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Political Memo

In Painful Past, Hushed Worry About Obama

By [JEFF ZELENY](#)

DALLAS — There is a hushed worry on the minds of many supporters of Senator [Barack Obama](#), echoing in conversations from state to state, rally to rally: Will he be safe?

In Colorado, two sisters say they pray daily for his safety. In New Mexico, a daughter says she persuaded her mother to still vote for Mr. Obama, even though the mother feared that winning would put him in danger. And at a rally here, a woman expressed worries that a message of hope and change, in addition to his race, made him more vulnerable to violence.

“I’ve got the best protection in the world,” Mr. Obama, of Illinois, said in an interview, reprising a line he tells supporters who raise the issue with him. “So stop worrying.”

Yet worry they do, with the spring of 1968 seared into their memories, when the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and Senator [Robert F. Kennedy](#) were assassinated in a span of two months.

Mr. Obama was 6 at the time, and like many of his admirers, he has only read about the violence that traumatized the nation. But those recollections and images are often invoked by older voters, who watch his candidacy with fascination, as well as an uneasy air of apprehension, as Democrats inch closer to selecting their nominee.

Mr. Obama has had Secret Service agents surrounding him since May 3, the earliest a candidate has ever been provided protection. (He reluctantly gave in to the insistent urging of Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#), Democrat of Illinois, and others in Congress.) As his rallies have swelled in size, his security has increased, coming close to rivaling that given to a sitting president.

His wife, Michelle Obama, voiced concerns about his safety before he was elected to the Senate. Three years ago, she said she dreaded the day her husband received Secret Service protection, because it would mean serious threats had been made against him.

Among friends and advisers, danger is something Mr. Obama rarely mentions.

“It’s not something that I’m spending time thinking about day to day,” said Mr. Obama, who has been given the Secret Service nickname Renegade, a way for agents to quickly identify him. “I made a decision to get into this race. I think anybody who decides to run for president recognizes that there are some risks involved, just like there are risks in anything.”

Not long ago, his advisers worried that some black voters might not support his candidacy out of a fierce desire to protect him. It was a particular concern in South Carolina, but Mr. Obama said he believed the worry was also rooted in “a fear of failure.”

Now that he has won a string of primaries and caucuses in all corners of the country, and built a coalition of black and white voters, failure would seem to be less of an issue. The fears, however, remain.

Representative Bennie Thompson, Democrat of Mississippi and chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, raised concerns in a letter in January to officials who oversee the Secret Service. While Mr. Obama was already receiving protection, Mr. Thompson said that the intense interest in the election prompted him to make sure that Mr. Obama and the other candidates were offered adequate security.

“The national and international profile of Senator Barack Obama gives rise to unique challenges that merit special concern,” Mr. Thompson wrote. “As an African-American who was witness to some of this nation’s most shameful days during the civil rights movement, I know personally that the hatred of some of our fellow citizens can lead to heinous acts of violence. We need only to look to the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and 1968 presidential candidate Robert Kennedy as examples.”

In an interview, Mr. Thompson declined to elaborate on any specific threats that had come to the attention of his committee or authorities. He said he wrote the letter to the [Homeland Security Department](#) without discussing it with Mr. Obama, whom he has endorsed.

“His candidacy is so unique to this country and so important that the last thing you would want is for him not to have the opportunity to fulfill the role of a potential presidential nominee,” Mr. Thompson said. “It’s out of an abundance of caution that I wrote the letter, rather than keep our fingers crossed and pray.”

Before Mr. Obama decided to run for president, he discussed his safety with his family. His campaign employed a team of private security guards before he was placed under Secret Service protection. Since then, he has grown fond of the agents who surround him, inviting them to watch the [Super Bowl](#) at his home in Chicago and playing basketball with them on the days he awaits the results of an election.

Mr. Obama was reticent in speaking about his security or the period in American history that is often raised — without prompting — by voters who are interviewed at campaign events. Mentions of the fate that befell President [John F. Kennedy](#) and Senator Kennedy only increased after Mr. Obama was joined on the campaign trail by [Caroline Kennedy](#) and Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#) of Massachusetts.

“I’m pretty familiar with the history,” Mr. Obama said. “Obviously, it was an incredible national trauma, but neither Bobby Kennedy nor Martin Luther King had Secret Service protection.”

Indeed, the assassination of Senator Kennedy in 1968 prompted Congress to authorize protection of major presidential and vice presidential candidates. In this campaign, Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) of New York has had Secret Service protection from the beginning, because she is a former first lady. None of the other candidates had protection during their primary campaigns.

“Some candidates are bigger targets than others — any transition candidate or change candidate has a higher profile,” said former Senator [Gary Hart](#), who received protection as a Democratic presidential contender in 1984 and 1988. “The evocation of the same excitement surrounding John and Robert Kennedy triggers both negatively and positively.”

The Secret Service does not discuss details of its protection, including whether Mr. Obama is receiving more protection than Mrs. Clinton.

[Gerald Posner](#), author of books on the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. King, said he did not believe that Mr. Obama was under a significantly higher risk than President Bush or Mrs. Clinton. The fears are more openly discussed, he said, because he is the first black candidate to come this close to winning a major party’s presidential nomination.

“Barack scares those of us who think of the possibility of an assassination in a different way,” Mr. Posner said. “He represents so much hope and change. That is exactly what was taken away from us in the 1960s.”

Here in Dallas, those memories were raised in conversation after conversation with several of the 17,000 people who came to see Mr. Obama at a rally last week.

“Right around the corner is the John Kennedy Memorial; everyone all around me was talking about it,” said Imogene Covin, a Democratic activist from Dallas. “In the back of my mind, it’s a possibility that something might happen because he’s something to gawk at right now. But you know why I think he will be safe? He has a broad range of people behind him.”

That afternoon, Mr. Obama’s motorcade passed Dealey Plaza and the Texas Book Depository building, where the fatal shot was fired at President Kennedy in 1963. Several campaign aides looked out their windows, silently absorbing the scene.

Not so for Mr. Obama, who later said he had not realized he was passing the site. And no one in his car pointed it out.

“I’ve got to admit, that’s not what I was thinking about,” he said. “I was thinking about how I was starting to get a head cold and needed to make sure that I cleared up my nose before I got to the arena.”