

20 Years in the Secret Service

My Life with Five Presidents



By Rufus Youngblood

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I joined the Secret Service in 1951, not because of any burning desire to be a Secret Service agent—I had only a general idea of what the Service did—but because my chosen line of endeavor had fallen unexpectedly on hard times and I had a family to support.

Like some 12 million other Americans, I had put in my World War II time, some of it as a waist gunner aboard a B-17 bomber named Jack the Ripper. The GI Bill saw me through Georgia Tech and I was well on my way with my industrial engineering degree.

At least that was my plan until an unaccustomed word—"recession"—began to crop up in everyday conversation. The recession hit the engineering profession and I began looking elsewhere for work. The Georgia Tech alumni placement office provided me with a lead that stated: "The United States Secret Service is seeking

qualified applicants for Special Agent positions, starting salary \$3,825 per year."

I was in the Atlanta Secret Service office almost before I finished reading the notice.

Within a year Youngblood was assigned to the White House detail of the Secret Service.

From the original five men assigned to the protection of Theodore Roosevelt in 1902, the White House detail had grown into a complex, tightly knit unit of well-trained and highly professional men whose job was as important as any in the world. I was impressed with the place, the job, and the people. Before coming to the White House as a Secret Service agent I had never seen Harry Truman—or any other President. It was, to me, a rarefied atmosphere I worked in for the next few days, standing my assigned posts, learning my way around the White House, and moving with the President as part of the team.

Possibly, I was overimpressed. One morning, after I had been rotated to the 8-to-4 shift, I saw what to me was a legendary figure moving through the White House to an early appointment with the President. I was on my way to report in and as I reached the office I stopped at shift leader John Campion's desk, where he was working on some papers.

"Guess who I just saw!" I said, pointing back toward the corridor.

Without looking up he said seriously, "Not John Wilkes Booth, I hope."

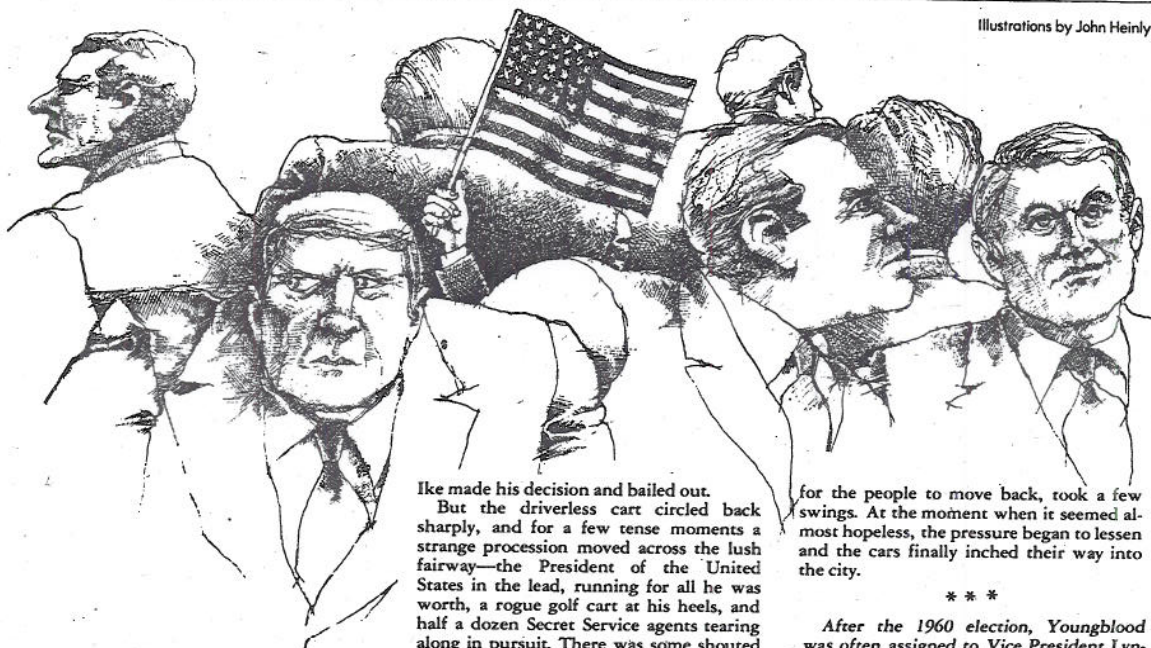
The sarcasm missed me entirely for the moment. "No! General Omar Bradley, that's who!"

He looked up then, and turning toward the clerk at the adjoining desk, he said, "Say, didja hear that? Youngblood just saw General Omar Bradley!" He looked around at me. "Say, Youngblood, with your luck, if you'd been around here about 80 years ago you mighta seen General Grant. Yes sir, you sure might!"

"General . . . Grant . . ." I mumbled. I was learning more than protective work. In a nudist colony you don't stare. At least not after the first couple of days.

While President Truman's daily walks around Washington worried the Secret Service agents in charge of his safety, President Eisenhower's walks presented another kind of problem.

We had another walking President, but one who disdained the salutary stroll down Pennsylvania Avenue for the pursuit of a golf ball over endless miles of roughs and fairways. At first glance, it would seem that this would be a Secret Service dream come true. What better protection than to have your man far from the madding crowd, in the fresh air and privacy of an exclusive golf club, spending hour after hour in such a healthful and harmless pursuit. After all the only golfers you ever hear of getting killed are those who rush to the



shelter of the nearest oak tree in a sudden thunderstorm.

But the President is exposed to a different sort of danger than the ordinary golfer. When Ike stepped up to the first tee, there would already be an agent on the green ahead, and agents flanking the fairway as well as bringing up the rear. One of his doctors always accompanied the entourage. On a relatively strange course, there might be a foursome of agents playing the hole ahead and another teeing off behind the President.

In effect, what appeared to be a simple golf game was in actuality a miniature military movement that began its advance on the first tee with its objective the eighteenth green. Of course, there was no outward evidence of this. Heavily armed agents appeared to be nothing more than fellow golfers, caddies, or a small gallery that had the peculiar habit of watching everything but the golfer.

But if the efforts of the Secret Service were instrumental in keeping Ike safe while enjoying his hobby, the many miles of walking America's finest golf courses were not entirely without incident.

Golf carts were just coming into vogue in the early '50s, and Ike often enjoyed driving his own cart. One warm spring afternoon on Augusta National, Ike tooled his cart up to the edge of the green where his ball lay just off the putting surface. The moment he took his foot off the accelerator it was apparent that something was wrong, as the cart continued on under full power. Faced with a long downhill run to a creek,

Ike made his decision and bailed out.

But the driverless cart circled back sharply, and for a few tense moments a strange procession moved across the lush fairway—the President of the United States in the lead, running for all he was worth, a rogue golf cart at his heels, and half a dozen Secret Service agents tearing along in pursuit. There was some shouted discussion as to whether the thing should be shot, just as three agents overtook it and, like a dogie at a rodeo, bulldogged it over onto its side.

Caring for a President's safety overseas sometimes presented the Secret Service with more exotic problems and one trip of President Eisenhower's to New Delhi became a legend in the Secret Service.

India had a shortage of almost everything but people, and when Ike landed at Palam Airport some 12 miles outside New Delhi, and headed toward the city in the company of Prime Minister Nehru, the motorcade along Kitchener Road found itself penetrating a solid mass of humanity that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. The crowds pressing in from either side of the road became a huge, writhing vise, with the motorcade between its jaws.

I learned from first-hand experience on later visits to India that the accepted method of crowd control on the part of the Indian police—whether the crowds be friendly or not—is the liberal use of the heavy wooden clubs they carry. They swing them with abandon and those on the receiving end accept the blows in the same spirit they are given. But there is little to be gained by bludgeoning a man who is pressing forward under the relentless pressure of thousands behind him. They crammed in against the limousine, laughing, smiling, shouting greetings to Ike even as the clubs rained down on their heads.

At one point Nehru himself grabbed a club from a surprised officer and, shouting

for the people to move back, took a few swings. At the moment when it seemed almost hopeless, the pressure began to lessen and the cars finally inched their way into the city.

After the 1960 election, Youngblood was often assigned to Vice President Lyndon Johnson. In 1961 he accompanied Johnson to the then rather obscure Asian country of South Vietnam.

With the business over, the Vice President expressed a desire to have a look around. The countryside in the vicinity of Saigon was fairly safe for travelers at that time, and so after lunch, as impromptu motorcade wound its way out of the city. We stopped occasionally in a hamlet for Johnson to have a few words with the people through his interpreter, or alongside a rice paddy to observe the farmers at work.

As we rounded a bend several miles out in the country, Johnson's face suddenly brightened. There to our right was a field in which a dozen or so head of cattle were contentedly grazing.

"Pull over!" the Vice President ordered the driver. We eased off onto the roadside, the vehicles behind following suit. Johnson was out almost before the car stopped, loping off with his big Texas cattleman's gait to inspect the local stock. Stu Knight and I dutifully trotted along with him, not feeling too easy about a prolonged stop, and keeping an eye out toward the forest beyond the field. Battles were not being fought in the area, but sniping was not uncommon.

I had never had much contact with beef in the live state. My first brief visit to the LBJ Ranch in Texas, shortly before this trip, had shown me that the Vice President was no stranger to the beasts, and as we made our way toward the assembled cattle, I assumed these were the same as those in Texas. Still, I preferred my cattle disassembled, preferably broken down into T-bone

steaks, lightly salted and peppered, and done medium rare over charcoal. These, I noticed, had ceased their grazing and were eyeing the oncoming group with suspicion.

The next thing I noticed was that they were no longer simply standing there; they were coming to meet us, a couple of them at a steady trot.

"Mr. Vice President," I said, "I don't think it's advisable for us to get too far from the cars." What I was thinking was that I did not want to be the first Secret Service agent to get hoof marks in the line of duty.

Lyndon Johnson was a man who knew when to back off, and he knew it now. "Whatever you think is best, Rufus," he replied, and doing an about-face we headed for the cars, trying not to break into a dead run because of the everpresent reporters and photographers who had come along with us.

We reached the cars about ten feet ahead of the cows, and as they strolled victoriously back into their field, the Vice President suggested that he had seen enough of the countryside for this visit and we headed back into Saigon.

In November, 1963, Youngblood accompanied President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson on the fateful trip to Texas.

This motorcade through Dallas, as planned, was virtually indistinguishable from three the previous day, in San Antonio, Houston, and Fort Worth. The streets through which a Presidential motorcade moves may differ from city to city, the

faces along the route are not the same, the worker sitting in an open window munching a sandwich on his lunch break is not the one you saw yesterday, yet there is a sameness about motorcades, whether they take place in New Delhi or New York, Dakar or Dallas—if they go according to plan. The Secret Service is there, in a sense, to maintain that sameness. It had been maintained in the other cities, but the Secret Service agent on protective duty lives on the brink of disaster. His job borders on the impossible.

It is a job of interception. When the eager young man with a camera in his hands breaks from the curb toward the cars, he must be intercepted and as unobtrusively as possible moved back into the crowd. The camera might not be a camera at all; it could be a bomb or a gun.

When the fellow standing in the front row half a block ahead wearing a raincoat on a sunny day, pushes his hands into his pockets, an agent may drop almost casually off one of the cars and position himself between that man and the one he is assigned to protect.

As a Secret Service agent you are constantly on the alert for the individual who somehow does not fit. You scan the crowd, the rooftops, the doorways, the windows, ready to take whatever action may be necessary should you observe something that could jeopardize your mission. You look into thousands of faces and you try to determine in each if he or she may be the one who came to do more than look. You seldom know whether some action on your part may have thwarted that individ-

ual—the young man with the camera or the man sweltering in the sun in the trench coat—because you have passed and he has melted back into the throng that dissolves in the wake of the motorcade. If he was the man, he may give it up altogether, or he may be at the corner of 4th and Main in the next city when you get there, ready to try again.

He was there in Dallas, faceless, nameless so far, but he was there. He had a rifle powerful enough to bring down a grizzly bear, and he had a telescopic sight that extended its effectiveness. His training as a rifleman had been the best, the U.S. Marine Corps, and he had constructed a sniper's nest as perfect as a duckblind. He must have known the odds were in his favor; we—the Secret Service—knew it. The attack he planned was the one against which we were virtually defenseless at that time. We had long been aware that when we had to move the President through the streets of a city in an open car it was like mounting him on the track of a shooting gallery and inviting one and all to step right up and take a shot.

The man, waiting patiently behind stacked cartons of schoolbooks in a dingy storeroom six floors up, saw the car bearing his quarry as it began to move down the incline toward the overpass. The car, moving straight away from him, and slightly downward, presented him with a target that was, in effect, almost stationary.

The Secret Service had carried the mandate of Presidential protection for 61 years, with the shadow of a failure of the first magnitude hanging over it twenty-four hours of every day. There had been some close ones, but the record of no losses had held.

That record ended a few seconds after 12:30 p.m., November 22, 1963, on Elm Street in Dallas, Texas.

After President Kennedy was pronounced dead, Johnson was sworn in as President and his first official order was to fly the plane back to Washington.

The President sat quietly for some time after the takeoff, while the plane streaked upward, leaving the mottled Texas countryside far below and Dallas far behind. The closeness and discomfort that had prevailed on the ground disappeared now that the air-conditioning system was functioning.

"Have the radioman get Mrs. Rose Kennedy for me, Rufus," he said.

The first attempt resulted in a poor connection. Radioman John Trimble rerouted the call and President Kennedy's mother was on the line.

"I wish to God I could do something to help you," Johnson said, his voice thick. He seemed to want to say more, but found himself incapable of it, and he said simply, "Here's Lady Bird," and handed the phone to his wife.

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Streaking eastward with the aid of a strong tail wind, night came quickly. The lights of Washington blinked below as Air Force One made its approach to Andrews, touching down at 6:05, two hours and eighteen minutes after taking off from Love Field. Colonel Swindal taxied to the reception area, where scores of newsmen and hundreds of VIPs — senators, congressmen, members of the diplomatic corps, and others — waited. For obvious security reasons, admittance to the area was extremely tight. But the general public was not excluded from what went on, for when the big plane came to a halt, and the rear door opened, viewers across the nation saw a yellow forklift truck, in the brilliant glare of the television lights, gently lower the bronze casket bearing the dead President. O'Donnell, O'Brien, Dave Powers, and two men from the honor guard that had awaited the arrival of the plane lifted the casket off the forklift and placed it in a gray Navy ambulance. Jacqueline Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and General Godfrey McHugh got into the rear with the casket. Agents Kellerman and Greer, who had been in the President's car in Dallas, along with Special Agent Paul Landis and Rear Admiral George Burkley, John Kennedy's physician, rode in front as the ambulance slowly moved out for Bethesda Naval Hospital, where an autopsy was to be performed.

As the ambulance moved away, the President glanced around the stateroom, obviously looking for something. "Rufus," he said, "where's my hat?"

"Your hat, sir?"

"It was in the car during the motorcade."

"Then that's where it probably still is, sir," I said. "I didn't get it."

"Well, get the damn thing! Call back to Dallas and have one of your men get it!"

His hat at a time like this? Then the incident struck me as the first indication of a return to normalcy. This was LBJ, the President, giving me a chewing out.

The tragedy in Dallas, however, carried with it a subtle but strong point that was a very effective deterrent to anyone's

wanting to take over the Service's chief responsibility. The Secret Service had shouldered this awesome burden for more than 60 years, not without serious incident, but without its mission being thwarted. Now, after one volley of gunfire by a man whose reasons we would probably never know, the Secret Service was fighting for its very existence as a protective unit, because there are no small losses in this line of work. Bank robbers may roam the country, spies may abound, wars may flare, and the agencies and departments responsible for containing these activities are seldom if ever called summarily on the carpet with an attitude of "if you can't cut the mustard, we'll get somebody who can."

The headlines made on November 22 and the days that followed would be a long time getting to page two. Why would anyone seek a job whose failure, regardless of the manner in which it happened, would inevitably cause such an upheaval? I felt then, and I feel now, that this question was evaluated and came up with no enthusiastic takers.

This and the fact that Lyndon Johnson, in the main, backed the Secret Service were largely responsible for the job remaining where it was. The feeling seemed to have been: give them some lumps, do some revising and reorganizing, but let them keep it. The hot potato went around the circle and came back to where it started.

Understandably, morale was not at an all-time high in the Secret Service. Many career agents in protective assignments felt that this mandate might pass to other hands, and they sought transfers to the field. The necessary merging of the Vice Presidential detail into the White House detail disturbed the normal upward flow of promotions. It was a time of uncertainty, and in a surprisingly short time it came to the attention of the President himself. Less than two months in office, and with the monumental responsibility and work load that had been thrust on him, he considered the matter of sufficient importance to deal with personally, which is exactly what he did on January 6, 1964.

I was just sitting down to supper with my wife, Peggy, and the children when the phone rang. There was no

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aide or secretary saying, "Hold the line please for the President." It was LBJ himself, and he minced no words.

"I've received a memorandum that disturbs me, Rufus. I'll read you some of it. 'Morale in the Secret Service is at an all-time low. A number of agents of the White House detail have been asking for transfers. This is a great body of men. These men feel they are being prevented from doing their job properly. They do not want favors; they just want to be accepted. We need them badly, especially in campaign years.' And it goes on."

"Sir," I said, "may I ask who wrote the memorandum?"

"I don't think I ought to name him, but it was one of Kennedy's top people, and somebody in your outfit has been bellyaching to him."

The case in point, the President told me, was a small write-up in a national magazine to the effect that LBJ, while driving his own car at the ranch, had told a Secret Service agent in the follow-up car that he was going to shoot out a tire if he did not stop following too close. The incident itself was not important. It was a simple example of LBJ being himself. The fact that a magazine found out about it was important.

"There's enough truth in it to see that somebody talked," the President went on. "You know I can't have disloyalty, and I can't talk in front of your people and have them repeat it. I told Chief Rowley that, to call 'em in and take the resignations of anybody who wanted out, and I'll be glad to have his or yours or anybody else's. If they don't want to handle it we can get the FBI to do it. So you get ahold of Rowley and you all hold a meeting, and if you want to resign, I'll be glad to accept it forthwith. If Secret Service wants to go back to counterfeiting, then I'll get Hoover to assign me a couple of men to stand by my side without all this damn fuss!"

He went on, chewing me out for the incident itself and the fact that it came to his attention from a third party. He had a point. I don't know how long I sat there in my kitchen with the phone in my hand, saying, "Yes, sir, Mr. President," every now and then.

At last, he began to wind down. "Get ahold of Rowley and find out who the hell has been doing all this bellyaching and get it straightened out.

Take their resignations, get them out of here, and get Lem Johns back and you and Lem handle me. (Lem had been put on shift work when we got back from Dallas.) And if you don't want it, just honestly say so and I'll get you a good reassignment and I'll get Hoover to send me over a couple of 21-year-old accountants and they'll probably do as good a job!"

I winced on that one, but he finally had it off his chest. I said, "We'll stick with you, sir."

There was a pause. "Okay. But I want something done about it, you understand? Good night, Rufus." And he hung up.

I lowered the phone and sat there staring at it. Peggy came and stood in the kitchen doorway. "I fed the children," she said. "I didn't know how long you'd be so I put our plates in the oven."

I looked up. "Can you see the teeth marks on me?"

She shrugged and smiled. "Well, for three years the Vice President's been chewing you out. Now it's the President. You've come up in the world."

As firmly founded as the protective procedures of the Secret Service are, certain exceptions can be made in the light of reason. And, occasionally, reason does not prevail. The handling of food that comes to the White House in the form of gifts has always been a routine matter. One of the classic methods of assassination has been the poisoning of food or drink, and the surest and simplest way to prevent this from happening is to destroy such gifts.

Lady Bird Johnson, one of the most cooperative and uncomplaining women we ever had the privilege of serving, occasionally found fault with this indiscriminate destruction, and when special friends wished to send her some edible gift, she would have them send it to her secretary, thus circumventing the Secret Service.

Even so, there remained obvious cases that could not involve a security risk. One bright Sunday morning, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara arrived alone in his station wagon at the southwest gate of the White House. Rather than go into the mansion in his casual attire, he handed a package of Mrs. McNamara's cheese blintzes — a gourmet specialty for which

she was well known — to the policeman with instructions to have them delivered to the Johnsons.

The officer, following his written orders, advised the Secret Service. The package was picked up shortly afterward and went the way of all food gifts. This might well have been the end of it except that a few days later Mrs. McNamara asked the President if he had liked the cheese blintzes she sent him. At this point, the blintzes hit the fan.

"What the hell happened to the cheese blintzes Mrs. McNamara sent me?" the President roared at the nearest Secret Service agent, who happened to be Lem Johns. Lem relayed the question through channels, and it very quickly settled on my desk.

I checked it out and went straight to the Man with my answer. "Sir," I told him, "about Mrs. McNamara's cheese blintzes . . ." I took a deep breath. "We just fouled up."

He couldn't argue with that, and that was the last of it, except that a few internal changes were made in the handling of food gifts.

As passions intensified over the escalation of the Vietnam war so did the frustrations of some of the agents.

As Vice President, LBJ had not had to face some of the problems that befell HHH. Because of the rankling feeling about the Vietnam war that was constantly increasing in the United States, Humphrey was often beset by hecklers when he spoke. This can be one of the most frustrating experiences imaginable, and on one occasion it reached a point where one of our agents did something agents are not supposed to do. Humphrey was scheduled to speak at a large university, and hecklers were lying in wait for him. The Secret Service had intelligence of this, but there was little that could be done about it. The hall erupted into a near-melee only minutes after Humphrey started to speak and was drowned out by the hecklers, and when the dust began to settle, the agent (who shall forever remain nameless) phoned me in Washington.

"I put my foot in the bucket tonight, Rufe," he said. "I may have to resign from the Service."

"What happened?"

"I belted one of those damn militant hecklers. You know how it's been with the Vice President lately. You can't

help but admire him for keeping his cool when they're giving him so much hell. One of 'em was standing right in front of me just below the podium, screaming up at the Man while he was trying to speak, calling him a bastard and a few other things. The next thing I knew there was a lot of pushing and shoving and I had my fist down his throat." He gave a half-hearted laugh. "I think I broke my hand. But you know something? I really felt good! Anyhow, there was bedlam all over the hall by then, and we got the Vice President out."

"Where are you now?" I asked him.

"At the airport. I heard some of the press saying one of the ringleaders was screaming that a Secret Service agent poked him, but he wasn't able to tell them which one."

"Okay," I said. "You tell the Vice President what happened, have a doctor look at your hand, and get back here to Washington. Maybe you should take a little annual leave."

Humphrey did not condone what had happened — he couldn't. But he was understanding, and it went no farther than him. I had no choice but to reprimand the agent. But it was a rough year to be traveling with Hubert Humphrey, and no one knew that better than Humphrey himself.

After the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy in 1968, legislation empowered the Secretary of the Treasury to assign Secret Service protection to all major candidates for the Presidency and Vice Presidency.

By the time Richard Nixon won the election — by a scant 7/10 of 1 per cent of the popular vote — the Secret Service could tally up more than a quarter of a million man-hours that had been applied to the protection of candidates. And all the candidates had come through alive.

With his successor named, we found ourselves dealing with a different LBJ after the November elections. I think "waxing mellow" best describes it. During an award ceremony late in November, he became almost maudlin, but we appreciated it.

"I have abused you," he said, "I have criticized you, I have been inconsiderate of you . . . I have spent more of my time telling you what you did wrong than what you did right. But . . . I remember in

Australia when I just couldn't keep back the tears when I looked in the faces of Jerry Kivett, Dick Johnsen, Jerry McKinney, Lem Johns, and Bob Heyn, and the dearest of all, Rufus Youngblood, with that paint streaming down their faces, splattered all over them, but their chins up and their President safe . . . I remember Bob Taylor standing there and letting the Cadillac run over his foot in order to protect his President from harm."

When the President says things like this about your outfit, you cannot help but feel proud. Still, I wondered months later if that qualification as "dearest of all" had not been something like the kiss of death for me.

Youngblood's contact with the new President and his staff was minimal and after 20 years in the Secret Service he decided to retire.

My final trip out of the capital with President Nixon took us to Georgia in January 1971. The occasion was the death of Senator Richard B. Russell, and being a Georgian, I went along with the President and his regular Secret Service detail to Atlanta, where Russell's body lay in state in the Capitol.

In a sense, this was my coming full circle with the protective forces of the Secret Service. It had been almost 20 years ago that a green probationary agent stood nervously awaiting the arrival of Vice President Alben Barkley at Atlanta Airport. Now I was back at the same airport aboard Air Force One, accompanying the fifth President I had served.

Like many career men in the Secret Service, I had come almost unscathed through all the physical hazards built into the job of protecting the President. But when your work requires you to exist within the most political milieu in the nation — the White House — the fact that you are a nonpolitical professional does not guarantee you immunity to the political intrigue that is constantly going on there. There is the more subtle hazard of identification.

Although I had served five Presidents, I was identified with one, and my career was not the first in Washington to reach a stopping point because of identification with a previous administration. If a change of identity could have been arranged by my denouncing anyone I had served, I would not buy that. ■

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