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U.S. Secret Service: Threats to and Assaults on Presidents and Vice Presidents

Overview

USSS has two mandated missions: (1) criminal investigations, and (2) protection of persons and facilities. Criminal investigations focus primarily on financial crimes, whereas protection focuses on the safety and security of specific government officials and specifically identified government facilities. The criminal investigation mission is the USSS's oldest mission; however, the protection mission is the one that often receives the most public and media attention. USSS protects the President, Vice President, their families, former Presidents, and major candidates for those offices, along with the White House and the Vice President's official residence. Protective activities also extend to foreign missions in the District of Columbia (embassies, consulates, residences, and other buildings used by foreign governments) and to designated individuals, such as the Secretary of Homeland Security and visiting dignitaries. Separate from protecting these specific mandated individuals and facilities, USSS is responsible for coordinating security activities for National Special Security Events (NSSE), including inauguration ceremonies, major party quadrennial national conventions, and certain international conferences and events held in the United States.

History of USSS Protection

In March 2003, USSS was transferred from the Department of the Treasury to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). With this transfer, DHS generally, and USSS specifically, became the federal department responsible for protecting significant and specified persons and property. Prior to the enactment of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the Treasury Department had been responsible for this protection (through USSS) for over 100 years.

USSS has been protecting presidents from President Grover Cleveland in 1894 on a part-time basis to the continuous, round-the-clock protection of the President today. Over the years, the USSS protection mission has been determined by unofficial decisions (such as the one to protect President Cleveland) and congressional mandates (such as the one to protect major presidential candidates). USSS protection activities have generally expanded with an increase in the number of protected individuals; there has been one instance of a specified type of protectee being removed from the authorized list of protectees—presidentially designated federal officials temporarily representing the United States abroad.

Over the past century, congressional action has focused primarily on the USSS's protection mission.

Protected Individuals and Facilities

The following individuals are currently authorized USSS protection under 18 U.S.C. Section 3056(a):

- President, Vice President, President- and Vice President-elect;
- immediate families of those listed above;
- former Presidents, their spouses, and their children under the age of 16;
- former Vice Presidents, their spouses, and their children under the age 16;
- visiting heads of foreign states or governments;
- distinguished foreign visitors and official United States representatives on special missions abroad; and
- major presidential and vice presidential candidates within 120 days of the general presidential elections, and their spouses.

The USSS is also required to secure the White House complex, the Vice President's official residence at the Naval Observatory, the Treasury Building, foreign diplomatic missions in Washington, DC, and during their presidential administration, the personal residences of the President and Vice President. The USSS's Uniformed Division primarily secures these facilities.

Specific Protection Activities

As the pool of protectees has evolved over time, so has the manner in which they are protected. Originally, USSS protection primarily involved agents acting as "body guards" and providing personal security to protectees. Today, protection operations include not only the presence of agents in close proximity to the protectee, but also advance security surveys of locations to be visited; coordination with foreign, state, and local law enforcement entities; and intelligence analysis of present and future threats. The USSS protection mission comprises human resources, physical barriers, technology, and reviews of critical infrastructure and their vulnerabilities. 18 U.S.C. 3056(e)-(f) also authorizes the USSS to conduct other activities, such as planning, coordination, and implementation of security operations at NSSEs; and providing forensic and investigative assistance involving missing and exploited children.

Threats to Protectees

Presidential safety is and has been a concern throughout the nation’s history. For example, fears of kidnapping and assassination threats towards Abraham Lincoln began with his journey to Washington, DC, for the 1861 inauguration. The number of attempted and successful assaults against Presidents legitimizes concern for presidential safety. Ten presidents have been victims of direct assaults by assassins, with four resulting in death (Presidents Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy). President Woodrow Wilson’s Vice President, Thomas R. Marshall, is the only known Vice President to have been targeted for assassination. In 1915, a German-American opposed to the United States selling weapons and material to the Allies bombed the U.S. Senate Chamber’s reception room, which was next to the Vice President’s office. Vice President Marshall had been receiving death threats from opponents to American policy in World War I, in letters, for weeks. There was potentially a threat to Vice President Pence on January 6, 2021, but the events of that day are still being investigated.

Since USSS started officially protecting Presidents in 1906—in 1917, Congress enacted legislation (39 Stat. 919) that made it a crime to threaten the President—seven assaults have occurred, with one, President Kennedy, resulting in death. The USSS does not provide information on any threats to protectees or investigations related to threats made against protectees. Thus, the extent to which protectees have been threatened or targeted remains a matter of conjecture. For more information on USSS funding see CRS Report R48129, *U.S. Secret Service Protection Mission Funding and Staffing: Fact Sheet*, and for more information on the Personal Protective Details of government officials see CRS Report R47731, *Who Protects Whom? Federal Official and Judicial Security and Personal Protective Details*.

The following table provides information on assaults against Presidents who were protected by USSS; it does not include information on assaults against Presidents prior to the USSS assuming the responsibility of presidential safety.

Table 1. Direct Assaults on Presidents Protected by the U.S. Secret Service

Date	President	Location	Assailants and Reasons
11/01/1950	Harry S. Truman	Washington, DC	Oscar Collazo and Griseilio Torressola, advocates for Puerto Rican independence
11/22/1963	John F. Kennedy	Dallas, TX	Lee Harvey Oswald, motive unknown
09/05/1975	Gerald R. Ford	Sacramento, CA	Lynette Alice Fromme,

Date	President	Location	Assailants and Reasons
			member of extremist “Manson Family” and mentally unstable
09/22/1975	Gerald R. Ford	San Francisco, CA	Sara Jane Moore, revolutionary
03/30/1981	Ronald W. Reagan	Washington, DC	John W. Hinckley, Jr., mentally unstable
10/29/1994	William J. Clinton	Washington, DC	Francisco M. Duran, motive unknown
05/10/2005	George W. Bush	Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia	Vladimir Arutyunian, motive unknown
11/11/2011	Barack Obama	Washington, DC	Oscar Ramiro Ortega-Hernandez, anti-government political views

In recent years, for the USSS mission of “protection of persons and facilities,” Congress has appropriated:

- FY2016—\$509.8 million;
- FY2017—\$627.9 million;
- FY2018—\$711.2 million;
- FY2019—\$740.9 million;
- FY2020—\$754.5 million;
- FY2021—\$818.8 million.
- FY2022—\$863.5 million;
- FY2023—\$907.7 million; and
- FY2024—\$1.031 billion.

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