

Intrigue in New Orleans

Behind Those 'Plots' on Nixon

By William Claiborne
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New Orleans

For a city that seems to thrive on conspiracies, real or imagined, New Orleans may have outdone itself during the three weeks before President Nixon's visit here on August 20.

Federal and local law enforcement officials were kept busy investigating no less than five separate unrelated incidents that at various times were thought to be parts of one or more plots against the life of the President.

As it turned out, all but one of the investigations have led into dead ends or have proved to have had nothing to do with an assassination plot. However, in total, the incident caused a disruption in Mr. Nixon's plans and gave the Secret Service its most serious publicly revealed assassination scare since John F. Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas.

SHOOTOUT

One of the feared "plots" here was a case of mistaken identity that led to a shootout in the Sangre de Christos mountains in New Mexico and the arrest there of a hapless ex-policeman, who, by his account, didn't know Mr. Nixon planned to visit New Orleans.

Two other incidents were found to involve nothing more than simple theft, and another resulted in a windfall of arrests for detectives of the bank robbery detail.

The police, the FBI and the Secret Service are left with what they regard as one serious plot to shoot the President as he was to travel on a motorcade along bustling Canal street on the way to speak to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention.

The plot purportedly was hatched by members of the Black Panther party, and although the police admit they

don't have enough evidence to make arrests, federal agents are still keeping five suspected conspirators under constant surveillance in hopes of breaking the case.

They also fear for the life of an informant who, believing that the police have not held information as confidentially as they should have, is no longer cooperating with the authorities, sources close to the investigation said.

SECURITY

The five separate facets of the assassination scare here began to surface fully three weeks before Secret Service advance men arrived and started security preparations.

In another city at another time, the incidents might not have caused as much cumulative alarm among the protectors of the President, and might not have resulted in the cancellation of an event Mr. Nixon is known to have been looking forward to.

But New Orleans is a conspiracy-conscious city. It

Back Page Col. 5

From Page 1

was here in 1964 that District Attorney James Garrison unsuccessfully attempted to link the Kennedy assassination to a plot involving Clay Shaw.

The U.S. Attorney's office here uses federal conspiracy statutes more than any other jurisdiction in the Fifth U.S. Circuit and possibly more than any other similarly sized jurisdiction in the country, according to one federal prosecutor.

It is against this background that the police and federal authorities began facing some startling developments early in August.

The first occurred when police learned that a group of about a dozen blacks, believed to have been linked to the underground Black Liberation Army, moved into the Parkchester apartments, a complex of drab, four-

family, low-income housing units in the central city.

Police sources said the group was holding up banks here to finance the opening of a New Orleans BLA chapter. San Francisco detectives, who came here hoping to establish a link between the BLA group and the 1971 gun attack of a police station in which an officer died, reported that guns seized here, have been traced to California.

GROUP

While the BLA group has not been linked to any threat against the President, police sources said that the presence of the suspects and the knowledge of their background alone was cause enough for concern at a time of presidential visit.

When it learned about the alleged Black Panther plot, the Secret Service asked Police Superintendent Clarence Giarusso to arrest the six men until Mr. Nixon's visit was over. Giarusso refused, claiming he did not have enough evidence, and instead the suspects were put under watch.

The third alarm for the police and the Secret Service attracted the most public attention, but turned out to be the least menacing aspect of Mr. Nixon's visit. It involved Edwin M. Gaudet, an eccentric former New Orleans policeman known variously as "Punchy," "Popcorn" and "The Cat," depending on whether he is walking the streets of the French Quarter or roaming through the Taos, N.M., commune in which he, his wife, Judy, and three children lived.

Four days before the president's August 20 arrival, Secret Service agents conducted a routine security "sweep" of the Canal street motorcade route, interviewing shopkeepers and looking for possible trouble spots.

AGENT

One agent entered Waterbury's drugstore, a cluttered all-night pharmacy at Canal

and Camp streets on the fringe of the French quarters, and spoke to a soda fountain clerk named Romana Burkhardt.

Mrs. Burkhardt said that at 6:30 a.m. on the previous Sunday, she heard a breakfast customer say, "Nixon ought to be shot, and if no one else is big enough to do it, I will." She said she had heard the same man complain before about the President and the economy.

The Secret Service showed Mrs. Burkhardt several photographs of people who were believed to have been involved in incidents concerning the President. Mrs. Burkhardt picked Gaudet's photograph and made a positive identification.

In 1970, Gaudet had received a suspended sentence for igniting an American flag during a presidential visit and throwing it at Mr. Nixon's car. Last month, he was arrested on a marijuana charge and, federal officials said, police found a high-powered rifle in the trunk of his car.

However, the photograph from which the identification was made showed Gaudet with a light partial beard. He now has a full black beard which falls nearly to his chest.

On August 22, when Gaudet finally gave himself up after a chase through the mountains of New Mexico Mrs. Burkhardt retracted her positive identification.

CHARGE

The charge of threatening the life of the president was then dropped.

Gaudet's lawyer, Lillian

Cohen, said it would have been a simple matter for the Secret Service to ascertain that Gaudet, his family and another young New Orleans couple drove out to the commune late in July and had not returned to New Orleans.

Gaudet told his lawyer that when the agents came after him, he didn't understand who they were or what they wanted, and he ran. Gaudet had not even heard about the warrant, his lawyer said. Mrs. Cohen called the episode a "comedy of errors" and, in a letter to the Secret Service, said, "since

you started this, it is incumbent upon your group to clear up this matter."

Coupled with Black Liberation Army worries, the alleged Panther plot and the Gaudet incident were two other 11th-hour incidents that contributed to the decision by the Secret Service to cancel the motorcade.

Late the night before Mr. Nixon's arrival, a police uniform, a badge and nameplate were stolen from a parked car, and officials began to theorize that an assassination plot could include a gunman impersonating an officer. Then a few

hours later, police chief Giarrusso's own car—equipped with a two-way radio—was stolen from the driveway of the chief's home in nearby Algiers.

The key had been left in the ignition.

While police have now ruled out any connection between those two incidents and the alleged Panther plot, no such confidence was being expressed the night before the presidential visit, sources said.

Taken together, all of the incidents convinced the Secret Service to cancel the motorcade.