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# Travel of Government Officials on Government Aircraft

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our reports on (1) the White House staff's use of military helicopters and (2) government aircraft used to transport senior-level military and civilian officials. I will highlight the key findings from these reports and then discuss each finding more specifically.

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## Results in Brief

In response to a congressional request, we reported in July that, as previously disclosed by the White House, staff members had flown in military helicopters 14 times during the first 16 months of the current administration, without accompanying the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, or Heads of State.<sup>1</sup>

In response to another congressional request, we reported in June on government aircraft used to transport senior-level military and civilian officials.<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense (DOD) policy states that the military services' operational support airlift (OSA) inventory of fixed-wing aircraft—which, among other things, are used to transport senior-level military and civilian officials—should be based solely on wartime requirements. However, DOD had not provided central guidance on how the services should count their OSA aircraft or determine their wartime requirements, leaving each service to independently establish its own requirements. Our analysis showed that the April 1995 OSA inventory of 520 fixed-wing aircraft was about 10 times larger than the number of OSA aircraft used in theater during the Persian Gulf War. In addition, the Army and Air Force helicopters located in the Washington, D.C., area were not justified based on OSA wartime requirements and DOD senior travelers' most frequent helicopter flight was to or from Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, located about 15 miles from the Pentagon. In response to recommendations made in our report, the Joint Chiefs of Staff completed a study which recommends a reduction in the number of OSA aircraft to 391, and DOD strengthened the policy governing the use of OSA aircraft, including helicopters, by senior-level travelers.

Regarding civilian agency aircraft used to transport senior-level officials, we reported that only 19 of 1,500 aircraft operated by the various civilian agencies were used to routinely transport senior-level officials.

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<sup>1</sup>White House: Staff Use of Helicopters (GAO/NSIAD-95-144, July 14, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Government Aircraft: Observations on Travel by Senior Officials (GAO/NSIAD-95-168BR, June 5, 1995).

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## White House Staff's Use of Helicopters

In 1994, six Members of Congress<sup>3</sup> expressed concern about a White House official's use of a military helicopter to visit Camp David and a golf course on May 24, 1994. Accordingly, we were asked to determine (1) the frequency of helicopter flights by White House staff from January 21, 1993, to May 24, 1994, and (2) whether applicable White House procedures were followed in requesting and approving the May 24 trip to Camp David and the golf course.

Since 1976, the Marine Corps HMX-1 Squadron in Quantico, Virginia, has been responsible for providing helicopter support to the White House. The squadron is specifically tasked to fly the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, and visiting Heads of State. White House staff may be authorized to use HMX-1 helicopters when they are directly supporting the President, Vice President, First Lady, and wife of the Vice President or conducting immediate White House activities. Manual records of flights taken by, or in support of, the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, or Heads of State, are maintained at the squadron's Quantico facilities.

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## Staff Use of Helicopters

According to HMX-1 manual records, approximately 1,200 flights were flown in support of the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, and Heads of State during the 16 months before May 24, 1994. These records indicated that, as previously disclosed by the White House, staff members flew in military helicopters 14 times without the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, or Heads of State during this period. We performed several tests, which I will discuss, to verify the completeness and accuracy of the HMX-1 manual records. Our work did not identify any additional White House staff flights.

We reviewed approximately 1,200 manual records (HMX-1 after-action reports) of flights by or in support of the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, and Heads of State. The after-action report, which is filed by the pilot, identifies the passengers, an itinerary, and the flight crew and is retained by the HMX-1 White House Liaison Office in Quantico. Among the after-action reports we examined were the 14 flights previously reported by the White House as the only flights taken by White House staff when the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, or Heads of State were not on board. According to officials from the White House Military Office and the HMX-1 Squadron and an associate counsel to the President, the after-action reports we

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<sup>3</sup>Representatives Bartlett, Gingrich, Clinger, Armev, Camp, and now-retired Representative Michel.

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reviewed covered all White House-related flights between January 21, 1993, and May 24, 1994.

## How We Did Our Work

We performed four tests to independently verify the completeness and accuracy of the manual records maintained by the HMX-1 Squadron. As our first test, we compared the President's itinerary, as reported in the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, with HMX-1 after-action reports. We then listed instances in which the President had traveled, but no after-action reports existed. A White House official then provided us documents from the Presidential Diarist and the Secret Service. These documents verified that the President had used other forms of transportation on the days in question. Next, we compared the records maintained at HMX-1 with the flight records in the Navy's automated Naval Flight Record Subsystem. This database is part of a larger automated flight record system used to track and manage all naval aircraft flights. The database is maintained by the Navy and the Marine Corps and contains flight information provided by pilots after each flight. The automated data we obtained covered 6,120 flights of HMX-1 aircraft from January 21, 1993, to May 24, 1994. We found the records maintained at HMX-1 to be more complete than those maintained in the database.

Third, during our review of the previously reported 14 White House staff flights, we found that 10 had a squadron-specific mission purpose code. According to a Marine Corps official, pilots are to assign this HMX-1 squadron-specific mission purpose code to all flights for logistical support of an executive aircraft, as well as any flight by White House staff that is not directly associated with a flight taken by the President, Vice President, First Lady, wife of the Vice President, or Heads of State. We searched the automated database for all flights with this specific code and found 72 more flights. Of the 72 flights, 34 were included in the records we had reviewed at HMX-1. The remaining 38 flights had no after-action reports. Because it was unclear whether after-action reports should have been completed for the 38 flights, we asked for clarification. We ultimately confirmed why the 38 flights had not been included in the flight records we reviewed at the HMX-1 Squadron. Some flights with no after-action reports included flights to and from contractors for maintenance, flights to test facilities, and support for presidential travel.

As one last check that the squadron had not inadvertently omitted a flight from the after-action reports we had reviewed, we interviewed 52 pilots still assigned to the squadron who had flown a White House mission during the 16-month period of our review. In the presence of officials from

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the White House and the HMX-1 Squadron, we asked the pilots if they had ever flown a White House mission without filing an after-action report. All the pilots said that they always filed after-action reports when they flew missions in support of the White House.

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### Approval Procedures for the May 24, 1994, Trip

At the time of the May 24 trip to Camp David and a golf course, White House policy required that White House Military Office officials approve all HMX-1 helicopter travel by White House staff. The former Deputy Director of the White House Military Office stated that he had approved the use of an HMX-1 helicopter for the May 24 trip. However, no written procedures detailed how such flights were requested or approved. White House Military Office officials told us that the infrequency of helicopter use by the White House staff made written policies and procedures unnecessary; each request had to be considered on an individual basis. The former Deputy Director also told us that the request and approval for helicopter service for the May 24 trip, like most requests for helicopter service, were made orally.

Shortly after the May 24 trip, the White House changed the approval authority for staff's use of military aircraft. According to a May 31, 1994, memorandum, the approval authority was elevated from the level of the Deputy Director of the White House Military Office to the White House Chief of Staff or the Deputy Chief of Staff. For trips that involve the Chief of Staff, the approving authority is now either the White House Counsel or the Deputy White House Counsel. Now let me turn to the issue of senior-level officials traveling on government aircraft.

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### Travel by Senior Officials on Government Aircraft

Approximately 500 fixed-wing airplanes and 100 helicopters are used for DOD's OSA mission, which includes transporting senior-level officials in support of command, installation, or management functions. The Secretary of Defense has designated some DOD senior-level travelers as required use travelers (1) because of their continuous requirement for secure communications, (2) for security, or (3) for responsive transportation to satisfy exceptional scheduling requirements. However, the military department secretaries may apply more stringent restrictions in determining which four-star officers within their respective departments must use these aircraft. DOD policy excludes some aircraft, such as those assigned to the Air Force 89th Military Airlift Wing, from the OSA mission. The 89th Wing provides worldwide airlift support for the President, Vice

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President, and other high-level officials in the U.S. and foreign governments.

The Office of Management and Budget has made the General Services Administration (GSA) responsible for managing civilian agencies' aircraft programs. DOD, like the civilian agencies, is required to report data to GSA semiannually on senior-level, civilian officials' travel.

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### April 1995 Osa Inventory Is 10 Times Greater Than Number of Osa Aircraft Used in the Persian Gulf War

DOD's policy states that the OSA inventory of fixed-wing aircraft should be based solely on wartime requirements. During our review, however, we found that each service had established its own wartime requirements based on differing definitions and methodologies. As of April 1995, the services reported 520 fixed-wing aircraft in DOD's OSA inventory. Our review showed that only 48 OSA aircraft were used in theater during the Persian Gulf War, which is less than 10 percent of the April 1995 OSA inventory.

In 1994, the Air Force determined that its OSA inventory exceeded its wartime requirements, whereas the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps determined that their OSA inventories were slightly less than wartime requirements. However, a February 1993 report on Roles, Missions, and Functions issued by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the May 1995 report of the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces indicated that the existing number of aircraft dedicated to OSA missions had been and continued to be excessive.

To correct this problem, we recommended in our June report that the Secretary of Defense (1) provide uniform guidance to the services concerning how to compute OSA wartime requirements, (2) develop the appropriate mechanisms to ensure the availability of each service's aircraft to help fulfill the OSA needs of the other services, and (3) reassign or otherwise dispose of excess OSA aircraft. Additionally, in our September report on the 1996 DOD operation and maintenance budget, we recommended that Congress direct the Air Force to reduce its OSA inventory to its wartime requirements, which would save \$18.1 million in operation and maintenance costs.<sup>4</sup>

To address the recommendations in our June report, the Joint Chiefs of Staff studied OSA wartime requirements across DOD, including how the

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<sup>4</sup>1996 DOD Budget: Potential Reductions to Operation and Maintenance Program (GAO/NSIAD-95-200BR, Sept. 26, 1995).

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availability of each service's aircraft could help fill the needs of the other services. The resulting October 1995 report established a joint requirement for 391 OSA aircraft and developed a common methodology for determining OSA requirements. The Chairman submitted the report later in October to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, requesting his approval for the OSA fleet to be sized at 391 aircraft, which would mean a reduction of over 100 aircraft. The disposition of excess OSA aircraft is currently under review. Further, DOD plans to update its policy on OSA to formalize the definition, use, and management of OSA aircraft. Plans are also underway to assign to the Joint Chiefs of Staff responsibility for determining DOD's annual OSA requirements.

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## A Downward Trend in Travel on OSA Fixed-Wing Aircraft

Adverse publicity and increased congressional concern about potential abuses resulted in a number of statements during 1994 by the White House and the Secretary of Defense emphasizing the need for senior officials to carefully consider the use of commercial transportation instead of government aircraft. On May 9, 1995, the Deputy Secretary of Defense issued a revised policy memorandum that eliminates an entire category of "required mission use" for justifying individual OSA flights and requires that many more OSA flights be justified based on a cost comparison between DOD's OSA aircraft and commercial carriers.

Our review indicated that from March 1993 to February 1995, the number of senior-level officials' OSA flights generally declined. During that period,<sup>5</sup> the number of senior officials' OSA flight segments<sup>6</sup> per month ranged from a high of about 1,800 in March 1993 to a low of about 1,000. We found that 16 of the 20 destinations most frequently traveled to by senior-level DOD officials were also served by commercial airlines with government contracts. For example, 1,619 flight segments from Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, could have been served by government-contract airlines. It should be recognized, however, that some of the trips we identified were made by those senior-level officials required to use government aircraft and that the contract flights may not have provided the same scheduling flexibility made possible by government-owned aircraft.

On October 1, 1995, the Deputy Secretary of Defense issued a new policy on travel that should help decrease the potential for abuse. The new policy

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<sup>5</sup>Our review covered October 1992 through March 1995, but complete records from all of the services were available for only January 1993 through February 1995.

<sup>6</sup>Agencies record travel in individual flight segments rather than in round trips.



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(1) requires the services to use the smallest and most cost-effective mission-capable aircraft available; (2) requires the Secretary of Defense's or the military department secretary's approval for use of military aircraft by required use officials for permanent change-of-station moves;<sup>7</sup> (3) prohibits the scheduling of training flights strictly to accommodate senior-level officials' travel; (4) allows the military department secretaries to further restrict the required use designation for four-star officers in their respective departments; and (5) limits the use of helicopters for senior-level officials' travel.

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## Restrictions on Senior Officials' Use of Helicopters

Although senior-level officials' use of helicopters in the Washington, D.C., area declined substantially between April 1994 and March 1995, these officials continued to use helicopters to travel between nearby locations. For both the Air Force and the Army, the most frequently traveled helicopter route was between Andrews Air Force Base and the Pentagon, a distance of about 15 miles. According to an Army memorandum, flying time for an Army UH-1H from Andrews Air Force Base to the Pentagon is about 24 minutes—at a cost of about \$185. The same flight in an Air Force UH-1N would cost approximately \$308. However, actual cost to the government would be higher because all trips are round trips. In the case of the Army, the cost to get a helicopter to the Pentagon or Andrews Air Force Base must be included, which would increase the flight time to about 1 hour and the cost to about \$460. We estimate that the same trip would cost about \$9 by car and about \$30 by taxi. Thus, for general comparison purposes, a trip between Andrews Air Force Base and the Pentagon on either an Army or Air Force helicopter would cost over \$400 more than the same trip by car.

In December 1994, the Secretary of the Army established a new policy prohibiting Army officials' use of helicopter transportation between the Pentagon and Andrews Air Force Base except in unusual circumstances. The memorandum stated that the existence of unusual circumstances would be determined by the Secretary of the Army or the Chief of Staff of the Army. In our report, we recommended that the Department of Defense adopt this policy.

The October 1995 revisions to DOD's policy on the use of government aircraft and air travel include a section on helicopter travel. The new policy states that "rotary wing aircraft may be used only when cost [is]

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<sup>7</sup>All other travelers must obtain prior authorization for all travel, including permanent change-of-station moves, from their designated authorizing officials.

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favorable as compared to ground transportation, or when the use of ground transportation would have a significant adverse impact on the ability of the senior official to effectively accomplish the purpose of the travel.” We believe that this change in policy should result in fewer helicopter trips between the Pentagon and Andrews Air Force Base, as well as other nearby destinations.

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### Inventory of Civilian Agency Aircraft and Operating Costs

At the time of our June report, civilian agencies had over 1,500 aircraft that cost about \$1 billion a year to operate. The civilian agency inventory includes many different types of aircraft, such as helicopters, special-purpose aircraft for fire-fighting and meteorological research, and specially configured aircraft for research and development and program support. However, only 19 are routinely used for senior-level officials’ travel. These 19 aircraft cost about \$24 million a year to operate. The operating costs reflect aircraft that are owned, leased, lease/purchased, and loaned between civilian agencies. For most agencies, the operating costs include those related to technical, mission-critical aircraft that are not used for administrative purposes.

We also reviewed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and Coast Guard senior officials’ use of aircraft and found that, although the use of such aircraft was infrequent, when these aircraft are used, many of the destinations were served by commercial airlines with government contracts. Inspector General reports indicate that agencies were not adequately justifying the need for aircraft acquisitions and that agencies’ cost comparisons with commercial service were not complete or accurate.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

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