

McCain: 'No' to Secret Service help

He points to inconvenience, expense to nation's taxpayers

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WASHINGTON - Sen. John McCain of Arizona waded through a crush of strangers at a crowded roadside diner in Florida two weeks ago, shaking hands and posing for photos with admirers and gawkers alike.

That's the kind of scenario that energizes voters but makes Secret Service agents shudder.

McCain, though, has no agents watching over him.

The presumptive Republican presidential nominee, McCain is the only major candidate who is not guarded by a Secret Service detail. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., has lifetime protection as a former first lady, and Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., has had protection since asking for it last year.

"The day that the Secret Service can assure me that, if we're driving in the motorcade and there's a guy in a rooftop with a rifle, that they can stop that guy, then I'll say fine," McCain told reporters late last year. "But the day they tell me, 'Well, we can't guarantee it,' then fine, I'll take my chances."

Although it has been decades since the last attack on a presidential candidate, Secret Service details have become part of the entourage that accompanies most White House hopefuls.

Often seen as a necessary part of modern campaigning, the details can offer an air of legitimacy to a fledgling campaign. By providing security and some transportation, the details can cut down on campaign costs.

But they're also cumbersome and constraining for candidates who want to connect with voters on a personal level.

McCain, who has cultivated a tough-guy image over the years, bristles at what he calls the inconvenience of Secret Service protection and says it's a waste of money.

"It's partly his style," said John Geer, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University. "He wants to be able to dive into a crowd. He derives his energy from that."

McCain's stance also helps explain the inherent conflict that exists between Secret Service agents and the candidates they seek to protect.

"The candidate wants to get as much hands-on exposure with the public, and the Secret Service wants to pull back," said Andrew O'Connell, a former Secret Service agent who is now managing director for Fortress Global Investigations Corp.

But O'Connell, who protected Bill Clinton when he campaigned for president in 1992, says most candidates want the protection.

"You'd think that, in the interest of the party alone, they'd have Secret Service coverage," said Joe Russo, who worked for the federal agency for 20 years, most recently as head of former President Clinton's detail.

Russo, who now works for the security firm T&M Protection Resources, said it's "silly" to expect agents to guarantee they will save your life.

Still, he said, a "lot less could happen when the Secret Service is involved."

Agents began guarding presidential candidates after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, who was fatally shot after winning the California primary in the summer of 1968.

Four years later, Secret Service agents were unable to prevent the shooting of Alabama Gov. George Wallace as he campaigned in Laurel, Md. Wallace, a segregationist in the 1960s, lost his bid for the Democratic nomination and spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. That was the last major attack on a presidential candidate.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat who chairs the House Homeland Security Committee, questioned the wisdom of refusing Secret Service protection.

"The magnitude of this election is greater than any one candidate or party," he said in an e-mail.

Best-known for its protective functions, the Secret Service was created in 1865 to fight counterfeit currency at a time when about a third of the cash in the country was fake, said Ed Donovan, an agency spokesman.

It took the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, long after the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Garfield, for the Secret Service to assume full-time protection of presidents. In 1902, two agents were assigned to guard President Theodore Roosevelt.

The Secret Service has since grown into an agency with a \$1.4 billion budget and 6,500 agents, uniformed officers and support staff. The budget for campaign protection has grown from \$65 million for the 2004 election to \$106.5 million for the upcoming election. The Secret Service began protecting Obama in May, the earliest a presidential candidate has ever received a detail. Clinton, as a former first lady, has had protection from the beginning of her campaign, likely requiring more agents than usual.

Although McCain can opt to go without Secret Service agents as a nominee, he won't have that choice if he's elected president.

"We protect the office, not the person," Russo said.