A long and hard-fought primary season in the United States will culminate this month when the major political parties nominate their candidates officially at their national conventions in Cleveland and Philadelphia. The rancorous campaign has raised concerns about possible civil unrest associated with both conventions, but security planners say they have considered every eventuality. Beyond possible civil disturbances, there have been no credible threats made against either convention, authorities say.

National Special Security Events

Both conventions have been designated as National Special Security Events (NSSEs), which means the U.S. Secret Service is the lead agency overseeing implementation of the security plan. Security strategies also involve local and regional law enforcement, the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. An additional 50,000 or so people, including delegates, staff,
media, security officers, and transportation personnel, will be in each city during the respective conventions.

Antagonising tensions on the eve of the political conventions are a sniper shooting July 7 that killed five police officers in Dallas, and recent demonstrations across the United States to protest the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of police.

The Republican National Convention

The Republican National Convention in Cleveland, July 18-21, will be held at the Quicken Loans Arena, with some 1,300 related events planned throughout the city. A designated “event zone” will include portions of downtown Cleveland between the Cuyahoga River and Interstate 90. Inside the zone, objects such as air rifles, lasers, aerosol guns and glass bottles will be restricted, but Ohio’s “open carry” law ensures that legal gun owners can carry their weapons. One estimate is that more than 40,000 protesters could target the Republican National Convention to speak out on a variety of issues.

Police and security presence

Police presence will include 500 Cleveland officers and another 2,500 or so officers helping out from jurisdictions throughout Ohio and around the country. A combination of motorcycle, bicycle, canine and mounted police officers will patrol the city. In addition to the use of bodycams, a dedicated video unit will provide footage as police interact with protesters.

A $50 million federal grant is helping to provide equipment needed to protect the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, including 2,000 units of riot gear, 300 patrol bikes, 24 sets of ballistic body armor, 3.7 miles of interlocking steel barriers, and police officer housing.

Violent demonstrations at Donald Trump’s campaign events during the primary season suggest a greater possibility of such events at the Republican convention. Trump at one point urged his followers to “riot” if the Republican party sought to deny him the nomination (although the possibility of any convention machinations in favor of an alternate candidate mostly died in the wake of Trump’s decisive numbers late in the primary season). Clashes between pro- and anti-Trump factions remain a possibility. Dozens of groups requested permits to hold demonstrations
during the convention. Police will monitor any demonstrations and intervene only if public safety is at risk.

"Officials say the Democratic National Convention will be smaller in scope and scale and thus easier to protect than the papal visit"

The Democratic National Convention

Security at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, July 25-28, will leverage techniques and lessons learned from the high-profile visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in September 2015. In fact, officials say the convention will be smaller in scope and scale and thus easier to protect than the papal visit.

A “no-scale” perimeter fence will be erected around the Wells Fargo Complex and surrounding areas, where the convention will be held. Some opposing politicians have pointed out the irony: The party that favors open borders – and dismisses Donald Trump’s proposal of a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border – is erecting a fence to protect its convention. In addition to the Wells Fargo Complex, public events will be held at the Philadelphia Convention Center and other venues. The city received a $43 million grant to purchase additional supplies, conduct training and pay security personnel, and they also have access to the equipment used in the papal visit.

Risk of unrest

There were incidents of unrest during the Democratic primary season, too, notably when violence broke out at the state convention in Nevada. Several pro-Bernie Sanders demonstrations are expected, and tens of thousands of individuals are likely to attend rallies at FDR Park, at Thomas Paine Plaza and at city hall in Philadelphia. Other activist groups, including Black Lives Matter affiliates and clean energy groups, also plan rallies. Many remember the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, marred by riots and widely reported confrontations with police.

As politics dominate current events this summer, we can only hope that violence and/or civil
unrest do not upstage the process. Some say national conventions have become more like political pageants or high-priced “infomercials”. Even so, security will be doing its part to ensure the show goes on without a hitch.

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An experienced journalist and long-time presence in the US security industry, Larry is SourceSecurity.com’s eyes and ears in the fast-changing security marketplace, attending industry and corporate events, interviewing security leaders and contributing original editorial content to the site. He leads SourceSecurity.com’s team of dedicated editorial and content professionals, guiding the "editorial roadmap" to ensure the site provides the most relevant content for security professionals.
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