

The Secret Service



by Gary Fouse

In thinking about what I could write about the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, I had to ponder what I could add to what is being reported and commented on by millions around the world. The answer to that question was right there swirling in my head because, among my primary concerns for former President Trump, the deceased spectator, his family, the two wounded individuals, and the country in general, I find that my thoughts also keep going back to the Secret Service and the criticism that is being directed at them.

Being a retired Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent (1973-1995), I had several occasions to come into contact with the Secret Service. On one occasion, I worked an undercover case with a Secret Service agent, and during my tour of duty in Milan, Italy (1982-87), they also had an office down the hall from ours in the US Consulate in Milan. Many people don't

realize that aside from their protection duties, the Secret Service is also responsible for investigating counterfeit currency cases. At that time, there was a lot of counterfeit US currency circulating in northern Italy, and so the Secret Service opened an office in Milan. To this day, I have a certificate of appreciation from the Secret Service hanging proudly on my wall, as well as an autographed photo of President Ronald Reagan "to (me) with best wishes". (The latter was actually a gift from one of my Secret Service colleagues in Italy, and the signature is machine-made. I never met Reagan.) All of that is a lead in to saying that I have enormous respect for the Secret Service. I consider them an outstanding, professional organization, and I feel sadness at the apparent black eye they are suffering today.

Make no mistake: The agents who dove on President Trump, shielded him with their bodies, and got him into the vehicle are heroes. They did what they are trained to do, in effect, take a bullet, if necessary for the president-whomever that may be. Yet, the entire world is asking why that building, some 150 yards or so from where Trump was standing, was not secured. How did the shooter get up to the roof of that building in the first place? As I write, there is still speculation and outright Internet rumors going around as to how agents and or police responded to the rooftop alert from witnesses, exactly when the Secret Service snipers zeroed in on the shooter, and were they short on manpower, if so, why? That will all be sorted out in the coming days and weeks.

What I do know is that for every event that a Secret Service protectee attends, an advance team goes to the location several days earlier to prepare for the protection operation. They meet with local police, get information as to any possible threats in the area, identify locations of the closest hospitals, scout out the event location, and plan the operation. The question is how did that building figure in the planning and was it actually overlooked? The coming

investigation will focus greatly on that advance trip and what kind of operational plan was made up.

Another point I want to mention is this: As with any law enforcement agency, these tragic events serve as a teaching point for agency training in order to prevent a repetition of any mistakes that might have been made. This is not for the purposes of crucifying individual agents, but for legitimate training purposes. The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 became a training "manual" for future Secret Service agents, and their protection methods have become much more sophisticated since. Has that stopped attempts on presidents? No, unfortunately, these will continue, but lives can be saved.

Though DEA does not have protective duties, we do have operations that require planning. We have also had our share of tragedies and agents killed in the line of duty. In our case, these have mostly occurred during undercover operations and raids. To prevent these tragedies, DEA, like any professional law enforcement agency in the US, requires an operational plan be drawn up for instances like the above. (Of course, sometimes, things happen so fast that having an operation plan becomes difficult if not impossible.)

In terms of training, many of our tragedies in which we have lost agents have become material for training future agents. One term we use is "risk management", that is, certain methods as to how risks can be reduced when working undercover or conducting search or arrest warrants. I myself taught some of those classes while stationed at the DEA Office of Training during my final tour of duty before retiring in 1995.

As I said, there is now and will continue to be intense scrutiny on the Secret Service. We know the questions; we must await the answers and the solutions. I sincerely hope that Congress does not decide that the solution is to scrap the Secret Service and reassign protection duties to another

agency, DHS or the FBI. That, in my view, would be a grievous error, but that is a whole different discussion. If the Secret Service erred in Butler, they will correct the error and learn from it. If disciplinary measures are needed, they will be taken. If there is some institutional problem, for example, with current leadership, hopefully, that will be addressed. If criticism of the Secret Service is warranted in this case, so be it. I still believe, however, that these agents are dedicated, courageous, and professional people.