

Secret Service Warned About Going Public

Agents Must Protect Presidents and Their Private Lives, Director Says

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A tell-all book alleging philandering by President John F. Kennedy sparked a sharp reminder to Secret Service agents past and present that protecting the chief executive also means no tattling.

In a Dec. 5 letter to 3,200 current and 500 former agents, Secret Service Director Lewis C. Merletti said interviews by four former agents on Kennedy's detail were, "regardless of [their] accuracy, very troubling and counterproductive to the mission of the Secret Service."

Merletti, who was promoted to director last summer, continued with an admonishment that talking to anyone about "any aspect of the personal lives of our protectees" damages the service's professionalism and its relationship with those it guards.

"I ask that we all remember our commission book oath as 'being worthy of trust and confidence.' This is a confidence that should continue forever," Merletti wrote.

Tony Sherman, one of the agents quoted in Seymour M. Hersh's "The Dark Side of Camelot," was responding with a letter of his own, demanding an apology.

Merletti "insults me when he says that, because I tattled on a president that's been dead for 35 years, I should be ashamed of

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myself," Sherman, a 21-year veteran of the service, said in a telephone interview yesterday.

"He implies that our First Amendment rights are limited, but there's no oath and no law, no 'Official Secrets Act,'" Sherman said.

Secret Service spokesman Jim Makin said Merletti intended neither to offend nor to infringe on agents' free speech rights. "This was just a reminder," Makin said. "The policy is nothing new."

Sherman and former agent Larry

Newman, another source for Hersh, acknowledged the prudence of a closed-mouth policy where living protectees are concerned, but they suggested the Secret Service formalize a confidentiality oath.

In one passage from Hersh's book, Newman recalled security concerns about Kennedy's alleged womanizing: "You were on the most elite assignment in the Secret Service and you were there watching an elevator or a door because the president was inside with two hookers."

Chafing yesterday at the Secret Service's subsequent reprimand, Newman said, "If they're so concerned, a confidentiality clause would be a constructive step rather than getting on the edge about our character and integrity."

None of the former agents was paid for his information, he added.

Still, Hamilton Brown, an officer with the Association of Former Agents of the United States Secret Service, called the agents' role in Hersh's book "an embarrassment."

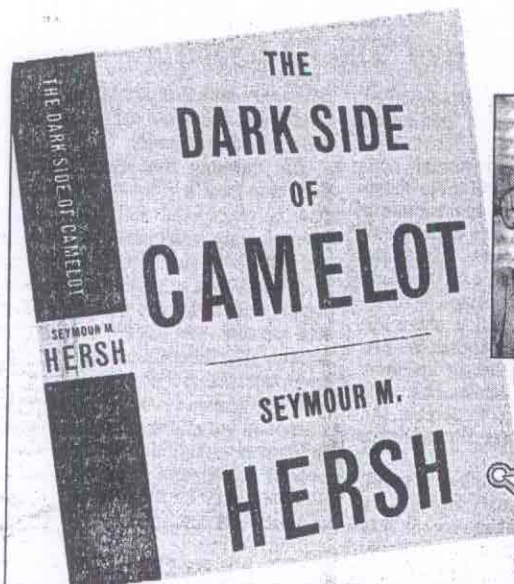
"The primary job of a Secret Service agent is to keep both the president and the office of the presidency alive," Brown said. "That certainly includes not trading in gossip and rumormongering."

Hersh speculated about the motivation behind the Secret Service memo. "Why would the current head of the detail want to put his nose in the tent? Is he condoning coverup? Why would the Clinton White House care what happened 35 years ago? Two and 2 is always 4 and there are certain things that are obvious," he said.

White House spokesman Michael McCurry said he had no reason to believe that Merletti consulted with President Clinton.

"The president expects those assigned to protect him to follow whatever procedures the Secret Service has," McCurry said.

Clinton himself was the subject of former FBI agent Gary Aldrich's 1996 memoir of working in the White House. FBI employees are prohibited from going public about their work without permission, though Clinton's Justice Department declined to prosecute Aldrich.



HERSH

