



The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency

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Pulling the veil off a highly visible yet tight-lipped federal agency, acclaimed scholar Philip Melanson has created the first definitive history of the Secret Service. With 8 pages of photographs, rigorous research and interviews with former White House staffers, retired agents, Service training dropouts, and the first female agent on the presidential detail, Melanson presents the agency's hidden history and examines its role in the headlines of our times. Here are revelations about the assassination of JFK and the shooting of President Reagan, along with threats against other presidents; presidential demands on agents and agency funds (by JFK, LBJ, Nixon, the Bushes, and Clinton); alcoholism, divorce, and burnout among agents; the Service's inexplicable failure to develop a profile of assassins that would facilitate effective prevention; and how the gender gap within the Service has been institutionalized. Assailing the image of a highly professional and apolitical organization, the book examines the pervasive, often detrimental influence that politics exerts on the Service, typified by Kenneth Starr's efforts to use agents' testimony against President Clinton. Melanson also discusses the profound new challenge facing the Secret Service: How to respond in a post-September 11 world, as brazen new assassination methods proliferate. With this provocative study, one federal agency still veiled in secrecy is exposed for all to see. Explosive and revealing, this is the first comprehensive history of one of our government's most shrouded agencies.

The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency Details

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Jeremy says

This book is a brief and cursory review of the history of the Secret Service (330+ pages simply cannot do this agency justice), but that's not what I'm choosing to focus on with this review. Instead, I'd like to comment on the absolutely terrible writing and editing of this book. I found it nearly impossible to read at times, due to overly complex grammatical choices by the author, absolutely terrible editing, and even some sections where the same sentences and paragraphs have been cut and pasted into multiple pages. The author overuses quotes, referencing them multiple times in completely different chapters, relating them to entirely different topics. The last chapter is a commentary and set of recommendations for the Service which (in my opinion) has no place in a historical re-telling of the Service's history. Who appointed the author to the head of the Secret Service restructuring committee?

Although you may (like me) be interested in learning more about the Secret Service, please, do yourself a favor and skip this book. There are far better texts on the topic, and frankly, this one is a waste of your time and money. It certainly was mine.

Paul Lunger says

From 2002, Philip Melanson & Peter Stevens's "The Secret Service" is an interesting read that tells the history of the organization from their founding in 1865 to serve as a way of preventing counterfeiters in the aftermath of the Civil War through their current task in the wake of 9/11. Across over 300 pages we the reader get a chance to understand the formation of the organization & the changes it has gone throughout the years as it's mission has changed. The reluctance of the various presidents over the years to have the protection is examined as well as what it takes to become a member of this group as well as an insight into just what goes on in the minds of the men & women who become these agents. The book itself is based on fact & is done in a way that gives we the reader a chance to examine all facets of the organization. Overall a very well done history & must read for anyone who has an interest in this very unique federal agency.

Lana says

This was a complicated book to review. It started really interesting to me, with a lot of history about the secret service that I didn't know. And I liked (kind of....) the organization, rather than doing a straight up history of the service, in chronological order. But, it was pretty opinionated, with opinions stated as facts. Now that's not a problem if it's a "theory" book, positing an argument and making it clear that this is an argued position about the weaknesses of the service (and, preferably, why that is). Instead, I found this to be an outside look at the service, pointing holes that may or may-not be there, given the incompleteness of public records. It wasn't my favorite read, in the end.

Robert Jones says

It's worth noting from the onset that this book was not what I was hoping for. I wanted information on the Secret Service's history, especially its role in investigating counterfeit currency. I wasn't misled or anything, I just picked this book up cheap in the hopes that the first couple of chapters would have what I wanted. They didn't. After a (very) cursory explanation of the founding and early history of the Secret Service, the book got into the meat and potatoes of what it wanted to discuss: protecting presidents.

This book does a pretty good job of describing how the Secret Service protects presidents. It does so by dedicating each chapter to a different facet, or failure, of the agency's president protecting career. By focusing on how the agency screwed up during the Kennedy assassination, however, it allowed a better understanding of what the Secret Service does (or ought to do!) today.

All in all, it was a better read than I expected, but not quite what I wanted. The history and counterfeiting felt a bit rushed. If you want to learn how presidents are protected, then, you'll want to take a glance.

Patrick Wright says

Very informative book; had some typos and after a while, I concentrated on finding them.

Nancy Shaffer says

Excellent history book. Highly recommend it.

Pete daPixie says

Got hold of this book just because of the name of the author. Melanson had written on the JFK, RFK and MLK murder cases, perhaps the only researcher to cover all three.

The expanded edition of 'The Secret Service' was published in 2005, just before Melanson passed away in 2006.

Much of this history is completely new to me, beginning in the 1860's through to the present, i.e. 2004.

Unfortunately as the 20th century progressed I found the writing a bit of a drag. Also the book becomes a tad repetitious with many typos and poor editing.

Surprisingly, I found a number of inaccuracies on the chapter that covered the Kennedy assassination.

Nothing earth shattering, but certainly odd for someone who had published on this subject previously.

Eric says

I picked this book up from the library because when I saw it I realized I didn't know jack about the Secret Service, other than it protects the president from harm. But everyone knows that - that's nothing special.

So now I know a little more. Is that special? Probably not.

Anyway, I didn't know that the Service is a Civil War creation that fought counterfeiters. It did not protect President Lincoln - it instead was designed to protect the money supply, which is why its home is the Treasury Department. There was a lot of funny money floating around during the Civil War, and the Service put a dent in it.

It didn't begin protecting presidents until the late 19th century, and it did so without any authorization from Congress. Congress didn't want the president protected, because that smacked of royalty or a standing army. Congress did not fully authorize the Service to protect presidents until World War II.

In the meantime, the Service continued to hunt counterfeiters, and also served as an intelligence agency during the Spanish-American war and World War I, and did it quite well. This was before the days of the CIA and even the FBI, so the service was the federal government's only law enforcement agency.

Until the service's protection duties were legal, it often protected presidents, their wives, or their children upon request, without getting the attention of Congress. However, the Service did get the attention of J. Edgar Hoover, who in the late 1920s and 1930s tried to take over the Service and give its unofficial protection duties to his own FBI. But FDR put the kibosh on that. In return, the Service relinquished its counterintelligence duties, with much regret.

The authors go into detail about President Kennedy's assassination, and conclude the Service really botched it. The route was horribly exposed and too slow, which made the President a sitting duck for snipers. When the first shot was fired, the Service driver slowed to a near stop, rather than speeding up and taking evasive maneuvers. This made it easier for Oswald to shoot JFK the second time with the killing shot. The authors quote doctors who believed that the initial wound would not have killed Kennedy, provided he received medical attention very quickly.

In short, the assassination was preventable and should not have happened.

Same with John Hinckley's attempt on President Reagan's life. The Service failed to adequately scan the press club and pick out the obviously out-of-place Hinckley. The rope lines were too close to the President, allowing the assassin to get to within 20 feet for the shots.

However, what saved Reagan's life was the quick reactions of the Service agents. One tackled Reagan into the limo, and the others blocked the president Hinckley from Reagan, willingly taking bullets not meant for them.

What also saved Reagan was luck. At first, Reagan said he was unhurt, then he complained of chest pains and started coughing up blood. The agent with Reagan ordered the limo driver to a Washington hospital. Because of crappy 80s era technology, they could not call ahead to the hospital and let them know an injured president was on the way, so no staff or stretcher were waiting for them. Reagan actually walked into the hospital with a bullet in his lung.

While surgeons rushed to save the president's life, the hospital remained vulnerable to further attack. If Hinckley had been part of a larger conspiracy, his fellow murderers could have killed Reagan in the limo on the way to the hospital or in the hospital itself. The Service did not adequately secure the hospital for several hours after Reagan's arrival.

The book examines the organization of the Service (very complicated for a small agency) and taps into the lives of some of its agents (burn-outs, alcoholics, and so on). It discusses how various presidents reacted to the Service's protection duties (some chafed under it, and others accepted it) and how the Service dealt with problem presidents like LBJ, who often sneaked away from his protection detail and once willfully pissed on a secret service agent. This book makes clear what a classless boor was LBJ.

This is an interesting book, very readable, though the writing isn't spectacular. The authors got hold of some good stuff - much of what the Service does is classified, for obvious reasons.

Bonnie says

The typos, my God, the typos! One of the worst edited books I've ever picked up. And while I learned a lot, I didn't appreciate the snarky attitude the author seemed to take toward the Secret Service. Hard to imagine me not liking snarky, I know, but it seemed very disrespectful of a group of men who put themselves in front of bullets for the President and his family.

Samuel says

The Secret Service is a surprisingly vivid read for a history book. It gives a few interesting inside details about past presidents and their interaction for the secret service, although don't expect to learn any actual secrets of the SS. This book keeps a pretty tight lip on any actual true secrets of how they do things. I think the book could have been condensed somewhat as it repeats a lot of the same information two and sometimes even three times.

I think for depicting the history of the secret service this book does a fairly descent job at that and would be a good first book to wet the appetite of anyone looking to learn more about the organization.

Dave Schoettinger says

As you may be able to tell from the picture, the cover of the hardback is a decades-old photo of trainees learning to ride on the running boards of a moving vehicle. I was intrigued by the photo and found myself staring at it time and time again. Much of the text was less intriguing. The first third of the book is a history of the Secret Service up through the 2002 writing of the book. It includes stories of the various rogues thwarted by the SS (they may not approve of that acronym) and the early directors who shaped the agency's direction. The last few chapters include amusing anecdotes of the merry chases on which agents were lead by Eleanor Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and the Bush twins, among others. The middle was a lot of dry administrative stuff, some of which I am sure is outdated because of changes to the organization since 9/11.

On the whole, I found the book enjoyable and some of the discussion of the need for a massive protective presence for American leaders now seems quaint as such protection now is so common as not to be noticeable.

Donna Herrick says

A fair, balanced, interesting history of the US Secret Service

Jonathan says

I go back and forth between 2 and 3 stars, but it will get 2 stars because there are likely many other books on the subject that are a) more interesting, b) better written, and c) have better information.

The Secret Service did not respond to requests from this author, so the book is from other sources, Freedom of Information Act requests, disgruntled former agents, etc... It is also poorly written with several spelling and grammar errors. In addition, there are copy/paste issues where whole sentences are repeated verbatim, and sometimes in the same chapter. Lastly, a good quarter of the book should be cut out by just writing more concisely.

In the end, there are a few interesting stories but the book is largely a criticism of the entire history of the Secret Service. I did find the first few chapters interesting as they give a historical account of how the agency started and the changes it went through. However, the majority of the book is critical and repetitive. No doubt the Secret Service has made mistakes, but there are plenty of successes.

In my opinion, the book should have had a lot more success stories to balance out the failures of the Secret Service. The author does give the agency its due respect, which it deserves. However, the book is more about the author's opinions of what the agency needs to change.

Lee says

this is the first book I read about the Secret Service and I found it truly intriguing. I think what I found the most interesting about this book was how little we as a society know about what the Secret Service actually does. You also get a lot of very detailed history as this book starts out. It has a way of blending history, and modern-day happenings, to what the Secret Service will evolve into as we now live in a world where terrorism is not far from everyone's mind.

I also never really knew that much about what actually went into protecting the president. In this book you get a clear picture of how protective practices changed over time. Starting with Abraham Lincoln who had really no protection at all to a few agents protecting James Garfield, as well as the assassination of William McKinley, and my favorite the protection of John F. Kennedy and what all was involved to protecting him. Then you have the attempts on Harry Truman at Blair House which I never knew I know I would've been out of order there. Then late 70s and 80s we have attempts on Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. My point in being is you see the chronological side of how the service has evolved.

I also found intriguing that during the Clinton years in the White House there was a few times Hillary swore at her detail. Furthermore, it talked a lot about how the first families and their kids always tried to outsmart the Secret Service. Those stories gave the book its humor and kept you coming back for more.

The book also goes into great detail about what it takes to become an agent and what a life changing experience that can be not only for the agents themselves but the families of the agents. I was also surprised at how in depth the book talked about the mental health aspect of agents and how in till after the Kennedy assassination this was not really an area that was explored.

So for anyone interested in learning more about what the Secret Service does and what is involved in the job. I would say this book is for you. It is one of the few books I have read about government agencies that is for the most part written in plain English.

Clare says

Fascinating - I learned a lot of interesting facts. But several sections could've been made a lot shorter by being less repetitive.

It was very interesting to see the Secret Service's point of view about the Kennedy assassination and the attempted assassination of President Reagan. There were some "juicy details" that kept me reading.

It was fascinating to learn how threats have changed over time and how protective measures have changed accordingly. This was a very satisfying book to have read (even though I started skipping sections during the last half of the book because I was discovering the chapters were repetitive near the end.)
