

The President's Shock at the Rows of Empty Seats in Tulsa

 [nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/politics/trump-tulsa-rally.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/politics/trump-tulsa-rally.html)

President Trump and several staff members stood backstage and gazed at the empty Bank of Oklahoma Center in horror.

Mr. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence had canceled plans at the last minute to speak at an outdoor overflow rally that was almost entirely empty, despite claims of nearly one million people registering for tickets to attend the event in Tulsa, Okla., and the president's false boast of never having an empty seat at one of his events.

The president, who had been warned aboard Air Force One that the crowds at the arena were smaller than expected, was stunned, and he yelled at aides backstage while looking at the endless rows of empty blue seats in the upper bowl of the stadium, according to four people familiar with what took place. Brad Parscale, the campaign manager who had put the event together, was not present.

Mr. Pence spoke just after 6:30 p.m. in Tulsa and then left, the cue for Mr. Trump to come on. But there was a delay. Mr. Trump's deputy chief of staff, Dan Scavino, peeked out from behind black curtains to scan the fan-free seats in the top rows.

Mr. Trump eventually entered the arena for a meandering performance in which he excoriated the "fake news" for reporting on health concerns before his event, used racist language to describe the coronavirus as the "Kung Flu" and spent more than 15 minutes explaining away an unflattering video clip of him gingerly descending a ramp after his commencement speech at West Point.

By the end of the rally, Mr. Trump's mood had improved, advisers said. But after he left the stage, the fight seemed to have left him, at least temporarily. Leaving the arena, he wasn't yelling. Instead, he was mostly muted.

When he landed back at the White House and walked off Marine One, his tie hung untied around his neck. He waved to reporters, with a defeated expression on his face, holding a crumpled red campaign hat in one hand.

Exactly what went wrong was still being dissected on Sunday. But a broad group of advisers and associates acknowledged to one another that Mr. Trump had not been able to will public opinion away from fears about the spread of the coronavirus in an indoor space. And they conceded that myriad polls showing Mr. Trump's eroded standing were not fake, and that he might be on course to lose to former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr, the presumptive Democratic nominee, in November.

Jared Kushner, the president's senior adviser and son-in-law who serves as the de facto campaign manager, and who was involved in the decision to choose Tulsa as the host city, was not among the group of advisers with the president at the event. But he will be

among those to whom the president turns to figure out what rallies look like going forward.

In a statement, Mr. Parscale, the campaign manager who many advisers singled out for the overhyped numbers, claimed the reports about TikTok users and Korean pop music fans foiling attendance at the rally were inaccurate, and even raised the possibility of not allowing the news media to attend events in the future.

“Leftists and online trolls doing a victory lap, thinking they somehow impacted rally attendance, don’t know what they’re talking about or how our rallies work,” Mr. Parscale said. “Registering for a rally means you’ve RSVP’d with a cellphone number and we constantly weed out bogus numbers, as we did with tens of thousands at the Tulsa rally, in calculating our possible attendee pool.”

Instead, he blamed the news media for the low turnout.

“The fact is that a week’s worth of the fake news media warning people away from the rally because of Covid and protesters, coupled with recent images of American cities on fire, had a real impact on people bringing their families and children to the rally,” he said.

Campaign officials on Sunday privately admitted that many people who had signed up to attend the event were not supporters but online tricksters. One campaign adviser claimed that “troll data” was still useful, claiming it would help the campaign avoid the same pitfall in the future.

The adviser said that the data could be put into the system to “tighten up the formula used to determine projected attendance for rallies.”

In an interview, Mr. Parscale said the empty arena was not his fault, and that local law enforcement in Tulsa had overreacted, making it difficult for supporters to gain entry. He claimed to have thousands of emails from supporters who tried to get into the Bank of Oklahoma Center and were turned away, but he did not share those messages or names of supporters.

And he shrugged off the rumors about his demise, claiming he had been fired 85 weeks in a row.

But unlike most situations in which Mr. Trump’s advisers have tried to keep certain information from him — such as the fact that Mr. Biden outraised him in the month of May — or put a rosy sheen on it, the president saw for himself the empty seats in Oklahoma.

Several White House officials called the rally a disaster, and an unforced error that heightened tensions among some of the president’s government advisers and his campaign aides. What’s more, Mr. Trump’s White House advisers had repeatedly

cautioned campaign aides against announcing an added appearance at an outdoor space, advice that was ignored as Mr. Parscale and campaign surrogates talked about it publicly.

The event does not portend additional large Trump rallies this summer, people familiar with the discussions said. The campaign had hoped to use the Tulsa event as a reset after the president's slide in the polls in the wake of his administration's failures responding to the coronavirus, and after his stoking of racial tensions amid nationwide protests over police brutality prompted by the killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis.

For days before the rally, Mr. Trump was giddy about his first arena outing since March 2, telling one interviewer after another how big it would be based on the numbers that Mr. Parscale had cited publicly.

Mr. Parscale and others believed the event would demonstrate a real pent-up demand for Mr. Trump's appearances — one the campaign has insisted exists. But some advisers privately questioned the data even before the event, and they feared the Tulsa rally was setting the team up for failure.

Now, some White House officials said the campaign was being dishonest about what had gone wrong, and they conceded that many of the president's older supporters had decided attending the rally was too risky amid coronavirus fears that Mr. Trump has repeatedly played down.

Veteran campaign hands in both major political parties were highly skeptical of the Trump operation's claims that one million people had signed up even before the rally.

Outside advisers to the president said his team was fielding calls from nervous donors and Republican lawmakers, who were asking whether the poorly attended rally indicated problems that were too big to fix with just over four months until Election Day.

It also was not clear if there would be a personnel switch because of the disastrous optics, but some officials recalled what happened in 2017, after an event in Arizona that did not go as Mr. Trump had hoped. George Gigicos, one of the original campaign hands and his rally organizer, was fired by the president.