
The city's murder rate is soaring. And the Secret Service prowls the poshest streets.

Why Washington's Best Cops Walk Its Safest Beat

by Matthew Cooper

Deputy Chief James Barnes is not only the kind of guy you'd want to have a beer with, he's who you want by your side when the guy at the end of the bar draws a knife. Chawing on a toothpick so hard that its 45-degree angle almost touches his salt-and-pepper moustache, Barnes looks like the ex-Marine that he is. Balding, he's a likable black Lou Grant. He calls me "Buddy."

Last month at the headquarters in Washington he showed me some guys he considers pretty tough. We strode out of his spare, large office to the trophy case down the fluorescent-lit hall. "That guy was great," he said, still chawing and pointing to a black-and-white photograph of a stocky 1940s cop, "he was incredible." Moving down the row of trophies, some of which looked like bowling souvenirs, and others that spoke with authority, like silver statues of 1920s-looking patrolmen with their arms cocked in the firing position, Barnes gets to the last plaque, the one with physical fitness awards given to his crew. "Hey, Bill, can you come out here a second," he shouts, and Officer William Knopick responds in about a second. He has that first-day-on-the-beach pale and a build that might pass for a pharmacist's. But he also has his name proudly etched on that plaque, holding most of the records for the 40-49 age group. The guy who sells you Sudafed probably cannot, like Bill Knopick, do 60 push-ups in a minute.

Barnes and Knopick aren't regular cops, they're the exceptional cops of the U.S. Secret Service.

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While it's best known for those inconspicuous agents with Ray Bans, suits, and wires coming out of their ears, the Secret Service also marshals a police force of 985 cops in its Uniformed Division. They drive midnight-blue squad cars and take to the streets in crisp uniforms: white shirt, black pants, yellow stripe down the side. They are a common sight in Northwest Washington where they guard the White House and most of the embassies, consulates, and chanceries under their jurisdiction. They wear badges.

It's an impressive crew. While most police departments administer a physical but once a year, the Uniformed Division makes its officers sweat it out every three months. Compared to other elite federal agents, the Uniformed Division looks good. Its leading marksmen have taken competitions from the Border Patrol, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and other federal law enforcement agencies. At the Secret Service training center, it is the officers of the Uniformed Division who teach the Ray Ban agents how to shoot.

There's just one problem: the best cops in Washington walk the safest beat. The Uniformed Division's mission to protect the embassies literally leaves officers riding shotgun past sleepy mansions in some of the city's best neighborhoods.

For years, Washington's local police force protected the diplomats, just as New York City's police force protects the missions of the U.N., albeit with some federal monies. Only in Washington do federal patrol cars drive past

boutiques with names like Toast and Strawberries and in neighborhoods like Kalorama where the officers of the Secret Service's Uniformed Division are ubiquitous and where a townhouse runs "\$700,000 and up to a lot of million, maybe five," according to Jill Denton, a Washington, D.C. realtor.

As you might expect, other neighborhoods in Washington are a wee bit more boisterous. Drug wars in the worst neighborhoods have pushed the number of homicides in Washington to a ten year high. Last year there were 228 murders. In the first months of 1988, the pace quickened. In Anacostia, Bobby Parker, a 23-year-old, is gunned down mob-style as his car pauses at an intersection. In Mount Pleasant, two women buy it in front of their children, shot down by thugs from a Jamaican narcotics ring. Members of the city council plead with Mayor Marion Barry to send National Guard troops to their wards. So why aren't those top cops where they're really needed?

Leonard Bernstein and the jellyfish

To understand why, you have to go back to 1969 when the Nixon administration proposed scrapping the White House Police, which, since 1922, had managed to protect the executive mansion's grounds with 250 officers drawn from the Washington Metropolitan Police. In its stead, it wanted an "Executive Protective Service" at triple the strength—850 officers—with roughly a quarter of the new troops assigned to stake out the embassies around the city. Those embassies had also been protected by local police.

There was more to the request than Nixon's dreams of an imperial presidency. (Although some of the first White House guards were put in regal brown uniforms with white tunics.) There was genuine fear as well. It was, after all, just two years after the riots that triggered the deployment of the National Guard, not just to the charred 14th Street corridor but to the steps of the Capitol. To those who weren't there, including myself, it is hard to imagine a city under siege. And there were some particularly embarrassing street crimes visited against the diplomatic community. The worst luck seemed to befall the Italian embassy where, on separate occasions, the ambassador was mugged and his butler was rolled for pocket money. The Mexican ambassador joined the Italian ambassador and several others in petitioning the State Department for more protection.

Security needed beefing up, but there was a host of ways to meet that goal, such as providing federal funds to place patrolmen at the most troubled embassies. Options like that were not even mentioned at the obscure hearings of the Subcommittee on Buildings and Grounds of the Senate Committee on Public Works that led to giving the Secret Service nightsticks and badges.

But more was at stake than security. For Republicans it was an easy vote to side with the new president and a back-door way of accomplishing other ends. It's instructive to look closely at that first hearing where Sen. Robert Dole told the head of the Secret Service: "The budget should give you enough to start rolling, which might set an example for some of the foreign countries to add more protection for people in our embassies in 170 countries around the world." How putting guards on affluent Kalorama Road would help our embassy in Karachi wasn't instantly apparent, but Dole seemed to think it would.

For liberals like Sen. Stephen Young, the hearings provided an opportunity to show that Democrats, after losing the 1968 election partly because of law and order issues, were still tough. At the same subcommittee meeting where Dole provided his own rationale, Young did a liberal's pirouette: while praising the 400,000 person anti-war march on Washington and the "fine people on that platform, including my friend Leonard Bernstein," he also took the opportunity to rail against criminals and "judges who have backbones like jellyfish." He ranted, not quite explaining how tripling the White House Police would give the judiciary spine.

To get some idea of how wearing it can be to patrol embassies for the Uniformed Division, stand in front of your house for two hours. Then drive to the supermarket and back home for two hours. Then repeat that four-hour cycle. Twice a day. Every day.

To break up the monotony, the shifts are a mix of two hours of "fixed patrol" (i.e. keeping an eye out for terrorists coming across the lawn) and two hours of moving patrol, either in a squad car (shotgun-equipped) or on a scooter. On a typical night you can see the officers, as I did, poised for hours outside the Turkish embassy. At the Polish embassy on 16th Street they are there into the night. On 17th Street, a gentrifying strip with a pricy Mexican restaurant and a gay steakhouse, a Secret Service squad car has its lights ablaze. Both officers are inside the 7-11. One is subduing a 310-calorie chocolate "Sport Shake;" the

“If you are going to have guards around the embassies just standing around, what’s wrong with them standing around the buildings where the drug pushers are,” asked the city council member.

other is wrestling a magazine to the ground.

It’s amazing that they stay in such good shape. “I try to get here at 7:00 and then I can start work by 9:30,” Barnes said as we toured the top floor gymnasium at the Uniformed Division’s L Street headquarters overlooking what there is of Washington’s downtown skyline. About two dozen officers, men and women, were scattered across the gray carpet moving free weights and Nautilus. In the corner near the rotary torso machine was a VCR and monitor for workout tapes. A four-color pie chart tells what to wear if they want to go out for a run. A lot of the guys have Secret Service T-shirts (available downstairs along with mugs and other souvenirs). Had I the slightest doubt, now I know I’m a wimp. I take only small comfort in the Xeroxed posters near the elevator announcing a seminar for “Fighting Fat.” Officers were told to bring their own brown bag lunches.

Of course, it’s hard to know whether that training pays off. The Uniformed Division won’t disclose a list of the arrests they’ve made. (Top secret, you know.) But it isn’t James Bond. A couple of officers mentioned drunk driving arrests. All mentioned how the Uniformed Division caught the killer of a D.C. police officer—who wisely chose to run across the Dumbarton bridge and past several Secret Service guards at the Turkish embassy.

The Uniformed Division doesn’t make a lot of the arrests you might expect, like demonstrations, which the D.C. police and the Park Service police handle. But then, keeping the D.C. police in the embassy security business seems to violate the rule on which the Executive Protective Service was founded. In 1969, Eugene Rossides, an assistant Treasury secretary, put it eloquently: “There will be no conflict of jurisdiction or duplication of effort, due to the planning which has characterized this effort.”

But there was a double effort last December when a couple of dozen demonstrators gathered at the French embassy to protest that government’s ties to Ayatollah Khomeini. The Uniformed Division was there with three squad cars, the D.C. police two. It’s hard to see why the extra force was necessary. When the South African embassy gets picketed, it is the D.C. police who take the congressmen off in the paddy wagon. When it comes to investigating crimes, the Uniformed Division defers to the local police.

The country club

“Sure, the boredom is there,” Barnes said of the patrols. “It’s something you’ve got to fight against.” That point was underscored by two officers of the Foreign Missions branch whom I spoke with. Dirty blond, with a silver chain, Steve Suter has wrists thicker than my forearms. The son of a police officer, Suter put in seven years as a fireman in suburban Maryland before joining the Uniformed Division in 1975. He said it held other attractions besides the family ties: a 20-year retirement (now 25 years), a good salary (currently \$23,487 to \$33,811), and the satisfaction that comes with being more than a local or state officer. “You go to New York and the police have ripped uniforms,” he said. “People will look at you and ask, and you’ll say that you’re a federal agent.”

When he came to the Secret Service, he was given the training that every officer goes through. Currently, that’s a 17-week mix of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Brunswick, Georgia and the Secret Service’s own academy in Beltsville, Maryland, where officers take courses in everything from “Marksmanship Fundamentals” to the “Effects of Weather Orientation.” They re-enact crises on a Universal Studios ver-

sion of a city block. Up and down "Hogan's Alley," officers have to pick off simu-terrorists without downing bystanders. Suter has been trained as a counter sniper.

Speaking of those long stints on patrol, Suter says that it requires concentration to stay alert. Some officers will take it easier while others will stand guard as if "the next wave is coming over the hill." All the officers I spoke with acknowledged that boredom was a problem. "It's out there," said Tom Mach, raised in both North Dakota and the D.C. area, where his father was an agent with the Customs Service. "You always have it in the back of your mind that there is the threat of terrorism and you remember what you were trained to do."

But there aren't a great many terrorists out there. "The people in that area are very well protected as a benefit of our being there for the embassies," said Inspector James Cottam, the head of the Foreign Missions branch of the Uniformed Division. Like Barnes, he's a huge guy. Like Barnes, he's an instantly likable guy who spends weekends with a youth group run out of his Masonic lodge, the Knights of Pythagoras. And like Barnes, he's got a puppy poster in his office. They both had been with the war zone 11th Precinct in Anacostia before coming to the Uniformed Division. "We called it 'the country club,'" said Barnes. I laughed. Cottam turned serious, looking concerned that I wouldn't get it. "But it wasn't," he said.

Other parts of Washington patrolled by the Secret Service may not be a country club but

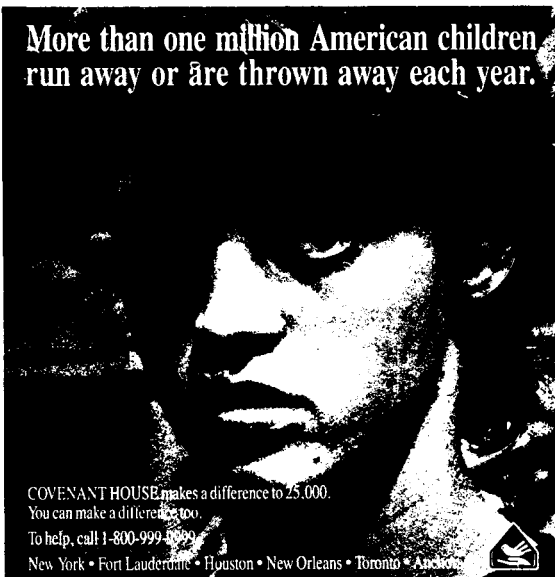
they're safer than where most Washingtonians live. In the 2nd police district, a wealthy enclave that encompasses much of the Uniformed Division's beat, there were five homicides in the first 11 months of 1987; there were 57 in the 7th district in Anacostia. There were ten rapes in the 2nd district; 53 in the 7th. Your basic mugging? There were 303 aggravated assaults in the 2nd district; 959 in the 7th. Obviously, there's the chicken and the nightstick problem. The neighborhoods in the 2nd district surely have less crime because Secret Service officers cover the streets. But any part of town with art deco Thai restaurants is going to have less crime than one with crack houses.

Nixon and the Uzi

The Uniformed Division isn't just out of the line of the city's worst gunfire, it's safe from the political shots that hit most federal agencies. While it seems like a government expense that budget cutters would go after, it isn't. It's too small for cleaver-wielding groups like the National Taxpayers' Union, which has never taken a hard look at the agency. And there's no opposition group to serve as a healthy critic. While most agencies have opponents that will try to put them in a half-Nelson—think of industry and environmentalists keeping EPA in line—no one is on Massachusetts Avenue chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho. The Uniformed Division must be effectively monitored." The diplomats welcome the security. The Reagan administration pumps up the Secret Service budget. This year it's asking for 117 new staff positions.

And the Uniformed Division remains invisible in part because it wants to. Those at the top throw a tarp of secrecy over what seem like less than sensitive matters of national security. I asked a public affairs officer what kinds of cars the patrolmen drive. He replied: "There are four things I can't talk about—manpower, equipment, methods, and cost." This left plenty of room for discussion.

This same government-in-the-sunshine policy extends to what at any other agency would be a promotional item—the in-house magazine. At most agencies, the public affairs officers can't wait to put it your hands. At the Secret Service I was allowed to a look at copies of *Service Star* under supervision. What would the KGB or PLO learn if they stumbled on one of these? Well, they'd spy the reprint from *The Walking Magazine* on how to prevent injuries when you're



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on your feet all day. They'd get the jump on the Secret Service road race (where the start was marked by the fire of an Uzi and the finish monitored by a Park Police helicopter). And they'd see full-page warnings that read: "Eyes and Ears are not renewable resources." They'd be in on the softball picnic reunion of Richard Nixon and the agents who have been guarding him since the fifties.

Of course, there's nothing terrible about extra police protection. And it's hard to work up a lather over a small division of a small agency. But the Uniformed Division is just one of 20 federal police forces in Washington, such as the Capitol Hill Police, with 1,250 officers, and the Park Service Police, which stands at 320. All totaled there are 3,100 federal cops in Washington. The D.C. force itself has only 3,800 officers. A few hun-

dred cops here, a few hundred there, and pretty soon you're talking serious protection. Are they all where they should be?

Some have their doubts. Nadine Winter sits on Washington's city council. Her ward includes much of Anacostia and part of Northeast Washington, including the infamous H Street corridor, a black hole for urban redevelopment programs where three years ago, Catherine Fuller, a working mother of six, was gang raped, sodomized with a metal rod, and then killed in an alley. "We ought to have uniforms in the neighborhood as a deterrent to crime," Winter said. "If you are going to have guards around the embassies just standing around, what's wrong with them standing around the buildings where the drug pushers are? I'm not of the opinion that we can't do better." □

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY Journalism Award

for January 1988 is presented to

Barry Werth *New England Monthly*

Why is college so expensive? Werth found some of the answers at Mount Holyoke, where tuition is \$14,600. That is twice what it was seven years ago. Like the boards of trustees at other schools, Mount Holyoke's adhered to the "Chivas Regal" policy of educational excellence. Changing higher tuition was calculated to make Mt. Holyoke "look aggressive, confident, on the move." But no parent need fear their savings are being squandered. The school has invested \$1.8 million in a state-of-the-art equestrian facility and \$101,000 to refurbish the living and dining rooms of the president's residence.

The Minneapolis Tribune

Why is government so expensive? A team of *Tribune* reporters showed the admirable ways Minnesota's state and local governments spend their money, such as financing the nation's most generous Medicaid program for the poor. But Minnesota also subsidizes the wealthy. For instance, property tax relief is granted to wealthy school districts that float bonds for capital improvement. That subsidy is part of the reason why the leading 10 percent of school districts in terms of spending dropped \$3,413 on capital expenditures and facilities per pupil and the bottom 10 percent spent just \$286. And it is hard to see how the poor are helped in the city of Grove Heights, where municipal workers are paid to shovel the sidewalks of homeowners.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, or radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation.

The award for stories published or aired in February will be announced in the May issue. Nominations for stories published or aired in March will close April 15. The winner will be announced in the May issue. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.