

In the line of fire

A Secret Service agent blows the whistle on his agency and winds up the target of investigators

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

Carter Kim has spent nearly two decades chasing bad guys. The former Honolulu cop and 18-year Secret Service veteran earned top reviews and cash awards of some \$13,000 for his work busting counterfeit and forgery rings. He served on the elite presidential protective detail. Today, he's the subject of an internal Secret Service investigation.

Kim's case is a doozy. The charges range from lost evidence to sloppy fieldwork to coverups. It could lead to the end of a top officer's career. But it could also besmirch the reputation of the historic Treasury Department agency best known for protecting the life of the president. In the past few years, the role of the Secret Service has grown enormously, to include high-profile missions like security operations for the Super Bowl and the Olympics in Salt Lake City. But the higher profile has brought embarrassment. At the Olympics, agents left plans for protecting Vice President Dick Cheney at a souvenir shop. The service also is fighting a federal discrimination lawsuit filed by more than 250 African-American agents. And now, *U.S. News* has learned, the service is embroiled in a controversy involving its trademark mission: investigating counterfeiting.

That was the work Kim performed, as head of criminal investigations, at the Secret Service field office in Las Vegas—and which led the 43-year-old Korean-American to file an Equal Employment Opportunity lawsuit in March. He's charging that the agency discriminated against him because of his race. Spokesman Mark Connolly said the agency would not comment on a pending case. At the heart of the matter—according to interviews and Kim's three sworn statements to the Secret Service Equal Employment Office, the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, and the Secret Service inspection division—is his charge that the Secret Service mis-

treated him after he blew the whistle on an alleged coverup of missing evidence in the Vegas field office.

In his filed EEO complaint, Kim says that he told his boss, Special Agent in Charge Joseph Saitta, that security for the office's evidence vault was lax. Entry logs, which tracked access to the vault, were incomplete. The vault was left unlocked at night. Kim had complained of other security lapses for three years. "The office was crashing and burning," says Kim. For example, he claims that STU-keys—classified encryption devices inserted into secure telephones—were rarely locked up.

In November, the Treasury Department's inspector general alerted the Las Vegas office that an audit was imminent.

Kim alleges in his EEO complaint that Saitta told the agents not to volunteer information because "we have a one-voice policy" and Saitta was that voice. Saitta declined to comment for this story, saying he was unfamiliar with the complaint. Kim charges in a signed sworn statement before three Secret Service in-

spectors that, as the agents prepared for the audit, Saitta told him to create fictitious documents to hide the gaps in the entry logs. Kim says he obeyed reluctantly. "The general culture of the Secret Service is you don't tattletale on your boss," says Kim. He says he made sure the fake logs were never used.

Faking it. More problems were discovered: Counterfeit money, turned in by Vegas banks and casinos, went missing. Also missing were items from a "speech kit"—including fake money—that agents use to teach casinos to spot forgeries. Kim alleges, in his statement to inspectors, that Saitta told an agent to mark the missing items from the speech kit as destroyed. Even evidence seized from forgers and counterfeiters—a laptop computer, keyboards, and computer peripherals—couldn't be found. Kim charges in the discrimination complaint that Saitta ordered agents to scour the office for substitute equipment that could pass for evidence—and that Saitta even joined in the search. Before the audit, Kim, on his own initiative, says he ordered an agent to remove all the fakes. Even so, the audit found problems with the handling of evidence. Afterward, Kim set about trying to correct them.

End of story? Not quite. When the Secret Service's internal-affairs division visited Las Vegas in March for a routine inspection, Kim says he blew the whistle. A few weeks later, as Kim was preparing security arrangements for a visit to Las Vegas by former President George Bush, he found inspectors waiting for *him*. Kim says the agency is trying to nail him for the alleged coverup. "They took away my badge and my gun," says Kim. Kim was placed on administrative leave. Saitta has retired with full benefits. "Here's a guy who tried to do the right thing, and he's the one they're hanging," says Ronald Schmidt, one of Kim's attorneys. Kim says he deeply regrets joining the Secret Service. "I never ever thought my career would end like this." |



CONTROVERSY. Secret Service agent Carter Kim says his office lost evidence and tried to cover up its mistakes.