

THE UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE AGENT

Age: Forties



Photograph by Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times/Redux

Let's face it: The audacity of hope is about to be tested by the tenacity of fear. Yes, it's amazing to witness the historic, anything-can-happen triumph of Barack Obama's 21st-century march on Washington, but if you're old enough to remember the black-and-white flicker of mid-20th-century TV footage you know that the concept "anything can happen" is precisely what we need to be worried about. As America's first black president-elect, Obama is a walking provocation to racists everywhere. Maybe for a while you had faith that the country was past all that—but then you heard [those voices from the rabid mob](#) barking "Kill him!" at Sarah Palin's and John McCain's rallies, and instantly the ghosts of JFK and RFK and MLK and Malcolm X began to float on the horizon. "Some idiot out there's going to put a bullet in that silver-tongued devil and then there'll be a race war," Thomas Stevenson, an Atlanta carpenter, told the *Roswell Beacon* in late May—which inspired an illustration featuring Obama in the crosshairs of a rifle. And it wasn't just "real Americans" like Tom the Carpenter who provided revealing blurts from the collective subconscious. Doris Lessing, the Nobel laureate, mused to a Swedish newspaper, "Obama would certainly not last long, a black man in the position of president. They would murder him." All of which means that a tremendous burden rests on the blue line of Barack Obama's security detail. These nameless suits with their aviators and earpieces—the men who've guarded code name "Renegade" since he reluctantly accepted Secret Service protection in May 2007—are suddenly the only thing standing between the free world and catastrophe. They've already managed to stop a few

of the drooling children of *Deliverance*: the [Colorado meth addicts](#) who spewed racist rants at the DNC, [the 24-year-old Ohioan](#) who loitered outside Obama's hotel with a knife, the [skinheads from Tennessee and Arkansas](#) who planned to take out the senator and 102 other African-Americans. As of late October, the Secret Service says, there had been more than 500 threats made to Obama's life, and as for more attempts, it's probably only a matter of time. The danger to President Obama will always be clear and present. "I'm pretty familiar with the history," Obama told the *New York Times* in February. "But neither Bobby Kennedy nor Martin Luther King had Secret Service protection." We're familiar with the history too, and that's why we think these agents hold the most power in the world right now: Only they can keep the past from repeating itself.

