

# Obamamobile draught

*by*

David Szondy

In 2009, all eyes are turned to Washington DC. With eager anticipation, the people of the world are looking forward to a new era of change complete with leather seats, though the number of cup holders is classified.

Yes, the White House is getting a new presidential limousine and it's a cool car.

Oh, and there was that election thing and a new president, but we have to stay focused on priorities here.

The Secret Service is notorious about revealing as little as possible about how they protect the President. They wouldn't even give the keys to the Clinton presidential limo to the curator of the Clinton Library where it's now kept. News of the new limousine only broke when a professional motor car “spy” on the lookout for new models spotted a very unusual car on a test track. It wasn't quite finished yet, but its general design was that of a Cadillac limousine—a Cadillac built along the lines of a truck and bearing a strong resemblance to the current Cadillac presidential limousine known informally as “Cadillac One” and by the Secret Service as “The Beast”. The real give away, aside from the presidential seal inside the rear passenger's door, is that the usually flat door handles were replaced by loop types from a Buick Le Sabre that the Secret Service favour because they give more leverage for opening the door. And the door on the president's limo can be a bit on the heavy side.

US presidential limousines have come a long way since Teddy Roosevelt rode around in a White Steamer. Where the first cars used by the White House were standard production Whites, Pierce-Arrows and even a Baker electric, modern US president's limos are less cars than comfortable tanks with lots of optional extras. They're not exactly the sort of cars James Bond would choose (Not nearly sporty enough and no ejector seats) and Batman wouldn't look at them twice, but an American president's car is more than just a luxury job with a TV and a bar—even if presidents rarely go chasing after the Joker.

The reason for all the weight is armour plating. The early presidential limos were either production cars or special jobs designed to be big, open-top cars suitable for public appearances. But after the United States entered the Second World War, it was felt that the President needed more protection and the Secret Service provided the first armoured limo. Oddly enough, they didn't have to order one special because they already had one in stock, courtesy of the gangster Al Capone, who'd had an armoured limousine built for himself due to the occupational hazards of being a Chicago mob boss and was seized by the Department of Treasury after Capone's conviction for income tax evasion. It was a matter of waste not, want not, so after the attack on Pearl Harbour, Al Capone's car became President Roosevelt's.

As to what is in President Obama's car, the Secret Service and GM aren't saying no matter how nicely they're asked, but we can take some pretty good guesses based on three things: What we can see, what previous presidents rode in, and what other armoured car aficionados are driving.

The obvious thing about it is that it's big. That's big as in massive. If you think that the Batmobile from

*Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* is a heavyweight, think again. It only weighs in at 2.5 tonnes. By estimate, the Obamamobile is twice that at five tonnes. That's not surprising, because every inch of the car is covered in 12.7 cm of armour. The armour may be steel plate, though it is more likely to be an advanced composite designed to stop anything from a high velocity sniper bullet up to and including a rocket grenade or a road mine. The windows haven't been forgotten either. When the doors are open, you can see that the windows are made of 12.7 cm of armour glass. That means, like on previous presidential limos, they can't open. On the other hand, if GM followed the lead of other armoured limo designers, the windscreen can be pushed out from the inside for an emergency exit.

If the Obamamobile looks a bit boxy and truck-like, that's because it started life as a truck; a GM 2500, to be exact. And the wheels are oversized to take 49.53 cm Goodyear Regional RHS truck tyres, though when it goes into service, the Obamamobile will certainly use special run-flat tyres that have a solid ring of rubber inside them to allow for speedy escapes even after the tyre's been shot out. The Obamamobile won't be a supercar and it will handle like a, well, a five-tonne armoured car, but it won't be slow. If it's like its predecessor, it will sport something along the lines of a 12-cylinder engine (probably a diesel) and be capable of hitting up to 241 kph.

Also, if its predecessors is anything to go by, the Obamamobile will have little flag holders on the wings complete with spotlights to illuminate them, a raft of antennae on the boot, fog lights, a mini desk, and seating for the President and six others. Oddly enough, it won't have a super computer/hotline/telephone/boyscout with a pair of semaphore flags system to keep the President in touch, because his motorcade already includes a complete communications centre.

One thing the Obamamobile will certainly have is a really good air conditioning system. That may sound trivial, but until the 1960s American presidential limousines had bubble tops and removable roofs. This was partly to give the public a better view of the President and mainly because if there was an air conditioner, it was so poor that on a warm day with the top on it was like a sauna inside. Unfortunately, without the top on, the President is nothing more than a slow moving target and after the tragedy of the Kennedy assassination in 1963 the days of the open top presidential limo were gone forever and the air conditioning had to be upgraded to avoid poaching the chief executive.

To fill out our picture of the Obamamobile, we have to look beyond the Secret Service motor pool. It isn't only American presidents who need armoured limos. The British government recently bought ten high security versions of the BMW 760 to cart Gordon Brown and high-ranking ministers about. Along with other companies, BMW markets security versions of its cars to governments and individuals who fear assassination or kidnapping; and where the American Secret Service is a bit tight lipped, BMW puts out glossy brochures that lay out all the features to the prospective customer, which is a big help in figuring out what the Obamamobile might have on board.

Like American presidential Limousines, the BMW 760s use overlapping armour plating capable of withstanding a 15 kilogramme bomb, though the bulletproof glass is thinner than in the Obamamobile. Along with its oversized 12-cylinder engine, it also has a remote door lock and engine start device that allows the driver to start the car or unlock it from 150 metres away in case there are any bombs wired to the vehicle. In addition, and this is very likely to be included in the Obamamobile, the BMW 760 has chemical sensors that can detect poison gas and seal the vents of the car instantly while an oxygen system kicks in to provide breathable air. Since the armour glass windows can't open, and you probably wouldn't want to do so anyway, the car is equipped with external microphones and speakers for passing through checkpoints. And last, but not least, there is a neat little James Bond touch of a smoke generator for those quick escapes when the bullets start to fly.

Of course, the BMW 760 doesn't have one feature that the Obamamobile will certainly include: A fluorescent lighting system to compensate for all that light-eating armour glass so that the President is

visible to the crowds as he drives by.

However, there's more to the Obamamobile than neat technology. Riding around in a posh tank may seem safe enough, but the most vital piece of safety equipment is still the person behind the wheel without whose skill all that armour could quickly change from a fortress to a death trap. You might think that what you need to chauffeur the President around is a sort of tame racing driver, but security driving expert Tony Scotti points out, security driving and race driving are two very different animals:

*When entering the corner, the racer knows the radius of the turn and speed at which that corner can be driven through, he has practised it, probably experimented with it, and talked it over with other drivers. Depending on the level of racing the car has an on-board computer, the racer looked at the computer data, discussed it with the engineers and then goes back out and does it over and over always comparing it to the last time he drove through the corner.*

A security driver, on the other, hand has to be ready to deal with the unexpected. A racing driver may be highly trained, disciplined, and alert, but you don't expect a lorry to appear out of nowhere in the middle of the track or bullets to start pinging off the roof—at least, not at the more reputable race courses. That's why security driving courses involve more than how to turn into a skid or slalom between traffic cones. The security driving student's practice sessions involve having masked men suddenly jumping into the road and firing paint balls or learning to cope with a flash grenade flying through the air. It's a very different world where making a lane change can turn into avoiding another car trying to ram you , being boxed in by three other cars trying to set up an ambush, and discovering that calculating the cars stopping time takes second to figuring out its escape time.

Of course, a civilian security driver usually has to handle such situations alone. The driver of the Obamamobile, on the other hand, has a bit more help to draw on. Not only is there a complete Secret Service detachment riding with the President, but the motorcade also includes an unassuming black GMC Suburban SUV. It may not look like much, but in the event of an attack on the President, the Suburban exhibits a feature that you won't find down the dealers. In an instant, the roof of the Suburban opens up and up pops a turret mounting a Dillion Aero M134D electric Gatling gun capable of firing up to 4,000 rounds per minute. That's 114 kilogrammes of bullets headed the bad guy's way at a speed that would turn, for example, a late-model Bentley Coupé into a Brillo pad.

All in all, the Obamamobile and all that goes with it is a pretty impressive piece of machinery which, unfortunately, will never see its way into a museum. The Secret Service no longer gives old presidential limousines to museums after they retire. They prefer to keep them for training, testing, and target practice after which they'll probably be broken up or dumped in the sea. That's a bit of a pity, because even though we can deduce a lot about the various features of the President's car, we certainly don't know it all. What other optional extras does the Obamamobile conceal? What technological marvels protect the person of the American President? We can't say for sure, but don't be too surprised if one evening you turn on the news and see footage of Barack Obama being raced from an assassination attempt by some remarkable innovation.

After all, if there's an Obamamobile, can the Obamapod be far behind?