

Obama and the Presidential Security Challenge

The U.S. presidential campaign trail presents a host of challenges for the US Secret Service (USSS) protective detail assigned to cover the presidential candidates, something we've discussed previously. Major presidential candidates have been afforded USSS protection since the 1968 assassination of Robert Kennedy at a campaign event. Due to the nature of modern presidential campaigns, the candidates' schedules are packed with events that often start at breakfast and continue long after dinner. Candidates also hopscotch across the country, often visiting several cities in a day and sometimes visiting multiple venues in the same city. The Security Challenge of Campaign Season

In the last weeks before the Nov. 4 election, the campaign of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama hit several different cities in one day, meaning that several teams of advance agents were deployed around the country at any given time. For example, on Nov. 3, Obama visited Jacksonville, Fla.; Charlotte, N.C.; and Manassas Park, Va. Campaign managers often adjust itineraries on the fly to meet the needs of the campaign. This tempo constantly forces protection agents into new environments with very little time to plan and implement security measures. Wherever Obama traveled during the campaign, USSS agents would send advance teams to scout airports and motorcade routes, plan security for campaign sites, conduct liaison with local police and keep tabs on any persons of interest during the visit. The advance agents are supplemented by teams of extra agents to help secure sites; dog handlers and explosive ordnance disposal technicians to check for explosive devices; and uniformed officers to help control access to sites, man metal detectors and provide countersniper support. Due to the nature of political campaigns, once a candidate like Obama lands and safely arrives at an event location, there is frequently tremendous exposure to the public. This is true not just on stage behind a podium but also as the candidate works the crowd, shaking hands, kissing babies and talking to voters. As seen during the May 1972 attempted assassination of George Wallace and the later attempts against presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, it is during these times of close interaction with the public that a VIP is at the highest risk. Would-be assassins can use the crowd for camouflage and quickly get a close shot at the VIP, leaving little time for agents to respond to the threat. Because of this, working the crowd is a difficult task and one protection agents hate. Fortunately for the Obama protective detail, with the election period over they will find themselves in these kinds of situations less frequently. Finally, there is the issue of the USSS being stretched very thin due to the nature of an election season. The USSS is charged with protecting former presidents and first ladies as well as, of course, the first family and the vice president. But during an election season, the presidential and vice presidential candidates are also assigned a security detail. Due to the perceived threat against Obama, a detail equivalent to a full presidential protection team was assigned to him. Such a high level of protection is unprecedented for a presidential candidate, and it helped stretch the USSS very thin. Now that the election is over, Obama's schedule will be greatly simplified, and it will take far less manpower to cover him. Obama will certainly have some travel, but the majority of this time probably will be spent between Chicago and Washington. This will allow the USSS agents protecting him to catch a breather and to establish a more secure, stable perimeter around the president-elect. Sen. John McCain's protective detail also will be eliminated, freeing up even more bodies. The relative calm of the transition period will end with the January 2009 inauguration ceremony and festivities, the next serious headache the USSS will face.

Past Threats to U.S. Presidents

U.S. presidents always face an array of threats. Four U.S. presidents have been assassinated: Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley and John F. Kennedy. Assassination attempts have frequently occurred, with every president since Richard Nixon having been targeted for assassination, with some threats more credible than others. The tremendous amount of power and symbolism of the office makes U.S. presidents prime targets for assassination. Obama will be no exception. But in addition to bearing the title of president, Obama also will be the first black president ? something that introduces a whole new and more serious threat matrix. Obama uniquely faces a threat from white supremacist groups, some of which believe a black president should be killed. Two plots to assassinate Obama were broken up during the campaign season, and several more remain under investigation. During his campaign, Obama was the target of a few threats that attracted considerable press coverage but in the end didn't amount to much. Press portrayals aside, reviewing the facts establishes that these incidents were certainly not viable threats to Obama. In one instance, authorities announced in late August that three Colorado men had been arrested after police found illegal weapons and methamphetamines on the men. During interrogation, federal agents learned that the group of methamphetamine users had discussed harming Obama. One of the men wore a swastika ring, indicating a possible link to the neo-Nazi movement. In the end, though, the three men were indicted on drugs and weapons charges alone, as the U.S. attorney overseeing the case said the evidence was insufficient to charge the men with conspiring to do bodily harm to a presidential candidate. While the group had discussed the topic, it apparently had made no overt acts in furtherance of an attempt, an element required to bring conspiracy charges. In another instance, two young men from Tennessee and Arkansas who had conspired to go on a crime spree that would end with an attempt on Obama's life were arrested Oct. 22. Their scheme was outlandish from the start, and

included robbing a gun store, killing 88 blacks and beheading 14 (both significant numbers to the white supremacist movement) and then performing their coup de grace on the presidential candidate while dressed in white tuxedos and top hats. As it was, the two managed only to be scared off by dogs during an attempted home burglary, shoot out a window of a nearby African-American church and draw neo-Nazi symbols on their car in sidewalk chalk. The two had met to discuss their plans on a Web site associated with white supremacists and skinheads. While their plan hardly got off of the ground, the two did show a high level of enthusiasm for their mission that certainly could be replicated within the white supremacist movement. White Supremacists and an African-American President

The Obama presidency occurs against the unfortunate backdrop of a history of assassinations of prominent African-American leaders in the United States. These have included Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (Evers' assassin was a Ku Klux Klan member, while King's assassin, James Earl Ray, at the very least harbored racist sentiments.) Broadly, there are three schools of thought among white supremacist groups on how to view Obama's election. The first school of thought is that someone should (or will) threaten Obama because of his race since his election has outraged white supremacists. While publicly making such a call is grounds for arrest, plenty of white supremacist blogs and Web message boards talk of the inevitability of an attack on Obama in a very suggestive way. This school of thought believes that such an attack would inflame racial tensions, sparking riots along the lines of those that followed the 1968 King assassination. Such violence would be viewed as positive in this thinking, as open combat between whites and blacks would bring their ideology to the forefront. The second school, reflecting perhaps the most widely echoed dogma within the white supremacist movement, believes that an Obama presidency benefits their movement since it will serve as a wake-up call to white America. Once Americans of European descent realize how far they have fallen now that a black man has been elected to the most powerful office in the country, goes the argument, they will flock to join white supremacist groups to reassert their power. An Obama presidency, this school argues, is thereby good for the white supremacists since it would swell their membership rolls and give them more influence and publicity. Former Louisiana state representative and Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke supports this line as does fellow white supremacist leader Tom Metzger. This second school of thought is bolstered by the argument that the other candidates weren't going to be any better, as they were all under the influence of the even more despised Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG). Adherents of this anti-Semitic conspiracy theory believe that Jews pull the strings behind a puppet U.S. government. Obama, in their opinion, is at least not under the heavy influence of Jewish interests. This line of reasoning is in no way an endorsement of Obama, but more of an instance of them making the best of a situation they see as terrible for whites in the United States. The third and last school of thought holds that the U.S. government, which is secretly controlled by the ZOG, is plotting to attack Obama himself. This group believes ZOG will blame white supremacists for the killing, which they will use as an excuse to clamp down on white supremacist hate speech as well as gun ownership.

Conspiracies and Lone Wolves

The USSS is much more adept at countering group conspiracies than lone wolf actors. Lone wolves are very, very difficult to uncover, especially if they remain isolated and tell no one of their plans. Groups are much easier to track, as their movements are more noticeable and their operational security weaker, as all members must remain silent to keep the plot clandestine. The money trail is also a dead giveaway for groups, as outside organizations will often fund their operations, helping them buy equipment and supplies in preparation for an attack. Considering this, white supremacist groups are under very tight surveillance by U.S. federal law enforcement agencies, and scrutiny of their activities will only increase as Obama takes office. As seen in the Tennessee case, online discussions and postings can come back to haunt Internet collaborators. It would be very difficult for even a small group to operate below the radar of not just the USSS but also the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the FBI, the CIA and the National Security Agency, all of which will have their proverbial ear to the ground to protect the president ? one of the most important national security missions these groups have. The lone wolf, in the end, poses the most likely threat to Obama, and to any target for that matter. The lone wolf's ability to act alone, keeping his intentions, activities and whereabouts to himself, makes it very difficult for law enforcement agencies to identify a threat before it is too late. But the lone wolf also must be very smart and have some access to resources such as weapons and vehicles ? characteristics severely lacking in the two cases above that targeted Obama. The real threat emerges when intent and capability are joined. White supremacists have the intent, but so far have not exhibited capability. We would expect federal authorities to uncover many more plots to attack the president that have been hatched by white supremacist ideologues. So long as they remain amateurish like those in Denver and Tennessee, the president remains secure from the white supremacist threat. But if a combination of ideology and ability to act as a lone wolf comes along, the threat level rises. Given the ties that figures within the white supremacist movement like Duke have with hostile foreign countries such as Russia and Iran, a scenario comes to mind in which a foreign country could secretly fund and train a low-level member or simply a sympathizer of the white supremacist movement to carry out an assassination. Duke has praised Russia's nationalist movement and has traveled there several times. He also attended a 2006 Holocaust denial conference in Tehran, Iran, where he was in general agreement with the Iranian

regime. Indications of such foreign connections have come up during investigations of past assassinations. Lee Harvey Oswald attempted to obtain Cuban and Soviet visas in Mexico City before he assassinated JFK. Recently, declassifications have tied Oswald to known KGB assassin Valery Kostikov. While these circumstances alone are not enough to conclusively link outside meddling with the JFK assassination, they certainly do raise questions. Additionally, Ray fled to Europe on a fake Canadian passport after killing King. He was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport two months after the King assassination with large amounts of cash, indicating Ray had outside help in the killing. Presidential security is a serious national security matter. A successful (or even unsuccessful) attack on a president causes instability in the United States and in the wider world. And given the especially delicate balance that the United States, Russia and countries of the Middle East are striking right now, an attack on the president would destabilize U.S. foreign policy and have a heightened impact on national security. Domestically, the assassination of the country's first black president would run the risk of devastating race relations ? and white supremacist movements see themselves as substantially benefiting from racial strife. Republished courtesy of www.stratfor.com