emailed a document to family members that read like a term paper, including a “rebuttals to objections” section.

He seemed to acknowledge he was cutting short a life of potential. “I want to throw up; I want to cry for all the things I wanted to do and never will,” he wrote.

Allen’s federal public defender emphasized he had no prior arrests or convictions on his record. Trump called the shooter a “lone wolf” and a “whack job” at a press conference.

On average, criminals have lower IQs than Americans as a whole, surveys of prison and jail populations show, said J. Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist. “Most individuals who are violent, they’re violent for emotional reasons,” he said. “They’re angry at somebody, or they’re very scared, and it’s very impulsive.”

There were notorious exceptions in the past, like Ted Kaczynski, a math professor who graduated from Harvard and became known as the Unabomber for mailing explosives that killed three and wounded more than 20 between 1978 and 1995.

Mangione appeared to be fascinated by Kaczynski’s writings on the dangers of technological advancement. Now, the 27-year-old who attended the University of Pennsylvania and completed his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in computer science in four years, with honors, has become a dark icon for a younger generation.

A college student on a crusade against artificial intelligence who allegedly threw a Molotov cocktail at the home of OpenAI’s chief executive earlier this month talked about “Luigi’ing some tech CEOs” before the attack. A 29-year-old Southern

California man who authorities said complained about wages and burned down a toilet-paper warehouse also cited Mangione.

Other alleged assailants who were at the top of their high-school classes include Tyler Robinson, charged with assassinating conservative activist Charlie Kirk, and Thomas Crooks, who was killed by a sniper after allegedly attempting to assassinate Trump. Robinson pleaded not guilty.



Tyler Robinson was charged in the fatal shooting of conservative activist Charlie Kirk. RICK EGAN/POOL/REUTERS

Theories for the trend include a rise in left-wing extremist attacks, more antigovernment and anticorporate sentiment among young people, and an increase in mental-illness diagnoses.

Forensic psychologists say intelligence alone doesn't make young men immune from being heavily influenced by online echo chambers. Palarea said that some online groups have developed into what he calls the Luigisphere, where "all of these folks

talk together online, and it only reinforces their grievances, and some of them are the fringe of the fringe that will go on to commit attacks.”

On social media, Allen reportedly became increasingly angry with Trump, retweeting posts that compared the president to Hitler.

Relatives and friends have been shocked at the allegations that these young men decided to throw away their promising lives. But O’Toole, the retired FBI profiler, said attackers don’t think of it that way.

“His perspective isn’t that he’s throwing his life away, but he’s doing something that only he can do—that he is very special and that he has to take this on after thinking about it for a long time,” she said.

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