

Stringent Security Set For Obama's Big Day

Past threats and huge crowds pose logistical challenges.

By Greg Gordon McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON - Barack Obama will be sworn in as America's first African American president under the tightest security ever, shielded by a new, heavily armored Cadillac limousine; bullet-resistant glass; fighter planes overhead; and Secret Service SWAT teams toting automatic weapons. The level of protection is no surprise, given that the throng stretching two miles from the west lawn of the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial is expected to be in the millions, and that Obama has already been the target of numerous threats.

Days before he was elected, federal agents broke up an alleged plot by two neo-Nazi skinheads to kill him. On Tuesday, al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader issued a tape blaming Obama for Israel's attacks on the militant Islamist group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

U.S. counterterrorism officials - boasting a daunting array of high-tech defenses, some developed since the Sept. 11 attacks - say they have received no intelligence identifying a specific, credible threat that someone will attack during the inauguration.

Still, the event poses a massive challenge for the Secret Service and 10,000 officers from more than 100 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, "in part because of the large numbers of people converging" on Washington, retired Secret Service agent Robert Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez, a former SWAT team leader who guarded four presidents over 22 years before he retired in 2004, said he also thought that the risk of harm to the nation's first black president "is greater, because, unfortunately, I believe there is still active prejudice in our nation."

He said the Secret Service began protecting Obama in the fall of 2007 - the earliest ever for a presidential candidate - because, he assumed, of "the intelligence and the threat level."

Jack Tomarchio, recently retired as Homeland Security deputy undersecretary for intelligence and analysis operations, said a black president could incite "a whole new cast of weirdos, like white supremacists or other people that might have a grudge against him purely because of his ethnic background."

The Secret Service, which has mushroomed from 325 agents in 1981 to about 3,500 today, has demonstrated time and again its ability to safeguard presidents, vice presidents and other dignitaries at inaugural events. No would-be assassin has harmed a president since 1981, when drifter John W. Hinckley Jr. shot Ronald Reagan outside a Washington hotel.

The biggest risk might surround those massing on the National Mall, where no inaugural tickets are required and spectators can watch and hear Obama's swearing-in and inaugural address on huge video screens.

Law enforcement officials have said that everyone will be checked on entering the mall, though they have yet to say to what extent.

"How do you search all of these people?" asked one retired Secret Service agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of security work. "If a suicide bomber or

two or three got loose in that crowd, God only knows what would happen."

Even a smoke bomb could cause spectators to try to flee in panic, the former agent said, heightening risks that people could be trampled.

Since the inauguration has been designated a National Special Security Event, the Secret Service is responsible not only for the safety of Obama and Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., but also "for protecting everybody in attendance," agency spokesman Malcolm Wiley said.

Security preparations have been under way for months, with agencies drawing plans for protecting the airspace over the city, the Capitol grounds, the mall and the parade route. The Secret Service and local transportation officials have said that more than 60 streets, highways and bridges to Virginia will be closed or limited to official vehicles on Inauguration Day.

U.S. borders "will be probably at a heightened state of scrutiny" in the days leading up to the event, said Tomarchio. "Certainly, everybody's going to be paying a little extra-special attention to the terrorist watch list, to high-interest individuals that may attempt to transit our borders during this time."

Obama will wear bullet-resistant clothing, speak behind a protective glass shield, and ride in the parade in the armored limo, with doors and windows so thick that he probably would survive a bomb blast, law enforcement officials said.

Trailing his car will be black vans loaded with SWAT and counterassault teams, high-speed communications equipment, and electronic devices that can jam the detonators for homemade bombs.

Wiley said Secret Service agents had surveyed every building along the cordoned-off parade route, which like the Capitol grounds will be limited to ticket holders. Snipers will be on roofs and balconies along Pennsylvania Avenue, their eyes joining surveillance cameras in scanning to ensure that every window is closed and that no one threatens the new president.

Under such security, Rodriguez said, "adversaries may look for a more opportune time to harm the president."