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Security At Vatican City State

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Vatican Security

As world leaders converge on Rome for the Papal funeral on Friday, the question of Vatican security will be high on the Holy See's agenda. This will be especially so given the presence of President George Bush – the first US president to attend a papal funeral – at Friday's ceremonies. Bush's visit has been flagged well in advance and will involve his attendance at a highly visible and choreographed set of ceremonies to which hundreds of thousands of mourners will have access.

This combination of factors places the US president within a predictable itinerary in proximity to large 'un-vetted' crowds of civilians within a confined space. In short, President Bush's visit will pose a considerable security challenge for the US intelligence community and especially for his close protection detail. In light of the international terrorist threat posed by groups such as Al Qaeda, who have a penchant for striking during sensitive religious ceremonies – such as during the Shia Ashura celebrations in Iraq and Pakistan over the last two years – the US presidential party will have to rely on close co-operation with the Vatican's security services in order to guarantee the president's safety.

In terms of internal security the Vatican - an autonomous independent state - has its own army in the form of the Swiss Guard. Consisting of approximately 100 men, the Swiss Guard is normally associated with its striking Medici-designed uniform, renaissance helmet and mediaeval halberd – a large axe-like weapon carried during ceremonial duties. Trained in the Swiss armed forces these troops will assume a high profile role during the funeral ceremonies in the coming days.

Those not employed in ceremonial duties will assume special security duties throughout the Vatican with a particular focus on the Apostolic Palace, the Papal Apartment and on the four main entrances to the city-state. Radically reorganised and re-equipped since the assassination attempt on the Pope by Ali Agca in 1981, the Swiss Guard are armed for such security duties with state of the art Swiss Sig Sauer automatic pistols and Heckler and Koch machine pistols. They also wear unobtrusive, conventional military fatigues whilst on such duties.

The primary responsibility for security within the Vatican over the coming weeks will rest however with the Holy See's police force or Servizio di Vigilanza. This highly secretive and highly trained security force liaises closely with the Italian police and intelligence community to ensure an integrated and highly co-ordinated approach to Vatican security at all levels. In this regard, the Vigilanza are overseen by the Vatican's Deputy Secretary of State or 'Sostituto' with responsibility for the curia and internal affairs of the city-state. The Sostituto in turn liaises directly with the Vatican's Foreign Minister who enjoys a healthy relationship with the US Central Intelligence Agency.

This close relationship was fostered by the Reagan administration following Pope John Paul's election as pontiff in 1978. Recognising the enormous potential of John Paul the second for facilitating the liberation of millions of eastern Europeans from the yoke of the Soviet Union, the US was anxious to promote closer ties with the Polish pope. Indeed, at

the time, President Reagan appointed the first US ambassador to the Holy See for over 100 years. The US administration also kept up pressure on the Soviets to back down on a perceived threat to invade Poland at a time when Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement was at its zenith.

The hard-line Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev visited Poland on the day that Mehmet Ali Agca attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul in 1981. There is some evidence to support the view that the assassination attempt was a KGB inspired plot to rid the Soviet Union of a papacy that threatened the fragile stability of Soviet controlled Eastern Europe. In an act of realpolitik, the US fostered ever-stronger ties with the Vatican. Those ties, forged at the beginning of Pope John Paul's reign are most likely those which will serve to ensure President Bush's security in the Vatican at the end of a remarkable Papacy on Friday.