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***[Virginia Prescott] I’m Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today the Secret Service: beyond the suits, sunglasses and earpieces. A number of you have asked about the agency in charge of protecting the President and the first family. Do past presidents still get protected? Can Congress stop paying for Mar a Lago visits? What would the Secret Service do if they caught a president doing something illegal? Well here to help us decode some of these questions is Nicholas Fandos who covers Congress for The New York Times. He's also been reporting on the Secret Service for the past year.***

[Nicholas Fandos] Thanks for having me.

***[VP] You got a view of US Secret Service I mean we don't learn much about them. But first some history, when did the Secret Service get its start?***

[NF] So the Secret Service gets its start actually in in 1865 and it's kind of an interesting story. The night the President Lincoln goes off to the theater and is assassinated he's left on his desk orders for creating a secret service within the Treasury Department to combat counterfeiting and protect the nation's financial system. It is at the end of the Civil War and counterfeiting was becoming a substantial problem for the Treasury. The irony of course is that there was no real presidential protection at that point in time in the Secret Service wouldn't go on to protect presidents for another 40 years or so.

***[VP] Well if Lincoln the assassination did not spur the agency into protecting the First Family. When did that happen?***

[NF] So that doesn't happen until 1991 when there is another presidential assassination this time its William McKinley. And at that point Congress formally request that the Secret Service begin protecting presidents in the intervening years the Secret Service had become actually kind of the elite law enforcement and an investigative body of the federal government. It predates the FBI and in addition to counterfeiting they started investigating everything from naturalization fraud to lynching investigations, land fraud things like that. And so Congress says ‘Hey can you start protecting presidents as well’.

***[VP] Our contemporary image is of the men with crew cuts in suits, sunglasses, earpieces. What are secret service agents doing that we don't see quite a lot.***

[NF] So actually half of the agency isn't involved in protection. Day to Day at all they are responsible for carrying out this mission that dates all the way back to 1865 which is protecting the integrity of the financial system. So there are thousands of special agents scattered in the 100 offices around the country that are working with state and local and other federal law enforcement to counteract financial crimes identity theft child exploitation. There's kind of a whole list of crimes that they can ban. And agents will typically in the course of their career go back and forth between investigations and criminal work like that and protection and the Secret Service says that the two skills help reinforce one another that good investigators are better at protecting because they know how criminals and other deviants work and a lot of protection these days involves doing advance work that in some cases can be highly technical and involved cyber realm to control systems and anticipate threats wherever the president and or other protect these of the Secret Service are going.

***[VP] That's a pretty broad mandate. How many people are in the Secret Service?***

[NF] The latest numbers are around six thousand employees and that's split between special agents who are the suit wearing men and women as well as uniformed division which are kind of like the cops of the Secret Service. And then it's a small subset of civilian personnel. The agency wants to grow that number. In fact thinks it needs to but that's been a difficult prospect.

***[VP] We'll get to that because I think it’s an important question, but first like who becomes a Secret Service agent? You mentioned that there is a pretty diverse group of people and skills that are needed. But I'm wondering who's willing to take a bullet for the president?***

[NF] Yeah it's a good question. The literal answer is I think it tends to be a lot of former state and local law enforcement officials, cops, detectives, former military the Secret Service works a lot with these kind of people and that tends to be the way they recognize talent and will pull them in. But it's a really rigorous process to become particularly a special agent because as we've said it requires a lot of physical endurance. It requires the mental steel to be willing to take a bullet but it also requires you know the mental capability to do cyber work and forensics and the kind of investigations that they also need to do so the Secret Service is really looking for well-rounded individuals and then they've got to make it through basically a grueling weeks long training course. And the acceptance rate into the agency and the graduation rates are appropriately low.

***[VP] And let's talk about the grueling training. You went to Beltsville, Maryland to a facility where they were training Secret Service agents. It's fascinating. I would encourage listeners to go and look at the New York Times article because there are films. What kind of training do they have to get?***

[NF] So it varies for special agents and for uniformed division. But for your typical special agent it's everything from guns and shooting which was an extensive course to control tactics so that's how to essentially control a crowd mitigate threats at close range if you're in a rope line and the president is shaking hands with supporters and supporter grabs on to hard at the Secret Service's job to subtly you know remove the overzealous fan. For those who wish to drive the President or other protect these there's a particular driving course which is trains even high speed and defensive driving or driving big heavy armored vehicles. And so that's a special skill set. But there's also things like every special agent is trained in how to work with reporters.

***[VP] Have Secret Service agents been killed in the line of duty protecting the president?***

[NF] So several have been shot. One has been killed in the line of duty protecting the president and that was in 1950 while protecting Harry Truman who was at Blair House when the White House was being renovated across the street. Since then though there's two prominent cases in which Secret Service personnel who were not in the line of duty but were working in their offices were killed and that's the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11 attacks in Manhattan. The secret services New York field office was actually located in the World Trade Center. And they've lost several agents in that.

***[VP] I want to get to the listener question Sarah. Do former presidents still get Secret Service protection?***

[NF] That is a good question and the answer is yes. It hasn't always been the case but all living former presidents and as long as they're alive their spouses receive protection. This is something that's actually often overlooked. But President Obama and President Clinton for example have a particularly demanding travel schedules and certainly add to the strain of the secret services work having young and active former presidents that are under their protection.

***[VP] Who else gets protected by the Secret Service?***

[NF] So obviously the president and the president's wife and immediate family. The vice president, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, which is what oversees the Secret Service the treasury secretary the department obviously that oversees the Secret Service, the president's national security adviser and chief of staff since September 11th have received protection. Former president as we said, and then it's essentially the president of the United States has broad discretion to decide if additional members of his inner circle should be protected by the agency and that tends to be based on whether or not there are credible threats against their safety.

***[VP] You mentioned the former presidents Clinton and Obama having a demanding travel schedule and that's something that's come up often in the Trump administration and in that listener question: Can Congress stop paying for Mar a Lago visits? But first Nicolas if you don't mind do you have an estimate on how much it costs the Secret Service for this visit?***

[NF] You know that is the million dollar question or perhaps more than a million dollars we are waiting. There are government estimates that are being drawn up right now. The Secret Service itself is loath to put out information like that because they fear what has essentially been happening early in the Trump administration which is a cost associated with protecting the president being turned into a political volleyball. So we don't have a great sense though we know it's expensive. The president travels with a very, very large security detail that has to precede him wherever he goes and is on the ground for days if not weeks preparing for him. They pay for hotels, they pay for rental cars, have to pay to travel on military aircraft. So it gets expensive on long trips. You know you're talking in the millions of dollars and this is something that has been a frequent criticism of President Trump who likes to spend weekends at his properties in Florida or New Jersey or elsewhere that kind of travel is essentially running up costs for the agency. I'm not sure that's exactly a fair criticism. Every president goes on vacation and they should be entitled to it. But the reality is that costs aside it has put a significant amount of strain on the Secret Service and on its agents who have to be staffing all of this travel that's time away from their families, time away from what may be their their day jobs.

As to the listener's question the answer is essentially no. The Secret Service doesn't really have any discretion in what it spends its job is to protect the president. It has a no fail mission. It does what it has to do to make that happen. Generally, Congress has appropriated the money that the agency needs to do that. There's not any precedent for Congress cutting off funds and I don't think particularly with Republicans in control here in Washington that that's a likely prospect.

***[VP] Congress however has called the Secret Service on the carpet for various different things during the Obama administration. I'm thinking there were a couple of White House security breaches. So how is this agency doing in terms of its public profile?***

[NF] It depends on who you ask. The Secret Service would tell you that they are on the mend and on the upswing. But even an upswing acknowledges the downswing and there have been a number of bad years. As you said during the Obama administration when the agency was dealing with a whole bevy of different setbacks some of those were high profile public relations nightmares agents caught with prostitutes in foreign countries, breaches on the White House grounds that appeared to allow intruders dangerously close to the president. These are things that really damage the agency's reputation.

It said Capitol Hill said Congress was investigating. They then turned up more incidents that were kind of further damaging and it's created what is not been a good cycle for the Secret Service which is reputation has taken a hit, which hurts recruiting morale has taken a deep hit. They have the lowest morale of any agency in the federal government. And that in turn has led to a high attrition rate. Folks retire as soon as they can and get out. And so the agency you know today is struggling to build itself back up. I think improve its image improve faith that it's going to do its chief job which was to keep the commander in chief safe. You know there are real questions that continue about the agency's funding during the recession and budget cuts for the federal government a few years ago. It took a hit and has slowly crept back up but the president's travel as we've been discussing and frankly the size of the first family which is considerably larger than other recent administrations has required additional resources.

***[VP] Well I would love to get to that question from a listener what would the Secret Service do if they cut a president doing something illegal?***

[NF] I think the general answer is probably nothing. There is a culture of discretion where the Secret Service does not see itself as ratting out the president or any of its protect these. That being said there are cases in which they could be compelled or subpoenaed to testify in a in a case against one of their protect these. This happened during the Clinton administration and the Lewinsky scandal though. Subsequently there continues to be some debate about whether or not or how they may be called as witnesses. In short though I don't think we're going to see any Secret Service agent you know turning in President Trump for something they've seen and didn't like.