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Friday at White House, ‘one after another unit failed’

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As an intruder sprinted for the White House door Friday, a Secret Service officer ran to get in his way — but the intruder barreled past the officer and kept going, officials familiar with the incident said Tuesday.

A few yards farther on, the intruder, Omar Jose Gonzalez, reached the White House door. A guard was supposed to be posted directly in front, but no one was blocking the door at that moment.

Those new details help explain how the Secret Service’s plan for guarding the White House — which envisioned five different rings of protection between the public sidewalk and the president’s front door — failed so completely.

A plainclothes surveillance team was on duty that night outside the fence, meant to spot jumpers and give early warning before they made it over. When that team didn’t notice Gonzalez, there was an officer in a guard booth on the North Lawn. When

that officer couldn’t stop him, there was supposed to be an attack dog, a SWAT team and a guard at the front door — all at the ready.

But the attack dog wasn’t released.

The SWAT team, which didn’t react in time, was trailing Gonzalez as he dove through some bushes ringing the White House’s front entrance.

And when Gonzalez reached the door, he found his path clear and the door unlocked.

“One after another unit failed,” said a former high-ranking Secret Service official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe White House security protocols. “This guy has now crossed 70-some yards of restricted area. If he has [an explosive] device on him and he gets in, he controls the White House. He could have anything on him.”

Inside, Gonzalez was subdued by a plainclothes agent — the sixth ring of security that night. That agent’s job is to patrol a place that intruders are never supposed to reach: the interior of the



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The Secret Service has installed temporary fencing about eight feet in front of the wrought-iron fence on the north side of the White House. For more photos of White House security measures, as well as a video about the Belgian Malinois attack dogs, visit washingtonpost.com.

executive mansion.

Questions for agency

Gonzalez, 42, did not express an intent to harm anyone at the White House. He was carrying only a folding knife, authorities say, and said he wanted to warn President Obama that the “atmosphere was collapsing.”

But the fact that he breached the White House’s legendary security perimeter — and did it using the unsophisticated method of jumping the fence and running for the door — has raised serious questions about the

Secret Service’s preparation.

The agency is conducting an internal review of the incident. Officials will also face questions from the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee at a hearing next week.

Secret Service spokesman Ed Donovan declined to describe the details of Gonzalez’s path. Asked about the criticism that the system failed at several levels to stop the intruder, Donovan said it was not appropriate to respond during an ongoing internal review.

“Any conversation prior to the

completion of the review is speculation or merely erroneous judgments provided by anonymous sources who are not in a position to know all the facts and whose experience and level are unknown," Donovan said.

Already, Friday's intrusion has altered the look of the White House grounds. Monday evening, the Secret Service put up a second fence along the mansion's north side. About eight feet in front of the White House's iconic, 49-year-old wrought-iron fence, there is now a line of metal barricades that look like bike racks linked end to end.

The Secret Service said that the new fence creates "a temporary buffer zone" and that it will stay up while officials conduct their review of Friday's intrusion.

Four days after the incident, a look back shows that Gonzalez had come to the Secret Service's attention twice earlier this year. This summer, he was interviewed by the agency after raising suspicions during a traffic stop on an interstate highway in rural Wythe County, Va.

The Virginia State Police allegedly found a number of weapons in Gonzalez's car, including a sawed-off shotgun, two sniper rifles, an assault rifle, a bolt-action rifle, one intact shotgun and five handguns. Police also found a map of the Washington area with a circle around the Masonic temple in Alexandria, Va., and a line that pointed toward the White House, police and prosecutors said.

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A former high-ranking Secret Service official,
speaking on the condition of anonymity

A Secret Service official, speaking on behalf of the agency, said Tuesday that agents had interviewed Gonzalez afterward, and found no reason to charge him with threatening the president or to refer him for mental health treatment.

Then, in late August, a Secret Service officer spotted Gonzalez walking along the White House's south fence, carrying a hatchet in his waistband. Officers interviewed him and searched his car, finding camping gear but no evidence that he posed a threat.

The Secret Service official said that, at the time, officers were aware of the earlier contact with Gonzalez in Virginia. But, the official said, "he did not exhibit any mental-health issues at that point. He had not engaged in any criminal activity." Gonzalez was let go.

On Friday, less than a month later, he returned to the White House and climbed the fence.

Crossing lines of defense

For some reason not yet explained, no officer was close enough to collar Gonzalez on his mad dash to the building.

The next line of defense was supposed

to be the attack dog, a Belgian Malinois trained to hit an intruder like a canine missile. A video of the event shows a dog running onto the scene, possibly on a leash, but only after Gonzalez opened the front door.

The next level of security was supposed to be a heavily armed SWAT team that roves the White House grounds. This team was created specifically in the wake of a study by the Army's Delta Force in the 1990s, which warned that the White House was vulnerable to jumpers.

It is unclear where the emergency-response team members were when the intruder passed Friday night. Some may have relocated to the South Lawn, where the president's helicopter had lifted off 10 minutes before the intruder appeared. In a video of the incident, black-clad figures with guns are seen following Gonzalez, but at that point he was already close to the door.

Finally, according to former officials familiar with White House security, an officer is always supposed to be stationed at the front door. In this case, no officer was there, said several people familiar with the incident who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe what they said were lapses. Video footage shows an officer on the far eastern side of the porch with his gun pointed at Gonzalez — but it is not clear what the officer's assignment was that night.

Several former Secret Service officials said in interviews this week that they were

surprised no officers fired at Gonzalez.

These former officials said Secret Service protocols have called for shooting an intruder who is close to crossing the threshold of the White House, as it might not be clear if the person is a serious threat.

"If they aren't stopping and are on the threshold of the house, you have to use lethal force," said Dan Emmett, a former Secret Service counterassault officer. "This would have been an easy shot and one that would have been entirely defensible."

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