

Safety First

Personnel losses and other problems make the Secret Service's job tougher than ever

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

On a warm summer night last year, a 19-year-old woman sat in a crowded bar, engaged in a rite of passage familiar to countless college-age teens: persuading a bartender to break the law and sell her a drink. This was no ordinary teenager, though. She was Jenna Bush, the daughter of President George W. and first lady Laura Bush. The bartender was amenable to serving the young woman—until he spotted two agents from her Secret Service detail. Nervous, he approached the agents and asked what he should do. Use your best judgment, the agents shrugged. The bartender promptly asked Jenna Bush to leave. She was furious. A Secret Service agent familiar with the incident told *U.S. News* that Jenna berated her agents, then fled the bar into a dark alley. Sources say one of the agents chased Jenna, and she taunted him. “You know if anything happens to me,” she said, “my dad would have your ass.”

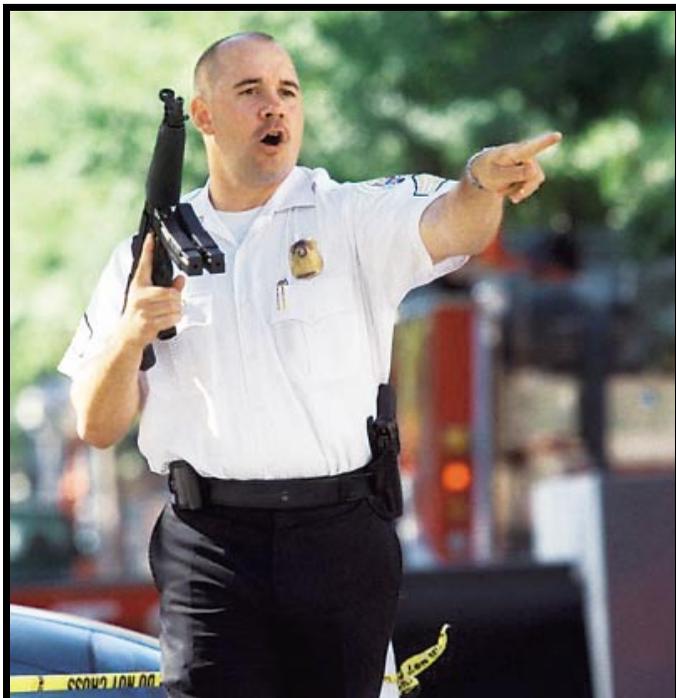
Not quite. After she called her father to





ON THE JOB. Members
of the president's
security detail

CHARLIE ARCHAMBAULT FOR USN&WR



CALLING THE SHOTS. A presidential pat on the back for Secret Service Director Brian Stafford. Above, a uniformed Secret Service officer outside the White House September 11. The agency is suffering from a continued loss of personnel.



complain about the incident, which is still widely recounted among agents, President Bush declined to side with Jenna. Laura Bush, however, was concerned about what Jenna and her twin sister, Barbara, view as repeated intrusions into their privacy. As a result, sources say, agents assigned to the protective details of the Bush twins have been ordered to pull back from traditional methods of coverage. Many agents say they regard this as a serious security risk. "They have no concept," says one source who has protected members of the Bush family. "... They act like they don't have any concept of world events and how vulnerable they are or can be."

Protecting the lives of families of top government officials has never been easy. By the same token, living under the controlling, intrusive, often overbearing, and seemingly omnipotent presence of agents can be stifling for political leaders and their families, especially for children. Presidents do what they can to strike a balance between protecting themselves and their families by acceding to the demands of agents, at the same time fighting for the right to have some semblance of a normal life. Some family members unused to the constant presence of armed law enforcement officers seek restrictions on agents' activities and guarantees of privacy. Others, more hostile, rebel and try to give their minders the slip, as Jenna's sister, Barbara, has done. Last April, Barbara's agents were lampooned by the Yale University magazine *Rumpus* after the car she was in sped through an E-ZPass lane as Barbara and her friends drove from New Haven, Conn., to a World Wrestling Federation match in New York. Members of her security detail had to wait in the toll lane on a bridge into Manhattan, then weave through traffic at high speeds to catch up. In Texas, Jenna evaded her Secret Service agents following class last fall, after the September 11 attacks, sources say. When she finally surfaced after several

hours, a supervisor on her protective detail lectured the young woman and warned against repeating such behavior.

The Bush twins aren't alone. Secret Service sources tell *U.S. News* that shortly after 9/11, President Bush sought expanded coverage for other Bush family members through an executive order. But this June, President Bush changed his mind and ordered the Secret Service to discontinue the security details he had authorized for several family members. "They are dictating coverage," says a Secret Service agent. "And what's worse is we're letting them."

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

"Protective methodology." After September 11, Secret Service executives made significant additions to President Bush's security arrangements. But some agents worry that Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, with its vast, open spaces, poses serious staffing and logistical challenges, difficulties that give pause to even the toughest military-trained tactical teams in the service. Providing security for its protectees in remote locations like the president's ranch is regarded as among the most difficult challenges by Secret Service executives, agents, and officers.

How to best guarantee the safety of the president, the vice president, and their families is just one element of a larger debate among line agents, uniformed officers, and Secret Service executives about the agency's changing role and responsibilities. In the past year, Director Brian Stafford has implemented a broad new security theory known as "protective methodology." Many agents and officers say this plan goes against the grain of time-tested Secret Service methods and practices and could expose protectees and their bodyguards to possible attack by reducing customary layers of protective "insulation." The changes include cutting the number of posts where agents and officers stand guard, eliminating some technical assets like magne-



The Secret Service, by the numbers

Established in 1865 to combat counterfeiting, the Secret Service began protecting presidents in 1901. The agency's mission is now twofold: investigating financial crimes and guarding the first family, the vice-president and his family, the White House and annexes, Treasury buildings, and foreign diplomatic missions in the United States. Lately, a flood of departures from its Uniformed Division has strained the Secret Service's protective missions.

Offices worldwide: **125**

Special agents: **3,000***

Technical, support, and administrative: **1,700***

Uniformed Division: **1,000***

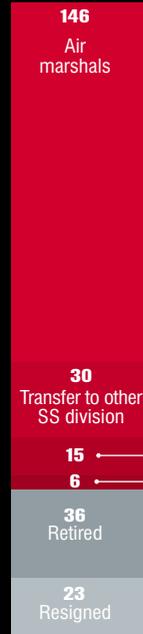
* Numbers are approximate

93
Total departures of uniformed officers



2001
(Oct. 2000-Sept. 2001)

256
Total departures of uniformed officers



2002
(Oct. 2001-Aug. 7, 2002)

Source: Secret Service

tometers, ballistic glass, and armored plating, and withdrawing Counter Sniper, Counter Surveillance, Counter Assault, and other tactical teams. "Basically, what we are doing now and what we were trained to do are at different ends of the spectrum," says a veteran agent. "It doesn't make sense."

Director Stafford declined to respond to an interview request. Paul Irving, who heads the Office of Government Liaison and Public Affairs, also failed to reply to a detailed list of questions for this article. A senior White House official who works closely with the Secret Service said he believes the service is doing a "terrific" job protecting President Bush and other top government officials and their families. Scott McClellan, a White House spokesman, also declined to respond to specific questions, saying, "We do not discuss security issues. The president and Mrs. Bush are grateful and appreciative for the outstanding job the Secret Service does in protecting the first family and others."

Traditionally, the Secret Service has relied on a guarantee of 360-degree coverage of its protectees. The approach calls for a team of agents enveloping the person under protection in a kind of moving box, covering him or her from all angles. The new protective methodology, by contrast, is based on an evaluation of "threat assessments," calculating different levels of risk confronting protectees like the vice president, his wife, and their children, the president's children, and the first lady. Using current intelligence information and historic precedents like past assassination attempts, Secret Service executives determine how many agents and what kinds of special teams and capabilities to assign individual protectees. For instance, vice presidents have been considered a relatively low assassination risk. Vice President Cheney, as a result, under the protective methodology approach, like other VPs, has received fewer assets and tactical support teams than the president.

Some Secret Service agents say that a protective theory based so heavily on intelligence analysis may be dangerously flawed, especially in light of the intelligence failures that occurred prior to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These individuals say that Secret Service executives have sometimes ignored or discounted security recommendations more heavily weighted to intelligence analysis, despite the fact that such analysis has been so heavily emphasized by Director Stafford and other proponents of the protective-methodology theory. Shortly after September 11, Cheney's security was beefed up. Then in December, Stafford and his deputy, Danny Spriggs, met with Secret Service agents and Uniformed Division officers at the Naval Observatory, Cheney's official residence. Sources say the meeting was intended as a morale booster. Stafford told the agents and officers that though they were not assigned to the elite presidential protective detail, they were doing a vitally important job. Intelligence analysts rated Cheney as a higher security risk than President Bush, Stafford continued, because of his having served as the first President Bush's secretary of defense during the Persian Gulf War a decade ago. The war, and the presence of thousands of American troops in Saudi Arabia before, during and after it, have been cited as a principal source of grievance by Osama bin Laden and others in his al Qaeda terrorist organization. Shortly after the meeting, however, several sources tell *U.S. News*, Secret Service executives reduced the level of Cheney's protection. "You say this guy is the biggest threat? They started cutting," says one former officer. "They were short of manpower for the Olympics. They cut posts everywhere." By Christmas, several Secret Service officials say, the special Counter Assault, Counter Sniper, and Emergency Response teams assigned to Cheney immediately after September 11 were phased out. For months, the Secret Ser-



FIRE ZONE. Secret Service agents secure an area during President Bush's tour of forest-fire damage near Ruch, Ore.

vice also rejected recommendations for magnetometers, or X-ray machines, to screen attendees at public events where Cheney appeared. These same sources say the service began assigning more Mag officers, as they are called, to Cheney's detail after *U.S. News* reported (June 17, 2002) on the agency's recent cost-cutting measures and personnel difficulties. The Treasury Department's inspector general initiated an investigation of each of the allegations cited in the magazine's earlier story. That inquiry is continuing, sources say. The department's top law enforcement official, Under Secretary for Law Enforcement Jimmy Gurulé, sources say, has also begun interviewing officers to gauge the extent of problems documented by the magazine in the Secret Service's Uniformed Division.

"Brokenhearted." The agents who spoke to *U.S. News* for this account are all currently employed by the Secret Service and have held a variety of high-profile assignments, including protecting the president and vice president, the first lady, Lynne Cheney, and other members of the Bush and Cheney families. They spoke on condition of strict anonymity. In addition, *U.S. News* spoke to many former Uniformed Division officers who have guarded the White House complex and foreign embassies in and around Washington, D.C. The agents and officers declined to discuss sensitive protective techniques and methods so as not to compromise protectees' safety or the security of the White House complex. Many of the agents and officers told the magazine that they decided to come forward after the earlier *U.S. News* article because of growing concerns about their ability to ensure the safety of some protectees—family members who typically receive little or no protective coverage. More than a dozen agents who have served on

protective details for a particular family member at various times over the past year have expressed concern that security measures the Secret Service has implemented on that individual's behalf were dangerously inadequate. *U.S. News* has refrained from publishing certain security information obtained during the reporting and research for this article and is withholding the name, location, and other details about the individual cited by these agents for security reasons. "If something happens to this protectee," says one agent, "it would cause great embarrassment. Not to mention the family; they would be brokenhearted."

In addition to the merits of the new protective-methodology plan, some agents question the timing of its implementation. The Secret Service budget has increased 75 percent since 1999, to \$1.05 billion today. At the same time, though, the service has suffered a debilitating loss of manpower while the scope of its protective and investigative missions has increased significantly. After the September 11 attacks, President Bush increased the number of protectees from 17 to 38. The number is now down to 22, but that's still a significant increase for a relatively small force of nearly 3,000 agents and roughly 1,000 Uniformed Division officers. The service has butted heads with other agencies like the FBI as it has sought to expand the original mission for which it was created—combating counterfeiting—to take on new responsibilities like investigating cybercrimes and international financial crimes. The service has also been given primary responsibility for providing security at what it calls national security special events like the Super Bowl and the recent Winter Olympics Games in Salt Lake City.

The new missions come at the same time the departures



GUARDING THE VICE PRESIDENT. Does the new “protective methodology” approach provide enough security for Cheney?

of agents and officers are accelerating. In the past year, more than 100 plainclothes agents have retired, quit, or taken jobs with the newly created Transportation Security Administration, internal Secret Service records show. In the past two months alone, the service has lost special agents-in-charge of its field offices in Cincinnati, Oklahoma City, Orlando, St. Louis, Atlanta, Minneapolis, and Kansas City, Mo. Many agents say they are leaving because they are fed up and want better pay and more humane working conditions, including less travel. These agents are averaging 81 hours overtime per month. A unique Secret Service pension plan allows retirement-age agents to rejoin the federal government at other agencies at elevated pay grades. Even elite Counter Sniper technicians from the Uniformed Division, who fill some of the most-sought-after and prestigious positions in the service, are leaving. CS marksmen guard the roof of the White House and travel on presidential and vice presidential advance trips to identify and assess possible security risks. Sometimes, Secret Service executives have had so few CS technicians that they have been forced to resort to what one source describes as “pseudo protection,” for presidential or vice presidential events, shining powerful floodlights, hanging huge drapes, or erecting special barriers in lieu of posting Counter Snipers at vulnerable location. In recent months, the shortage of CS technicians has been so acute that on several occasions, only one officer has been assigned to plan advance security for an event involving the president or vice

president. “They were cutting down power to do basic assessments,” says a veteran Secret Service official. “CS advance is very difficult. You could see [the technician] running around like a madman.”

Double standard. Morale in the service is plummeting, many agents say, in part because of a widely perceived double standard. Agents who enjoy close relationships with Secret Service executives in Washington are given more favorable assignments and other treatment than those who don’t, many in the service say. In the sometimes arcane parlance of the Secret Service, these agents have what is known as a “hook” with headquarters. The Secret Service has also had long-standing management difficulties with its Uniformed Division, the officers and technicians who are at the front line of defense at the White House and at foreign missions. They include members of the elite Counter Sniper teams, the Emergency Response Team, and the K-9 bomb squad units. Many of these officers complain of being treated as second-class citizens. Plainclothes agents sometimes refer to uniformed officers as “box creatures,” because they stand watch in the little white booths around the White House grounds. Sources say that some officers who transferred and became plainclothes agents found anonymous notes soon after taking up their new duties saying, “once a guard, always a guard.” Many of the uniformed officers are overworked, with even supervisors forced to put in an enormous amount of overtime. Since last October, the Secret Service has lost more than 256 Uniformed Division officers, according to

internal statistics provided to *U.S. News*; if current trends continue, the total could rise as high as 400 by year's end, nearly a third of the Uniformed Division's workforce. The personnel drain throughout the service has led to a decrease in the number of officers and agents available to protect the White House. "They cut posts around the White House before 9/11," says one source. Secret Service executives have had to shift officers who train cadets at the Beltsville, Md., academy to the White House complex. Officers assigned to guard foreign missions around Washington have also been shifted to stand post at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Valued members of the Secret Service's technical staff are also departing in significant numbers, including telephone and computer experts and highly trained encryption specialists.

Pressure cooker. The numbers alone are alarming, many inside the Secret Service say, but they also translate into a worrisome loss of experience among those who remain. When veteran trainers and supervisors leave, they take with them years of institutional knowledge and practical, hands-on experience that often cannot be taught by less experienced personnel. Agents and former Uniformed Division officers tell *U.S. News* that they fear that the enormous pressure to quickly hire and train new agents, combined with the lower hiring standards that were implemented in recent years, may further compromise security, if the wrong people are brought on board. In the past, Secret Service job applicants who had used *any* drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, were automatically disqualified and sent on their way. But now, sources say, an applicant who has stayed clear of marijuana for just 36 months and smoked it only 10 times can still qualify. And the Secret Service will consider candidates with cocaine or heroin use—as long as it was before their 21st birthday. The service now classifies such activity as a "youthful indiscretion."

In meetings with members of Congress, Treasury Department overseers, and White House officials, Secret Service executives have sought to downplay the extent of personnel problems. But they have also had little to say publicly about their new approach to guarding high government officials and their families. Director Stafford and his deputies have committed very little information about the new protective-methodology procedures to paper, several agents say. These agents worry that there has not been the kind of rigorous training, testing, and lesson planning based on the new protective theory, as has been the case with traditional protective methods. Agents and officers interviewed for this article expressed concern that if something goes wrong, there is so little on paper about the protective-methodology procedures that line agents and officers may be held accountable for decisions made by higher-ups. "Congress," says one veteran agent, "is going to grill our behinds, barbecue our backsides when, not if, but when—something happens." Adds another agent: "All you're doing is counting the days and hours you've been lucky."

Some key causes of concern:

- | The Secret Service is so hard pressed to find trained Mag officers to screen people attending public functions with the president, vice president, and other top officials that it has had to reduce the number of such officers at some events. When heads of Secret Service details request Mag officers, they are



DOUBLE DUTY. President Bush and his father, the former president, participate

often told that none is available; when they turn in security advance plans to headquarters, approved plans often come back with the number of Mag officers reduced, even for the president's detail, sources say. Detail heads have been forced on some occasions to pull agents from other posts to fill in near X-ray machines to scan crowds or even to use hand-held devices to screen attendees. One source says agents assigned to Cheney always make sure they are "vested up," have their bulletproof vests on, when they don't get magnetometer support and worry that a terrorist or a deranged person might sneak a gun into an event.

- | Because of concerns in part over excessive cost, Secret Service officials have declined to install ballistic glass in front of windows of hotels or other venues where key protectees have been scheduled to appear. "They won't put up ballistic glass," says an agent, "because they have to pay money to bring in a truck with a hydraulic lift to roll the glass in." Supervisors also frequently nix requests from agents for camouflaged armored sheets of steel used at outdoor events or in hotels to guard against sniper fire.

- | Agents say the Secret Service has failed to adjust its post-9/11 security procedures to address the potential threat of an aerial attack. The service, sources say, must demand more aggressive vetting of small aircraft by local police and other government agencies in advance of public events involving the president and vice president. Agents say they are especially worried about charter planes, because they receive virtually no security screening and their flight paths are typically not mon-



in a fundraiser for Republican Sen. Susan Collins in Scarborough, Maine.

itored. "It raises concerns," says one agent, "about how to reassure those who are under our protection about their safety, when really, we can't."

Security precautions taken for the first lady, some agents say, are often dangerously inadequate. In Washington, Laura Bush's motorcade does not even get the benefit of "intersection control"—coordinated traffic lights, a basic security measure accorded many high-risk visiting foreign dignitaries. And agents say they are concerned about the security of the vice president's wife, Lynne.

When her father was president, Chelsea Clinton was regularly assigned a two-man Counter Assault Team, in addition to her regular detail, after she received threats when she was a Stanford University student. The Bush daughters briefly were assigned similar teams after September 11, sources say, but they have since been pulled back.

Added to the loss of experienced agents and officers, many in the Secret Service believe executives remain skeptical of the value of some elite special units like Counter Assault, Counter Surveillance, and Emergency Response teams—the Pentagon-trained Uniformed Division officers who protect the White House. These sources say that many senior supervisory agents in the field and officials at headquarters are philosophically at odds with using these techniques. "They think we are cowboys," says a former veteran Emergency Response Team member, "and that it's overkill." This former officer and other sources say there's a kind of generation gap, due in part to the

fact that many senior officials never went through the specialized training now required of the Secret Service's most elite units. Training is a key measurement. Many agents and officers describe the training of new recruits as excellent, but others say the Secret Service is behind the curve. "These guys think old school," says one former officer who came to the Secret Service from the military. The specialized teams train to respond to multiple threats, like the September 11 attacks, and to rocket, chemical, and biological assaults. But most officers not on the elite teams and nonspecial team agents are still trained on a "single cycle" threat, such as that posed by a lone gunman. Some of these agents believe that after 9/11, the service should have modified its training curriculum to focus more on responding to multipronged attacks.

"Standing down." Paramount among the Secret Service's high-priority protective missions, of course, is the White House and its inhabitants. Despite the agency's ability to scramble and redeploy agents and officers from other responsibilities over the past year, the challenge is only likely to grow, agents and officers say. More than five years ago, special operations experts from the elite military counterterrorism unit Delta Force conducted a threat assessment of the White House and found numerous vulnerabilities. Secret Service executives have implemented only a few minor changes since that study, sources say. The threats are varied and not easy, in some cases, to counter. Veteran Secret Service officers worry, for example, about the long-standing custom of "standing down" when members of Congress come to call at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. One former officer says he requested a congressman's voting card to double-check the member's identification and was "reamed out" by his supervisor after the congressman complained. Officers who spoke with *U.S. News*

for this article say they have been forced time and again to allow members of Congress to enter the White House complex without identification because they have complained loudly when challenged. The worries, these sources say, are not misplaced. In April 1994, at the funeral reception for former President Richard Nixon at his library in Yorba Linda, Calif., a middle-aged man using fake identification papers sauntered through the VIP-congressional area and approached then President Clinton and former President George Bush. He attempted to engage them in conversation before he was finally detained, arrested, and charged with trespassing. "There's no way we can know even a quarter of these people," says one officer. "Yet we are supposed to allow them onto the ground without a picture ID. You can buy congressional pins or congressional license plates off eBay."

The Secret Service has a long and proud history of meeting difficult challenges and beating them. Many agents and officers, still intensely loyal to the agency, say they believe that with the right leadership and an influx of new blood, the service can handle whatever new demands it is required to meet. But others worry that the double whammy of personnel losses and increased responsibilities may be impeding the ability of the agency to function at the high levels expected of it. For some in the Secret Service, that challenge comes down to a decidedly personal level. "I hate to say this, but I couldn't have cared less," says one officer who has left the service. "If someone tried something, I probably would have missed it, because I just did not care." |