

The Executive Protection Racket

by Howie Kurtz

The light blue squad cars, looking like regular police patrols to the uninitiated, are a familiar sight in certain parts of northwest Washington. On one corner, two uniformed officers are sitting double-parked outside the all-night "7-11" grocery on Connecticut Avenue, sipping coffee and chatting about the high cost of living. Up the street a bit, a lone officer is shooting the breeze with two diplomatic-looking gentlemen in front of the Lithuanian embassy on 16th Street. And a few blocks away, another patrol car is cruising ever so slowly up the steep hills of Massachusetts Avenue, past the glittering facades of foreign chanceries, its occupants looking vaguely bored.

A closer look reveals that these are not District of Columbia policemen, but part of an obscure yet growing federal force called the Executive Protective Service. The name evokes the presidential guard duty of the Secret Service, of which this outfit is a part, but its beat is the posh residential area which stretches about three miles north and west of the White House. You won't see these officers near the burnt-out buildings and abandoned lots of Shaw, an inner-city corridor still scarred from the 1968 riots, and you won't see them in the slums of Anacostia or southeast Washington. For the official mission of these 900 officers of the Executive Protective Service is to guard not just the White House, but the foreign embassies and ambassadors' residences that are scattered throughout one of the

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city's most affluent neighborhoods.

The inescapable irony is that the nation's taxpayers, many of whom live in high-crime areas without adequate police protection, are paying over \$17 million a year to support a special police force in the one area of the nation's capital that needs it the least. And the program has grown, in typical Washington fashion, without so much as a sideways glance from the legislators who approve the money. "There hasn't been any controversy whatsoever about the organization in the four years that I've been here," says the staff man on the Senate subcommittee that routinely rubber-stamps the EPS budget. "Most members feel it's a job that has to be done," says his counterpart on the House side. The only hint of dispute, predictably, is whether the State Department should take over the force from the Treasury Department, which runs the Secret Service.

The federal government somehow got by with only 250 White House policemen from the days of Warren Harding until 1970, when President Nixon decided to create a more imperial force to look after both his family and the foreign chanceries. There had been a couple of embarrassing incidents in the papers—one ambassador was robbed, another envoy's wife was mugged—and Nixon convinced Congress it was time to extend his law-and-order campaign to the diplomatic community. Six hundred new policemen were added to the force, and at the next White House state dinner, some of them were dressed up in ridiculous-looking chocolate

brown uniforms with white tunics, gold braid, and steeply sloping hats.

The ornate outfits, which are still an embarrassing memory to the EPS, were retired as soon as Nixon was. But the Executive Protective Service has survived intact, except that its name recently was changed to the more awkward Uniformed Division of the United States Secret Service, which doesn't even have a catchy acronym. "We changed the name because the press and public has been confused about our role," says Ken Lynch, a public affairs officer with the Secret Service. "Some people viewed us as a private guard force. We were misunderstood. People just weren't sure why we were out there." But the unit's obscure image, Lynch admits, is somewhat intentional. "We try to be a low-profile agency," he says with a grin. "We don't want to spend a million dollars on PR to pat ourselves on the back."

'Gets Lonesome Out Here'

While you often see the EPS officers driving aimlessly around the embassy area or gabbing with each other on street corners, it isn't because they're especially lazy or incompetent. In fact, they tend to be young, intelligent, and highly motivated people looking for an advanced career in police work. It's just that, well, there isn't that much to *do* on the job. "One of the worst problems they face is monotony," Lynch concedes. "That's why we vary their duties to keep them alert." A few years ago, the officers rotated between shifts of two hours working and two hours off—a cushy routine designed to dispel unnecessary daydreaming. Now they put in a full eight hours, but switch off into squad cars and scooter patrols after standing in front of an embassy for two hours.

It is this "fixed-post" duty, stationed in front of an embassy like some royal British guard, that drives some of them crazy. "It's just a job, but it sure gets lonesome out here sometimes," says one tired-looking officer. "Sometimes

you just wish that something would happen so you could see some action."

The EPS officers have most of the powers of regular D.C. policemen, although they rarely exercise them. The EPS officer must stand his guard no matter what happens. If a burglary is being committed down the block from the embassy, EPS policy forbids him from leaving his assigned post to chase after the burglars. Instead he must radio other EPS officers or D.C. police in nearby patrol cars. EPS officers can make arrests and try to stop any crime committed in their immediate presence, however. In the past year, the force has made arrests for indecent exposure, purse snatching, defacing embassy property, driving under the influence, and assault with a deadly weapon. But these dramatic moments are few and far between, and most of the time is spent waiting for something to happen. EPS officers don't strike fear in the hearts of Washington drivers, who have learned they generally don't give parking or speeding tickets. To top it off, the EPS is not empowered to investigate any crime, even an embassy crime, after it has been committed.

"Boredom is a real problem," says Craig Ash, a veteran EPS officer. "When you first look at the Secret Service, you think of chasing the President around. Then, when you get into the job, the glamor that the media build up just isn't there. If you're standing guard on the midnight shift and no one comes by to say hello for hours—well, that can get very boring."

The officers don't live as dangerously as city cops—none has been seriously injured in the eight years since the service was expanded.

A Blaze of Gunfire

When something finally does happen, it can become a highly publicized incident, particularly if it takes place at the White House. In February 1974, for example, a soldier who flunked out of flight school commandeered an Army helicopter and, after a frenzied airborne chase,

landed on the White House lawn in a blaze of gunfire. But incidents of this kind were handled adequately enough before 1970, when the Secret Service had the security responsibility for the White House.

No Heavy Lifting

The EPS naturally beefs up its patrols during political demonstrations at the embassies, but its main concern is keeping the protestors at least 500 feet from the embassy. Oddly enough, it's usually the D.C. police or the U.S. Park Police, not the EPS, who arrest unruly protestors. "Our job is to protect the embassy," explains Lynch. "We'd only make an arrest if the crowd tried to run into the embassy."

Sometimes an officer will expel an insistent protestor, such as the South Korean priest who refused to abandon his prayer vigil on the lawn of his country's embassy. But it's far more common for EPS guards to assume the role of traffic cop whenever an embassy function threatens to tie up traffic. Every October, for instance, the Iranian embassy holds a big birthday bash for the Shah which never fails to create a massive rush-hour jam for miles along Massachusetts Avenue.

Although EPS officers occasionally ride into Maryland or Virginia to check on ambassadors who have moved to the suburbs, the only other city with an EPS presence is New York, where the service has been guarding some of the more sensitive United Nations missions, such as those of the Middle East countries, on a "temporary" basis since 1973. No one is quite sure why the New York patrol hasn't been made permanent, as EPS admits that it's far more costly to pay the daily expenses, the food and housing expenses, for example, of a "temporary" detail. The inexplicable arrangement has cost the taxpayers as much as \$700,000 a year.

Outside of the boredom, EPS can be an attractive place to work. There's no heavy lifting, the starting salary is \$13,799, and families are eligible for

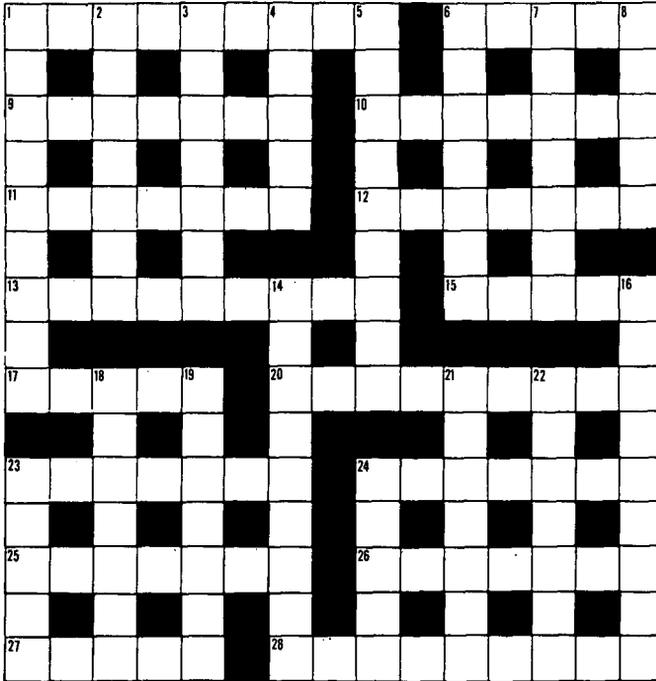
federal health benefits. In addition, EPS officers can retire after 20 years on an extraordinarily lucrative pension plan that's even better than the one for other federal workers (which, in turn, is far superior to the Social Security program that the rest of us are stuck with). The officers get much higher benefits than other federal workers, even though they make lesser payments over a shorter period of time. The General Accounting Office recently blasted the special pension plan as too generous and costly and said it should be abolished.

But the pension plan appears to be getting no more scrutiny than the Executive Protective Service itself. There is obviously a need for extra police protection along Embassy Row, but no one has ever demonstrated why 900 officers are needed in a neighborhood so well off that property values have nearly doubled in the last three years. EPS officials say they're already "strapped" with over 400 diplomatic locations to protect and would like more manpower but are willing to let Congress decide whether or not it's needed. "It's sort of an investment to make the diplomatic community feel safe. The extra protection is just a residual benefit for the people who happen to live in those areas," Lynch contends.

But how much is that investment worth? Most federal agencies try to justify their existence by exaggerating the problems they were created to solve—the Energy Department climbed to Cabinet status with dire warnings about the impending oil shortage, while the National Institute on Drug Abuse paints a grim picture of rising drug addiction at budget time. But EPS officials have taken exactly the opposite approach—they point with pride to the lack of crime in their area as indisputable evidence that the Executive Protective Service is on the job. Whether they could achieve the same results with a less expensive effort is a question that nobody in Washington has even bothered to ask. ■

the political puzzle

by John Barclay



ACROSS

1. New leader makes Hal join up. (4,4,1)
6. Brief seen in daughter's eyes. (5)
9. One's had confusion from these accidents. (4-3)
10. Trial arranged for man before a sport site. (7)
11. Volunteer army on a calm day? (2-5)
12. Fife arrangement with L.A. school is enough. (7)
13. Communist condiment? (3,6)
15. Basketball player or zoo keeper? (5)
17. On solid ground like in bed. (5)
20. Tippy nail shuffled in Michigan. (9)
23. Mortified flesh is ego-

centric. (7)

24. Deer cub doctored in good health again. (2,5)
25. Toner 200 improved joint action. (7)
26. 1977 Goya era exhibition. (4,3)
27. Actions by mischievous pests. (5)
28. St. Louis backers of 1 Across? (9)

DOWN

1. Clearly not a Yankee fan! (6,3)
2. Collected crazy dare in brick carrier. (7)
3. Will establishment bar poet somehow? (7)
4. Startling to find direction input confused. (5)
5. Where girl ends up on H.M.S. Raisin tour. (2,3,4)

6. Correspondence calls for craft, if it can be arranged. (7)
7. Bad weather triumphant, we hear. (7)
8. National symbol in idea gleaned from magazine. (5)
14. Crazy about city chops. (9)
15. It's not fair when they come down? (9)
18. Ice lens produces nothing. (7)
19. Motorists like stream in South Dakota flowing North. (7)
21. 1 Across before he was 1 Across. (7)
22. Take Iran van to absolute state. (7)
23. Belts and hose? (5)
24. Purchaser of smashed Eastern ruby. (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 38.