

Review and assessment of the United States Secret Service with reference to the presentation given by former Secret Service Agent [REDACTED] (henceforth referred to as Mr X)

Apart from the precise dates, I was already aware of the origins of the United States Secret Service as part of independent research I had done out of interest when the 1993 film *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Peterson: Director) was released. If memory serves correctly, Mr X described that film in his talk as 85% accurate which, while not as close as the 95% accuracy that Henry Hill gave *Goodfellas* (1990, Martin Scorsese) (Allen, 2012) is still pretty good. The official answer for the origin of the USSS is best retrieved from their website:

"Established in 1865 solely to suppress the counterfeiting of U.S. currency"
(secretservice.gov/about/overview)

The irony that it was Abraham Lincoln's last act as president to form the Secret Service is not lost (something I did not know prior to Mr X's presentation) given that the main priority of the Secret Service has expanded to include the protection of the President and Lincoln was the first U.S. Presidential assassination. Perhaps the best way to consider the primary responsibility of the United States Secret Service is, again, from their own website:

"The U.S. Secret Service has a pivotal role in securing the nation's critical infrastructures"
(secretservice.gov/investigation)

While best known for protecting the President of the United States (or, more accurately, as Mr X pointed out in response to my question, the *Office* of the President of the United States) the Secret Service is, in fact, responsible for protecting the nation's "critical infrastructures" which includes the Office of the President of the United States (personified as the current sitting president) as well as the national financial infrastructure which can be compromised through counterfeiting, cyber and organized crime - three areas of investigation of the U.S. Secret Service - and its foreign, diplomatic stature.

It is not surprising that the path to become a Secret Service agent is a difficult one - something that I had always suspected about the organization but was confirmed by Mr X's presentation. The eighteen-month to two-year journey to even enter the Service is fascinating in its meticulousness, yet not surprising. Given that security and protection is the primary goal, it makes sense that the vetting process would be as detailed as possible to ensure that the very people who are being placed into this position of responsibility are not themselves, a security threat.

I found it very interesting that one of the steps in the test is a polygraph test simply because the reliability of polygraph tests is highly questionable (APA, 2004). In Colorado the tests are all but inadmissible in court (Auge, 2015) and the U.S. Federal "Employee Polygraph Protect Act (EPPA)" prohibits the practice when it comes to hiring in the private sector (U.S Department of Labor, n.d.). However, this protection does not extend to government employees (Guerin, n.d.).

Having been in the technology industry for over thirty years and having worked with many people who have worked for the government¹ I have heard first-hand about high-level security clearances and restrictions on technological developments² so it came as no surprise when Mr X claimed that technologies that are commonplace today, such as cell phone technology, GPS and the Internet - presumably as the ARPANET (Featherly, n.d.) - were available to government agencies, including the Secret Service as early as the 1980s.

Given that the Secret Service has this sort of technological advance it would be reasonable to conclude that now, in 2019, they are in possession of technology that the general populace will not assimilate until the 2050s (if ever) and this could, conceivably include polygraph (or fMRI or other) technology that is better than the current "lie detector" technology which is often viewed as not much better than flipping a coin. This, in itself is a curious aspect of the Secret Service; that they can be considered beta-testers of our future technology.

¹ Including this author for a one-year contract with the United States Department of the Interior - I was not required to take a polygraph test, however, I was required to submit to a detailed background check which afforded me the lowest security clearance possible - so low even a foreigner can get one!

² I assure you no one divulged classified information no matter how vigorously I interrogated them.

Another aspect of the presentation which I found interesting and, given my general interest in international politics and diplomacy, the one I found most important was the question of who does the Secret Service protect? Some of Mr X's photographs, depicting him during his heyday, reminded me of the character of Special Agent Doug Chesnic (Nicholas Cage) in the 1994 movie *Guarding Tess* (Hugh Wilson, Director) which satirically reminds the audience that the President is not the only person whom the Government of the United States deems to be a personification of the nation's "critical infrastructures".

While fictional former First Lady Tess Carlisle (Shirley MacLaine) may not typify the most valuable protectee, for me former Australian Prime Minister Robert James Lee (Bob) Hawke does; he was one of Australia's most beloved leaders we were reminded by his passing, earlier this year (Shields, 2019). Apart from the relationship which Mr X and I discussed between Prime Minister Hawke and President Ronald Reagan, any harm coming to any foreign dignitary of an allied country on American soil could badly sully a relationship and for any dignitary of a marginal country could be downright catastrophic (imagine if North Korea's Kim Jong-un were assassinated during a U.S. visit, or Russia's Vladimir Putin or even France's Emmanuel Macron, given the bad blood that was generated between the two nations during the Iraq conflict).

It is true that many foreign dignitaries provide their own security but sometimes it is woefully inadequate as the 1994 "assassination attempt" on British Prince Charles in Sydney, Australia demonstrated. While the "attempt" was simply a protestor with a starter's pistol (Milliken, 1994) the fact that anyone could get that close to the Prince with a potential firearm is alarming and, presumably, judging from the film that Mr X showed, could never happen on the Secret Service's watch.

While Secret Service protection is available to a litany of people including, as mentioned, foreign diplomats and their families, families of the President and Vice-President and Presidential candidates (instigated with the assassination of Bobby Kennedy - sorry, I already knew that), I was not surprised to learn that it is optional for everyone except one person: whomever holds the office of the President of the United States; it appears that it is a condition of the office, which stands to reason.

The incapacitation of a President, or any national leader for that matter, has historically shown itself to be a time of turmoil, going as far back at least as the demise of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE (World History, 2018). The Presidential Succession Act of 1947 defines a very clear line

of succession but that wasn't enough to prevent confusion during the Reagan assassination attempt when Secretary of State Alexander Haig made his famous gaffe:

"As of now, I am in control here in the White House, pending the return of the vice president."
(BBC News, 2010)

The remark was probably an innocent mistake rather than an actual power grab as suggested by some - the Speaker of the House is next in line (Legal Information Institute, n.d.) - but it does highlight the importance of continuity in the office and, in that regard, explains why the President is required to accept Secret Service protection.

Because the FBI and the Secret Service are both federal law enforcement agencies, one would imagine that they step on each other's toes from time to time. However, their functions are quite clearly separate and defined. In simple terms, the FBI is more concerned with investigations, coordinating at a variety of levels with various agencies, including the Secret Service.

But the Secret Service's primary focus is on protection and prevention at a diplomatic level. Which leads me to my final thought: throughout this essay I have stated that there were several things that I learnt but was not surprised to hear (such as Secret Service technology or the Presidential requirement to be under Secret Service protection). There was, however, one comment that Mr X made that surprised me greatly. He confessed that it wouldn't be too difficult to kill a Secret Service protectee, adding the caveat that there would be no way you would survive.

This is something that I have long suspected so it didn't particularly surprise me that this is the case but I was very surprised to hear him admit it, and in such a candid fashion. I would have imagined that the Secret Service would have preferred to portray an air of invincibility; that they're capable of stopping anything. I wouldn't have thought that the Secret Service would like to confirm the possibility that a suicide mission would be successful as it might fuel extremists who show no concern for their own life in preference for a cause³. I suppose that it just goes to

³ And I would have thought that the 9/11 attacks demonstrated definitively that such people do, indeed, exist.

show that, while the Secret Service is an amazing organization, they are, at the end of the day, human. It's refreshing that they're honest and realistic about it.

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