

# SECRETS OF

Pressures and problems confront the



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# THE SERVICE

police agency that protects the president



**Agents at New York's  
Kennedy Airport wait  
for President Bush.**

DAVID BURNETT—CONTACT

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN AND CHRISTOPHER H. SCHMITT

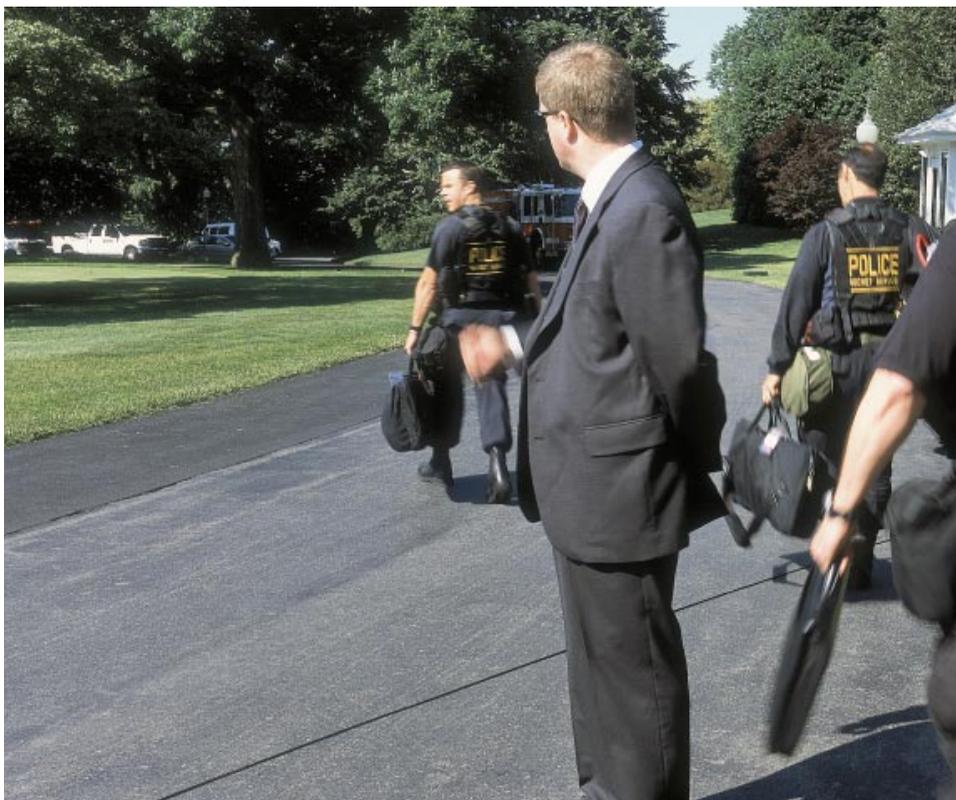
**O**n Oct. 8, 1993, Secret Service Special Agent Kenneth Banner was working a fraud investigation in Los Angeles when he got a call from a female informant named Akilah Ife Hasan. She was a small-time crook with a long rap sheet, a modest talent for scams, and an unfortunate weakness for drugs. Hasan had some dirt on a case Banner was working, she said. Banner, a supervisor in the Secret Service's L.A. office, agreed to meet Hasan at a lounge called the Current Affair. One thing led to another, and the agent and informant wound up sharing drinks, then returning to Banner's Inglewood apartment for sex. Afterward, when Hasan didn't return from a visit to the bathroom, Banner went and found her on the floor, lifeless, according to a police report. He called paramedics, who transported Hasan's nude body to a local hospital. Hasan, 43, had died of a brain hemorrhage in Banner's apartment because of a "history of cocaine abuse," police and coroner's reports said. Police concluded there was no foul play. Banner, now a private investigator, acknowledged to *U.S. News* that an inci-

dent took place. But despite the official reports, he said, "No one died at my residence. That did not happen."

In Houston two years ago, Secret Service Agent Sonna Prince Young tapped an old school pal who worked in the Texas state attorney general's office to help her steal money from a federal welfare program meant to feed poor kids. Court documents show that Young was illegally approved for the food vouchers, even though her combined annual income with her husband was more than three times as high as the eligibility level. She pleaded guilty to one count in federal court and was put on probation, fined \$250, and ordered to pay \$288 in restitution. She left the service.

This February, a team of Secret Service agents assigned to Vice President Cheney's protective detail on a visit to the San Diego area finished their shift and decided to wind down at a local bar. The outing ended in a drunken brawl between four Secret Service agents and a horde of locals outside a lounge called the Daley Double. During the fracas—in which the agents were outnumbered 15 to four and had to flee on foot—one of Cheney's agents bit off the tip of one of the locals' ears. It was never recovered. Police were summoned to sort things out, and the officers filed a report listing the agents' address—1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.

For more than 137 years, the Secret Service has presented an image to the world of bravery, excellence, and patriotism. Few who saw it will ever forget Special Agent Timothy McCarthy taking a bullet, or Jerry Parr hurling his body on top of President Reagan, as John Hinckley emptied his .22-caliber revolver outside a Washington hotel two decades ago. Or Special Agent Rufus Youngblood covering Lyndon Johnson's body with his own after Lee Harvey Oswald opened fire with his Mannlicher-Carcano sniper rifle in Dealey Plaza in Dallas. Created in 1865 as a tiny Treasury Department agency to root out counterfeit-currency rings, the Secret Service was given the mission of protecting presidents more than 35 years later. Today, the Secret Service's protective mission extends to all retired presidents, the vice president, visiting heads of state, foreign missions, and a host of executive branch offices and residences. Just last week, President Bush proposed moving the Secret Service into a new cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.



Over the years since the Secret Service assumed its protective duties, thousands of plainclothes agents and officers in the agency's Uniformed Division have proudly upheld its official motto, "Worthy of Trust and Confidence." In 1999, in a speech dedicating the Secret Service's new headquarters in Washington, where the motto is boldly emblazoned, President Clinton lauded the values the service embodies. "Regardless of the times or the tasks," said Clinton, "there has always been a thread of honor and integrity, trust, and true, confident performance."

But a *U.S. News* investigation shows that, at a time when the stakes for the Secret Service are higher than ever, the agency is rife with problems and resistant to oversight and correction. The troubles range from alcohol abuse and misuse of government property to criminal offenses and allegations of extramarital relationships by Secret Service personnel with White House employees. In response to questions from *U.S. News*, the Secret Service provided a detailed, four-page letter but declined to make senior managers, including Director Brian Stafford, available for interviews. "The Secret Service takes any

allegations of breaches of professional conduct seriously and has a long history of addressing such issues,” wrote Assistant Director Paul Irving, who heads the Office of Government and Public Affairs. Irving acknowledged that “without question,” over the past 25 years, “we have had employees who have been involved in professional misconduct and in some cases, criminal behavior.”

Such incidents, current and former Secret Service personnel say, are tarnishing the image of an agency long lionized as the elite of the elite. And they have led many agents to raise questions about their organization’s ability to fulfill its unique mission: protecting America’s leaders. In a move scarcely known outside the agency, the Secret Service has recently begun implementing a new “protective method-

to join the new Transportation Security Administration, created after the September 11 attacks. The service has lost 130 uniformed officers to TSA since January, according to Irving, who attributes these losses to a higher pay rate. “A large number of retired Secret Service agents now work for the Transportation Security Administration,” Irving wrote, “and have been recruiting from the ranks of our agency.” He says the service is hoping to increase its pay scale to prevent further attrition but concedes that more departures are inevitable. Defections in the elite corps of White House countersnipers, who stand watch on the roof of the presidential mansion, and even by K-9 officers, are further testing the agency’s limits, sources say. After the TSA was created in November, so many uniformed officers began applying for jobs

online from White House computers that the Secret Service blocked access, allowing officers to view application forms but not complete them. Secret Service brass refused time off for some officers to go to TSA for job interviews, according to service insiders. So one night, frustrated TSA recruiters showed up at the Secret Service Uniformed Division guard booth at the northwest gate of the White House to speak with job candidates. In a servicewide E-mail dated May 24, provided to *U.S. News*, Secret Service Director Stafford acknowledged the “continuous loss of personnel” due to “enormous overtime burdens.” Said Stafford: “I’m well aware that the attrition rate of the Uniformed Division is at a critical level.”

The strains are manifest throughout the agency. The service has been forced to pull firearms instructors from its training academy and uniformed officers guarding foreign missions to work protective details, sources say. *U.S. News* has learned that plans are underway to post plainclothes agents in and around the White House, to replace departing uniformed officers. But plainclothes agents including experienced senior supervisors also are retiring—more than 60 since January alone.

For the first time, young agents, too, are leaving in significant numbers. Internal statistics show that in all, nearly 85 agents have retired or quit and nearly 20 have transferred to other agencies since January. The attrition has caused alarm. “It’s all smoke and mirrors,” says a plainclothes agent. “We are like a giant ship teetering on toothpicks, waiting to collapse.” Says another: “Our protective mission is in crisis.” Despite the attrition and the increased responsibilities, Irving wrote, “[w]e are confident that we are able to carry out our investigative and protective responsibilities.”

*U.S. News* conducted in-depth interviews with more than a dozen veteran Secret Service agents and employees with intimate knowledge of the agency’s inner workings. The magazine also spoke with dozens more state, local, and federal law enforcement officials who interact with the Secret Service. Most of the Secret Service personnel, fearing retaliation by supervisors, spoke on condition of anonymity but provided *U.S. News* with sworn statements of their accounts. The magazine supplemented that information with an ex-



“We are like a giant ship, teetering on toothpicks, waiting to collapse.”

PLAINCLOTHES SECRET SERVICE AGENT

Members of the service’s Counter Assault Team on the White House South Lawn

ology” that calls for using fewer agents and officers to cover “protectees.” The plan is being viewed skeptically by some veteran agents and is at odds with the Secret Service’s traditional strategy of “360-degree coverage.” The agency declined to comment on any details regarding protection—citing security concerns. The change is being implemented at the same time the agency is taking on new duties by providing security at major events—more than a dozen since 1998—like the Super Bowl and the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. “Just as it has always done,” Irving wrote, “the Secret Service is continuing its need for additional resources in the post-September 11th environment.”

From its modest beginnings, the Secret Service today has grown into an \$857 million annual operation, with a budget that has soared by 50 percent in the past five years. The Secret Service carries out its mission with a relatively small workforce, nearly 3,000 plainclothes agents and fewer than 1,000 Uniformed Division officers. The overworked and traditionally underappreciated officers are leaving in droves now, many

tensive review of property, death, divorce, and police records, court pleadings, and evidentiary documents.

The magazine's examination found violations of basic policies outlined in Secret Service training manuals. For instance, the agency's Special Investigation and Security manual says that when it comes to job applicants or senior officials, "extramarital sexual relationships are of concern in suitability or security determinations," especially giving access to "sensitive compartmentalized information" or highly classified information. The manual warns that such relationships, from a security standpoint, "can be important when the potential for undue influence or duress exists." Special Agent A. T. Smith was the head of Hillary Rodham Clinton's White House detail after serving on the Presidential Protective Detail (PPD). According to several sources and a divorce pleading filed by Smith's wife at the time alleging adultery, Smith was conducting a widely known extramarital relationship with Cather-

while protecting Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal, were widely believed to be involved in extramarital relationships with women who worked in the White House. In a June 2000 legal deposition in a federal employment discrimination lawsuit against the service, former Special Agent in Charge Ralph Grayson alleged that though the service knew about Stafford's relationship with the staffer, the agency promoted Stafford. Several agents said that these alleged relationships—Merletti's, Stafford's, Smith's, and those involving other agents on the PPD—were the subject of widespread discussion within the Uniformed Division, among agents at Secret Service headquarters, in several field offices, and among White House staffers. These agents, who asked not to be identified, say that there was speculation among agents and officers that the service was claiming the "protective function privilege" in order to prevent these relationships from coming to light. The former White House staffer allegedly involved with Merletti is-



**“We wanted to... interview those with information.”**

KENNETH STARR, *former independent counsel*

**Former Directors Lewis Merletti (left) and David Carpenter, with President Clinton**

ine Cornelius, President Clinton's cousin. Cornelius worked in the White House scheduling office around the time of the Monica Lewinsky affair. Smith accompanied Cornelius to numerous White House social events and eventually married her after the divorce from his wife. Smith declined a request for comment.

Smith's relationship with Cornelius, and those of other agents on Clinton's detail with White House staffers, became an issue within the Secret Service, several current and former officials say. This was especially true after the Lewinsky scandal broke in January 1998 and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr sought to question Secret Service officers and agents under oath regarding Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky. The service and its director at the time, Lewis Merletti, resisted testifying, asserting a "protective function privilege." In a legal fight the Secret Service eventually lost in the Supreme Court, Merletti said in court papers that if agents were forced to testify, it would compromise their anonymity and jeopardize their proximity to the president. Many agents believed Merletti's fight was *mostly* a principled one. But others were suspicious that Merletti had other concerns: that Starr's inquiry would turn up information about personal indiscretions allegedly involving top personnel at the Secret Service, including Merletti himself. Merletti at one time was head of Clinton's detail. So was Stafford. In affidavits provided to *U.S. News*, six current Secret Service agents stated that Merletti and Stafford,

sued a written denial of any relationship. Merletti, in a letter to *U.S. News*, "emphatically" denied any relationship. "The claim of privilege," said Merletti, "was invoked precisely and exclusively as publicly stated and strongly supported by every living former director of the United States Secret Service as well as former President Bush."

Merletti told *U.S. News* that "rumors of the type you have raised were in fact inquired into by the Office of the Independent Counsel and were debunked and found absolutely lacking in credibility or foundation." But Solomon Wisenberg, a former top Starr prosecutor, rejected that claim. "That'sposterous," said Wisenberg, who is now in private practice. While not confirming that Merletti had been questioned, Wisenberg said, "it was never a part of our mandate to look into the sexual peccadilloes of Secret Service employees." In his letter, Irving also emphasized that the privilege was invoked "because of an overarching national interest that requires the most zealous protection." The former White House staffer named in Grayson's deposition as having had a relationship with Stafford did not return phone calls. Stafford, through a spokesman, also declined to respond.

In the end, Starr's lawyers questioned more than 30 Uniformed Division officers and agents and one supervisor of the PPD, Larry Cockell, who took over the presidential detail from Stafford in 1998, when Stafford assumed the directorship. Neither Merletti nor Stafford testified before the

grand jury. "We wanted to be able to interview those with information, while being sensitive to and balancing the needs of the agency," Starr said in an interview. "We didn't want to needlessly intrude into their work."

The Lewinsky episode clearly took a toll on the Secret Service, but current and former service personnel say they are more concerned now about what they describe as a growing number of personal and professional lapses. In mid-February, Secret Service agents visited Clayton Greenhalgh's Salt Lake City snowboard shop to pick up some souvenir Olympics hats. After they left, Greenhalgh was shocked to find a step-by-step plan for protecting Vice President Cheney at the closing ceremony of the winter games. The document ran to more than a dozen pages. Details included where Cheney would sit, who would be near him, and how he would enter and depart the facility, Rice-Eccles Stadium. The document also described precisely where Cheney's protective detail would be located and how it would be armed. It included specifics of Cheney's movements in stairwells and enumerated what rooms would be closed off from the time Cheney arrived until the moment he departed. "Basically," Greenhalgh told *U.S. News*, it covered "Vice President Cheney's every move . . . I happened to be in the right place at the right time, but if the right bad person found that, something really bad could have happened."

As embarrassing as the breach was, the Secret Service wasn't terribly interested in getting its security plan back, Greenhalgh recalls. Alarmed by what he'd found, Greenhalgh called the Salt Lake City Secret Service office. "They said they'd send someone right over," he says.

Nearly an hour later, no one had shown up. Greenhalgh called again. "They said, 'If you could bring it down to us, maybe that would be better.'" Greenhalgh obliged. After turning the document over, he asked an agent if he might get a picture of the vice president for his troubles. "She said, 'I work for him, and I can't get a picture, so why should you?'" Greenhalgh recalls. The next day, two agents showed up at Greenhalgh's shop to grill him. "They were both terribly rude," Greenhalgh says. "They were talking to me like I did something wrong. I was put off 100 percent." Irving said that employees "should have demonstrated greater care, in safeguarding this information." But, he added, "the information contained was not classified and, even if compromised, would not have altered or affected our overall security plan." He said none of the agents has been disciplined.

Other, less public incidents raise questions about the levels of stress many Secret Service employees must contend with and the ability of agency supervisors to monitor problems. Some examples:

▮ In Los Angeles, an agent guarding former President Ronald Reagan was found guilty in 1997 of having sex with a 16-year-old girl, possession of methamphetamine, and violently resisting arrest. The case came to light when the girl's father—a close friend of Agent Timothy O'Brien's—saw his daughter returning from the agent's house next door one morning, wearing only pajamas. Testimony indicated that O'Brien had sex

## HOT SEAT

## The service's man to see

One of the things that's true about nearly every police agency is a high level of innuendo, chatter, and speculation that center on the person at the top. That seems especially true of the Secret Service, and even more so lately, under its current director, Brian Stafford, and his two predecessors, Lewis Merletti and David Carpenter. Each, current and former agents say, played a critical role in selecting his successor. Each headed the Presidential Protective Detail before rising to director. Each held key posts during the Monica Lewinsky episode

WIN MCNAMEE—REUTERS



**ON DUTY.** Stafford, waiting for President Clinton, 1998

and/or the subsequent impeachment inquiry. So they have had their share of controversies.

Especially Stafford. A favorite in the Clinton White House, he loves country music and riding motorcycles, and recently even inquired about buying a Harley-Davidson dealership, friends say. His loyalty to friends is legendary but has sometimes gotten him into sticky situations. On Oct. 27, 1993, officers from the Florida Highway Patrol were preparing to arrest a man named German Pena, whom they had recorded on audiotapes acting as a

go-between to obtain fraudulent driver's licenses. The Highway Patrol was working on the case after being notified by the Secret Service, which had launched the investigation. But it turned out that Pena was the brother of a Secret Service agent who worked for Stafford, then the No. 2 official at the Secret Service's Miami office. One night, according to knowledgeable sources, as FHP officers waited for the right moment to arrest Pena, Stafford turned up in a Mercedes-Benz convertible the service had confiscated in an unrelated investigation. Stafford told FHP officers, the sources say, that if they ever expected the Secret Service to refer another case their way, they should turn German Pena into a "cooperating witness"—someone who would not be charged with a crime in exchange for working with law enforcement. With their taped evidence against Pena, however, the FHP didn't need a cooperating witness, but officers felt they had little choice. Stafford declined to comment on the matter, as did Pena. When they went to interview their new "cooperating witness" in his office, sources say, they found presidential pictures plastered all over the walls. As for Stafford, he was soon on his way to Washington. —C.R.

with the girl for hours, often night after night, then gave her tabs of methamphetamine, or "speed," to help keep her awake during school the next day. When the girl's father confronted O'Brien, the agent drew his service weapon and threatened to shoot him, says William Pounders, the Los Angeles Superior Court judge who presided over O'Brien's trial. O'Brien was arrested at gunpoint but only after a brawl with two officers, in which one was injured. While O'Brien was not charged with perjury, in court, he lied repeatedly, says Richard Rosenthal, the Los Angeles County prosecutor who handled the case. "He was the worst perjurer I think I saw," Rosenthal said, "in 15 years of being a prosecutor." Pounders says, "In 18 years as a judicial officer, I have never had another case involving so many violations of so many different laws by someone who should have been above reproach." Testimony indicated that O'Brien—who said he had done advance work for President George H. W. Bush and been given specialized counterterrorism training—had taken methamphetamine while on a training trip to

Washington. He had not been drug-tested since 1991. "The testing was minuscule—shockingly minimal, considering the circumstances," says James Blatt, O'Brien's attorney. "This was an eye-opener for all of us. We all thought of the Secret Service as this mystical agency that could do no wrong. It's not the case." O'Brien, fired by the Secret Service, was sentenced to six years in prison.

▮ In August 1999, Washington police were called to Lulu's Bar in Washington, "where every day is Mardi Gras," as the bar proclaims. Two men had gotten into an altercation in the restroom, patrons said, and it ended in a shooting that left both men injured. One was an Air Force enlisted man. The other was Secret Service Agent Manuel Puente, recently transferred to join the PPD. The injuries were not life threatening. Puente was told to leave the force. Efforts to reach him were unsuccessful.

▮ In October 1999, Kenneth Blake, a thief who scoured Chicago-area hotels to steal handbags, dropped in at the Fairmont Hotel, where then first lady Hillary Clinton was stay-

## RACE RELATIONS

## Many black agents are seeing red

**W**hen George W. Bush was campaigning for president in the summer of 2000, he asked the supervisor of his newly assigned Secret Service detail a question: Why were there so few minorities protecting him? Just weeks earlier, 10 African-American agents had filed a well-publicized race-discrimination lawsuit on behalf of a class of more than 250 agents against the Department of the Treasury. Bush's comments quickly filtered through the Secret Service Bush operation in Texas to the candidate nominee operations office in Washington. "They started looking for ways," says a source, "to take minority agents from other details like Bradley and McCain." The campaigns of those candidates had by then fizzled.

But in the end, not much changed on the Bush detail, say knowledgeable sources, and today the lawsuit is gathering dust on a federal judge's desk in Washington. Each plaintiff is seeking up to \$300,000 in back pay and other compensation and a court order directing the service to change the "racially hostile work environment" that the plaintiffs allege in sworn declarations dates to 1974.



**PLAINTIFFS.** At a Washington, D.C., press conference, agents discuss the reasons they decided to file their racial-bias suit.

Some allegations:

▮ Overt acts of racism go unpunished. The plaintiffs charge that colleagues and supervisors have used racial epithets in their presence to describe minority suspects nabbed in criminal investigations, and even toward black dignitaries. Special Agent Zandra Flemister alleges in her sworn declaration that white special agents "used the word 'nigger,'" to refer to the president of Senegal. Flemister says agents used the same pejorative to describe the president of Grenada.

▮ Black agents with superior performance-evaluation scores and major protective responsibilities say they are overlooked for promotions by supervisors who give top jobs to white agents with connections at headquarters.

**Good old boys.** Ronald Schmidt, an attorney for these agents, says they feel the deck is stacked. "This suit is about making the good-old-boy network relinquish power," he adds. "And the agency is going to resist that to the bitter end."

The president's detail is an example, Schmidt says. An avid jogger, Bush can outrun many agents assigned to protect him. According to the declaration of one plaintiff, Paula Reid, Bush "is able to exceed the physical fitness standards" the service requires for its special agents. Reid says physically fit and qualified black agents who can keep up with Bush are passed

over for "whip" or acting supervisory positions, which are given to white agents who claim to keep up with Bush but often can't.

Service officials have said that they are proud of their record on diversity issues. They say that two of seven assistant directors are African-American and that minorities head seven of the 11 largest field offices in the country. "It is offensive," Secret Service Director Brian Stafford said in an E-mail after the lawsuit was filed, "for anyone to question our commitment to equal employment opportunities for all of our employees."

Schmidt and his colleague David Shaffer said the E-mail would have a "chilling effect" on those wanting to join the suit. Judge Richard Roberts agreed. At his urging, Stafford issued a follow-up E-mail. "Each employee . . . should feel free to exercise his or her rights under the equal employment laws," he wrote. "My previous teletype certainly was not meant to suggest otherwise." —C.R.

DOUG MILLS—AP

ing. Secret Service Agent Mary Drury, a member of the Clinton detail, was at a hotel bar with another agent around 11 p.m., in violation of a strict service policy against agents drinking while carrying a gun. When Blake pilfered her purse, he took her .357-caliber Sig Sauer service weapon. It was the second time Drury had lost her gun, several knowledgeable sources say, and she had been promoted a grade between the first and second incident. In another incident, in 1993, Drury was driving home from a Chicago bar when she rammed her government car into a Chicago Transit Authority bus so hard that several items flew out of the trunk. Drury has not received any significant sanction from the Secret Service. Drury did not return phone calls. The service declined to comment. Blake received a 40-month prison term.

Law enforcement is among the world's most demanding professions, and given their unique responsibilities, Secret Service personnel can face higher stress levels than most cops. Special agents outside Washington spend long stretches away from their families, traveling for at least 30 days every 10 weeks. Many in the capital say they're burned out from the long hours they've put in since September 11. Many uniformed officers have been told they must work on one of their normal days off. Agents posted at the service's 118 field offices nationwide regularly wind up dropping criminal investigations they're working on to take their turn on the PPD in Washington. If an agent working with or on the PPD is exhausted, angry, or compromised in some way, current and former agents worry, it could jeopardize the safety of the president or other protectees.

The concerns are not ill founded. Several years ago, members of Clinton's protective advance team were alarmed to find that an unidentified group was following them and tracking their movements. Current agents declined to discuss any protective matters, but several sources say that since then, the Secret Service has implemented a new policy of sending a separate team of agents to watch the backs of the agents doing the advance planning for trips by high-level protectees. They have modeled their new security plan on the British Secret Service.

## FITNESS FOR DUTY

Threats like that, even before September 11, are precisely why so many still in the service, and others who have recently left, are concerned by the lapses they say they're seeing now. In just the past few months, there have been several instances of Secret Service agents' driving under the influence of alcohol, even to their posts at the White House. One agent received no punishment. The other agent was taken off the PPD. He had had a previous incident involving alcohol, sources say, an incident that not only went unsanctioned but that didn't prevent a promotion to the president's detail. In the San Diego bar-fight incident, the service says, it took no formal disciplinary action against the agents. According to a 20-page report by the Treasury Department's inspector general, the Secret Service has tol-

erated alcohol-related misconduct by employees. In August 1995, according to the report, an officer received a "fitness for duty" exam only after four incidents of suspected drunken driving in an eight-month period. In one of those cases, police at the scene confiscated the officer's service weapon for fear of what the officer might do. Still, the officer remained on the force—until he was convicted, in February 1999, of driving while intoxicated. Only then did the service issue him a "proposal for removal" for "conduct unbecoming" an officer. Other details of the case could not be learned.

Showing up for work intoxicated could obviously result in a security breach. But some instances of public drunkenness involving Secret Service personnel simply blemish the Secret Service's storied history of service and valor. In late January, a contingent of about 20 Secret Service agents bunked in at the Western Inn motel in Provo, Utah, on security assignment to the Winter Olympics in nearby Salt Lake City. In the wee hours of



**“We are able to carry out our protective [duties].”**

PAUL IRVING, *Secret Service spokesman*

**On a visit to Mexico, agents surround President Bush.**

February 1, some of the agents hosted a loud party, leading resident manager Casey Clements to plead for quiet. Clements also asked the agents, who he said were clearly inebriated, to stop smoking. “They said, ‘We don’t have to do anything we don’t want,’” Clements recalls. An hour later, the noise grew louder. Clements called the room. Someone hung up. He made another visit, pushing against a partially open door behind which an agent was peering out. “That upset him,” Clements says. “He pushed me out of the door and said if I did that again, he’d throw me to the ground, put a gun to my head, and I’d be sorry.” Days later, it was learned that the officers may have been drinking with several teenage girls. Local police have been investigating whether a sexual assault took place, after hearing of the incident indirectly. The service had not reported to Utah authorities any involvement of the agents with the girls. The Utah County attorney’s office is investigating; the Secret Service is cooperating. The episode left Clements with a bad feeling. “I guess I don’t trust law enforcement like I used to,” he says. “The agents that threatened me, they were just, like, ‘We’re above the law.’” Spokesman Irving says one of the three special agents resigned. The other two remain “in an administrative leave status,” says Irving, “pending possible prosecutorial action.”

## TEMPTATION

The *U.S. News* inquiry revealed other problems. Secret Service agents assigned to the elite Counter Assault Team (CAT), which

responds to any attack on the president, sometimes watch pornography on White House satellite channels in the "band room" in the basement of the executive mansion. That's where the CAT stashes its weapons and the Marine Band keeps its instruments. When the president and first lady retire for the night, several sources say, agents will often "put some skin on." Other agents watch pornographic videotapes on the ground floor of the mansion but only after posting an agent as a lookout, the sources add. If a female Uniformed Division officer approaches, the posted agent clicks three times in an agent's earpiece, to give him time to change channels.

In Miami and Ohio, according to sworn affidavits by several agents, Secret Service supervisors brought professional strippers into the offices. In Miami, Special Agent-in-Charge Jack Kippenberger reportedly permitted a male stripper into Secret Service offices for a female employee's bridal shower. The incident might have passed unnoticed had it not been for Kippenberger's prior refusal—on security grounds—to allow another agency employee to bring in a guest to organize games for *her* bridal shower. The incident brought a swarm of inspectors from Washington, and Kippenberger, sources say, was given a two-week suspension. He chose to take it at the end of the year, during the Christmas holidays, just before he retired. Kippenberger did not return phone calls. In Columbus, Ohio, Special Agent-in-Charge Irwin Cohen allegedly paid for a stripper from the Strip-a-Gram agency (motto: "You've been strip-a-grammed!") into the Secret Service office there to celebrate the birthday of another agent. Penny Steward, who ran the now defunct striptease service, recalls being whisked in and out of the federal building. "I'm sure we weren't supposed to be there," Steward recalls. Someone in Cohen's office sent pictures of the incident—obtained by *U.S. News*—to service headquarters, sources say, but no action was taken. Cohen declined to comment to *U.S. News* except to say "those things were discussed years ago."

What is most disturbing to many current and former Secret Service employees is when agents or officers violate the fundamental trust underlying their jobs.

Two years ago, Michael Cohen, a veteran agent mentoring a group of rookie agents in the Philadelphia office, embezzled some \$2,800 from the Secret Service in two incidents. According to court documents and an interview with prosecutors, Cohen claimed to be a couple of thousand dollars short on a house-closing payment; when agents turned over \$3,173 seized in a criminal investigation, Cohen kept some \$2,000 and faked a \$1,159 receipt for the balance. The case troubled prosecutor Amy Kurland. "He was so cavalier about taking \$2,000," recalls Kurland. "Somebody who does that so easily is not someone who hasn't done that before. It wasn't a one-time, spur-of-the-moment, take-the-opportunity kind of theft." According to court testimony and an interview with Cohen's attorney, when Cohen was drawing in one of the other young agents into his scam, and the agent expressed concerns, Cohen said, "This is the way we did it all the time in Kansas City." Cohen drew a 33-month prison term. He is free pending appeal.

In October 2000, based on information from a confidential informant, two Secret Service agents were criss-crossing Miami-area streets, monitoring a pair of thieves as they methodically ripped off cash from ATM machines. At the end of the day, it came time to make the arrests. But the agents had a dilemma: how not to blow the cover of their informant, who was accompanying the thieves. According to court documents and interviews with attorneys, the agents decided to allow the informant to run away, giving the appearance of an escape. That's what they did. But when the agents reported the case to the U.S. attorney's office, they told prosecutors there were three

ATM thieves, not two. A possible motive: James Smith, a high-ranking officer in the agency's Miami office, pocketed \$1,309 of the cash nabbed from the ATM thefts, perhaps the informant's share. Prosecutors began investigating. The agents' story soon unraveled. The prosecutors were forced to void the convictions of the ATM thieves. Earlier this year, Smith got five months' prison time.

With their jobs providing ready access to cash, temptation isn't far away for Secret Service agents. Office funds meant to pay confidential informants was an obvious lure for William Ebert, a career agent who by the early 1990s had worked his way up through the ranks to a critical posting: head of the Secret Service's counterfeiting division. This was back when "supernotes," high-quality counterfeit bills, were beginning to show up in quantity around the country, eluding the best detection efforts. Ebert got tripped up in a scheme in which he was submitting phony vouchers and pocketing money meant for confidential informants and others. He had been buying expensive airline tickets and then getting refunds; double-billing on other tickets; and claiming phony payments to informants, in the United States and overseas. Ebert was sentenced to five months in prison followed by home confinement. He agreed to pay \$29,900 in restitution and received a five-month prison term.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Many believe that at the root of such problems is a lack of accountability within the Secret Service. A government official familiar with the agency says the service has effectively used its Office of Inspection to sweep problems under the rug, seeking to prevent the inspector general (IG) of the Treasury Department—the service's parent agency—from opening and conducting investigations. In the past, this official says, the service circumvented the IG by classifying misconduct allegations as "management issues," thus keeping problems in-house, or in agency parlance, "in the family." Within the service, many current and former officials say, the "code of silence" is a time-honored tradition. Inspector General Jeffrey Rush says his office *could* have missed investigating some misconduct. In another area, a Treasury Department report, dated Oct. 31, 2001, concluded that investigators from the inspector general's staff "encountered a Secret Service policy hindering our access to its employees and records." That policy required agents and officers contacted by the Treasury IG's office to notify Secret Service headquarters. "It's like the cat and the bell," says Rush. "The mice like it, but the cat's got a job to do." Rush says he complained about the policy to Congress. The new policy still requires notification—not by agents but by the IG himself—before employees are contacted.

But the IG's office also is partly to blame for the inadequate oversight of the Secret Service. Rush acknowledges that, until he recently made changes, the IG routinely reviewed only cases involving complaints against senior managers, while ignoring things like complaints against Secret Service inspectors—the officials charged with policing the agency. Weak oversight and the ability of Secret Service inspectors to handle many problems in-house have contributed to morale problems in the agency, current and former employees say, because of a widespread belief that punishment for misconduct is administered arbitrarily. A February 2001 review by the Treasury IG of the Secret Service Inspection Division came to the same conclusion. The report said that in nearly a quarter of the 75 discipline files reviewed, discipline was not administered either consistently or in a timely manner. "We found that the USSS [U.S. Secret Service] has no centralized tracking or reporting system for em-



The shadow of a PPD agent in the White House colonnade

**“It’s like the cat and the bell. The mice like it, but the cat’s got a job to do.”**

JEFFREY RUSH, *Treasury Department inspector general*

ployee misconduct allegations,” said the report. “And they are therefore unable to track misconduct allegations that were handled as management issues.”

## DOUBLE STANDARD

All this is not to say that wrongdoers are *never* punished. Secret Service managers have taken many agents to task, but many remain on the force and continue to rise, despite lapses and abuses. What is galling, some agents and officers say, is a double standard that exists for employees who have relationships with Secret Service brass. If you have a “hook,” the saying goes, you can sometimes get off the hook. If you don’t and you incur the service’s wrath, beware. In those instances, some service personnel say, the agency can go to extraordinary lengths to investigate suspected wrongdoing. Patrick Cruise is a former special agent in the Secret Service’s Miami field office. In lawsuits filed against the service, Cruise alleges the special agent in charge suspected that he was abusing drugs because Cruise was dating a young part-time administrative employee who the service suspected was doing drugs. On Sept. 29, 1999, when Cruise wound up in the hospital sick with suspected hepatitis, he says, the service asked another agent’s wife who worked as a clerk in that hospital to steal his medical records so it could confirm the suspicions about drugs. A toxicology test, which included

a routine screening for drug use, was presumed positive. Cruise says the hospital failed to do the necessary follow-up test to confirm the result. His supervisor visited him in the hospital soon afterward, Cruise says, bringing Ben & Jerry’s chocolate brownie ice cream and a *Maxim* girlie magazine. But the real reason for the visit, Cruise says, was to get him to sign a medical release so the Secret Service could obtain the toxicology test results *legally* so it would have the paper records it would need in any legal proceeding after firing him. After Cruise was diagnosed with mononucleosis and discharged, Cruise says, the Secret Service ordered him to submit to a urinalysis and a forensic hair test that can detect drug use dating back months. Both were negative. Several weeks later, says Cruise, he was fired for leaving his duty post and going to the bathroom. Cruise has sued the hospital for malpractice and negligence and has filed a federal equal employment opportunity complaint against the service. He also has a federal suit pending to get his job reinstated. “Years ago if you would have spoken to me, I would have nothing negative to say about them. They were the best thing in the world,” says Cruise. “I would defend the Secret Service until I was blue in the face. Now, I have nothing good to say.”

*With Marianne Lavelle, Edward T. Pound, Anne Bradley, Sheila Thalhimer, and Carol Hook*