

McCain Holds Off on Secret Service Protection

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Weeks after clinching the Republican presidential nomination, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) still has no Secret Service protection and has not requested it, the head of the agency told Congress yesterday.

Director Mark Sullivan said the Secret Service does not provide agents, metal detectors, vehicles or other security measures to candidates until they ask for them. McCain's Democratic rivals, Sens. Barack Obama (Ill.) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) have round-the-clock Secret Service coverage.

"Statutorily he is not required to take protection," Sullivan said of McCain, in response to several questions from Rep. Ciro D. Rodriguez (D-Tex.) and Rep. Harold Rogers (R-Ky.). "As far as an actual request, we have not gotten one. We have no involvement at this point."

Rodriguez said he assumed that McCain's status as the presumptive Republican nominee required enhanced security and was surprised that McCain is allowed to campaign in large crowds without Secret Service protection.

"I just assumed that even if someone doesn't ask, that there are certain other levels of protection that are out there," said Rodriguez, who attended yesterday's hearing of the House Appropriations subcommittee on homeland security. "I just assumed that we would normally just do that automatically. . . . He's the nominee of the Republican Party, and we ought to have some levels of protection."

Obama began receiving protection in May 2007, 18 months before the election. Clinton already had protection because she is a former first lady.

Steve Schmidt, a senior McCain adviser, would not discuss the senator's security measures. Another top McCain aide said the campaign is "very unhappy" with Sullivan and wishes "he would have asked to answer [the lawmakers' questions] in a closed session."

White House spokesman Tony Fratto also declined to comment, saying: "We will let the Secret Service answer those questions. They obviously take their protective mission seriously." Jim Mackin, a Secret Service spokesman, declined to comment on why Sullivan made the disclosure in a public hearing.

McCain's choice not to request Secret Service protection has been mentioned on some blogs and was the subject of an article in the Arizona Republic newspaper. But it has not been reported by most news organizations, in part because of requests from his aides not to draw attention to the situation.

McCain does have private bodyguards who accompany him to events. When he travels on charter planes, reporters and staffers are screened by private security each time they board.

On one recent flight in Mississippi, a bomb-sniffing dog swept through the press bus before reporters were allowed to board McCain's Jet Blue charter.

But that level of security pales in comparison with the protection at Clinton and Obama campaign events, where Secret Service agents always are very visible, shadowing the Democratic candidates even when they are at rope lines with voters.

McCain, a former Navy pilot who spent 5 1/2 years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, has long nurtured a tough-guy image. He has derided the Secret Service protection as "a waste of taxpayer money" and proudly proclaimed that he would reject the enhanced security as long as he could.

"It's my intention, if we win this nomination, to reject Secret Service. . . . Why do I need it?" he told reporters in mid-November, as he campaigned in New Hampshire. "The day that the Secret Service can assure me that if we're driving in the motorcade and there's a guy on a rooftop with a rifle, that they can stop that guy, then I'll say 'fine,' " he said. "But the day they tell me, 'Well, we can't guarantee it,' then, fine, I'll take my chances."

Former Secret Service agent Andrew O'Connell, who helped protect Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, said McCain is taking an unnecessary risk.

"I don't think it's a wise move," said O'Connell, now a managing director of Fortress Global Investigations, a New York-based security firm. "John McCain may believe that he's not as polarizing a figure as Hillary or Obama, but that's not the point. . . . The primary motivator of would-be assassins is not the dislike of the candidate. It's wanting to go out in a big way and make a name for yourself."

Once a candidate is elected president, he or she has no choice but to accept Secret Service protection. Until then, it must be requested. Since it became clear that McCain would be the GOP nominee, his advisers have become increasingly concerned about his safety and have urged reporters not to mention the lack of Secret Service protection.

Once a candidate requests protection, the decision about whether he will receive it falls to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. Chertoff is aided by a five-member advisory panel that includes the House speaker and minority leader, the Senate majority and minority leaders and an at-large member, who this year is the House sergeant-at-arms.

To be eligible, candidates must reach certain thresholds in fundraising and in the polls, and must belong to recognized political parties, Sullivan told lawmakers.

The Secret Service is spending about \$38,000 per candidate per day, Sullivan said, and at the height of campaign season later this year expects to spend \$44,000 per candidate each day. The agency has protected candidates at more than 1,000 campaign venues and has put 550,000 people through magnetometers and metal detectors, he said.

In a remarkably active election campaign, the Secret Service's budget for candidate protection is \$85.3 million for fiscal 2008. For fiscal 2009, which begins Oct. 1, it is \$41 million.

"This is going to be the costliest campaign in the Secret Service's history," said Rep. David E. Price (D-N.C.), the subcommittee chairman.

Staff researcher Rena Kirsch contributed to this report.