

Secret Service Scandal

By Mel Lavine

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The Secret Service is reeling from a scandal over suspected misconduct involving prostitutes on a presidential trip to Cartagena, Columbia. Such news heightens fears for the safety of the first black president. According to the New York Times, Obama started receiving Secret Service protection in the spring of 2007, nine months before the Democratic primaries began.

During Obama's time in office there has been at least one misadventure for which the Secret Service might be faulted. At a state dinner in 2009, a couple without an invitation crashed the party. They posed for photos with luminaries and even got to shake hands with the president and first lady.

So far there is nothing to suggest the prostitutes in Cartagena were connected to any plot to harm the president. It is a reasonable fear, however, given the relationship between the world's oldest profession and the underworld. Consider the role underworld figures have been suspected of playing in the assassination of President Kennedy.

However the story pans out, it's shocking to hear of an investigation of the conduct of Secret Service agents – officers charged with providing protection for the president and the president's immediate family. Unless I missed something, the history of the Secret Service has been one of courage and self-sacrifice. For example:

In a recent excerpt in the New Yorker from Robert Caro's biography of President Johnson – "The Transition: Lyndon Johnson and the events in Dallas" on November 22, 1963, Rufus Youngblood, the Secret Service agent in the vice president's car, wasn't sure what he heard after the first "cracking sound" but when "President Kennedy in the car ahead seemed to be tilting toward his left," and one of the agents in the car immediately ahead of Youngblood was on his feet gripping an automatic rifle, Youngblood shouted, 'Get down! Get down!' and threw his body over the Vice President, shouting again, 'Get down! Get down!'"

By the time the next two shots were fired, only eight seconds had elapsed. "Lyndon Johnson was down on the floor of the back seat of the car, with the weight of a big man lying on top of him, pressing him down." Caro quotes Johnson as saying he would never forget –Youngblood's "knees in my back and his elbows in my back."

On March 30, 1981 John Hinckley, described as a 25-year-old drifter from a wealthy family, fired six rounds from a revolver at President Ronald Reagan as he came out of a Washington hotel. Jerry Parr, senior Secret Service agent on the scene, “slammed Reagan into the presidential limousine and pounced on top of him as a shield. Neither Parr nor Reagan realized that he had been hit.” But when the president began coughing up blood, Parr ordered the limousine to George Washington University Hospital. Doctors later said that Reagan’s “blood pressure had dropped so sharply that if treatment had been delayed just five minutes he probably would have died.” □

Other rounds from Hinckley’s pistol left press secretary James Brady severely paralyzed. A police officer and a Secret Service agent were also seriously wounded. (Source: “The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents,” editor William A. Degregorio.)

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