

Incredible Journey: How Barack Obama Became the Most-Traveled President His First Two Years in Office

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Introduction

There may have been some misinformation regarding the details and costs associated with President Barack Obama's recent trip to Asia, but one thing is certain: upon returning this past weekend from his two-day trip to Lisbon, Portugal for a NATO summit, he has now spent more days abroad during the first two calendar years of his Presidency than any previous Chief Executive. Obama has made 15 trips and visited 26 countries (eight of them more than once), over a period of 55 total days. This tops the previous record of 54 days abroad set by President George H. W. Bush during his first two years. The trip to Portugal occurs just a week after President Obama returned from a ten-day excursion to India, Indonesia, South Korea, and Japan (plus a stopover in Germany to refuel en route to India).

The Journeys

The bulk of Obama's journeys beyond U.S. shores took place in 2009, when he likewise set the record as the most-traveled President for any first year in office: he took the most trips, visited the most countries, and spent the most days abroad. Obama made ten trips to 21 countries (four countries were visited twice) and was out of the U.S. a total of 37 days. The previous record holder, George H.W. Bush, who took seven trips to 17 countries (one country was visited twice) over 28 days during the course of his first year in office.

In addition to the international meetings and G-20 economic summits that are typically on Presidents' travel itineraries, President Obama took several unique trips abroad during his first year in office. Foreign travel actually became a minor issue during the 2008 presidential campaign after then-candidate Obama's pledged to visit a Muslim country during his first 100 days in office. That promise was fulfilled in June when the President flew to Saudi Arabia and Egypt on a 4-day trip that also included stops in Germany and France. 2009 also included two trips to Denmark. He first traveled there in October to lobby (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to have his hometown of Chicago selected as the host for the 2016 Summer Olympics. He returned to Denmark again in December to make an address and accept his Nobel Peace Prize.

President	Trips	Visits	Number of Days
Eisenhower	3	3	9
Kennedy	6	9	20
Johnson	1	1	1
Nixon	6	24	30
Ford	7	19	38
Carter	5	17	29
Reagan	8	17	31
Bush, G. H. W.	15	34	54
Clinton	8	27	40
Bush, G. W.	11	28	47
Obama	15	34	55

Notes:

1. Sources: State Department data, media and other reports on Presidential activities.
2. Visits = number of countries visited (e.g., if the President leaves the country and visits 6 countries before returning to the United States, that is counted as 6 visits).

President Obama's foreign travel during his second year could have been higher, but domestic political issues decreased his opportunities to go abroad. A look at recent history shows that until 2010, every President since Lyndon Johnson has made at least the same amount of trips during his second year as in his first year. Johnson only took one trip in 1964 and did not travel outside the country in 1965. Richard Nixon took three trips in each of his first two years and Ronald Reagan made four trips in each. Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush all took more trips in their second year. President Obama made ten trips in 2009 but only five in his second year. Early in 2010, Obama's planned trip to Indonesia and Australia was twice postponed so that the President could stay in Washington in order to help push health care reform legislation through Congress. That trip was eventually rescheduled for June. But on April 20, the Deep Horizon offshore drilling rig exploded, leading to the largest oil spill in United States history. Once again, the trip was postponed. Obama's five trips had him out of the country 18 days this year, the fewest days in a President's second year of office since Jimmy Carter traveled a total of 13 days in 1978.^a

Obama has been outside the U.S. an average of 27.5 days each year; at this rate he would rack up a total of 110 travel days over four years. Should this prove to be the actual outcome, it would surpass the number of days that George H. W. Bush spent during his four years in office (102 days, or an average of 25.5 days per year).

November Getaways: Cure for the Post-Election Blues?

Some commentators have noted that Obama's recent trip provided a timely distraction from the election results that saw the President's party lose control of the House and its majority shrink in the Senate. In fact, the month of November during years with mid-term elections is a popular time for Chief Executives to head overseas. On November 16, 2006, President George

^a It is unknown whether any additional trips will be made during the remaining days of 2010.

W. Bush left for an eight-day trip to Russia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia. During November 19-23, 2002, Bush traveled to the Czech Republic, Russia, Lithuania, and Romania. Similarly, from November 15 to November 23, 1999, President Clinton traveled to Turkey, Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, and Serbia-Montenegro (Kosovo), and in 1994, following the Republican takeover of the House and Senate, President Clinton had a scheduled trip to the Philippines and Indonesia from November 12 to November 16. And in 1990, President George H. W. Bush traveled for seven days to Europe and the Middle East beginning on November 17.

Most-Traveled President: Clinton

Overall, Bill Clinton remains the most-traveled President. During the course of his two terms in office, he made 55 total trips and spent 233 days abroad.^b He was out of the country 29.1 days per year. The second most-traveled President is George W. Bush. During his two terms he took 49 trips and was abroad 215 days, or 26.9 days per year. However, Bush does occupy the Number One spot for the most days spent out of the country during a single year: in 2008, he took nine trips to 32 countries over the course of 50 total days. Typically, Presidents who complete two full terms in office travel far more in their second term than in their first.

President	Totals Days Abroad During the First Term	Totals Days Abroad During the Second Term
Eisenhower	20	74
Reagan	54	64
Clinton	80	153
Bush, G. W.	88	127

Sources: State Department data, media and other reports on Presidential activities.

President	Year (Year in Office)	Trips	Visits	Days
Bush, G. W.	2008 (8 th Year)	9	32	50
Clinton	1998 (6 th Year)	7	18	45
Clinton	1999 (7 th Year)	11	25	38
Clinton	2000 (8 th Year)	10	23	37
Obama	2009 (1 st Year)	10	25	37
Eisenhower	1959 (7 th Year)	4	18	35
Clinton	1997 (5 th Year)	7	17	33
Clinton	1994 (2 nd Year)	6	24	32
Bush, G. H. W.	1989 (1 st Year)	7	17	31
Carter	1979 (3 rd Year)	5	7	29

^b In 2001, National Taxpayers Union Policy Paper 104, *Bill Clinton: America's Best-Traveled President A Study of Presidential Travel: 1953-2001*, counted 54 trips and 229 days of travel. That data was based on an incomplete Department of State travel itinerary (www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/prestravels.html) and various news reports to fill in the gaps. The data in this publication, NTUF Issue Brief 161, is based on a newer, complete State Department database: <http://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/president>. Travel dates from Clinton's final year were corrected and an additional trip to Japan is included.

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The Costs of Presidential Travel

As Vice President Joe Biden might say, presidential travel is a “big deal”: excursions overseas involve hundreds (even thousands) of man hours of preparation, multiple trips by advance teams to the host countries, complicated security logistics, large entourages, often high stakes negotiations, and invariably, high costs. Just what are the costs associated with such travel? Unfortunately, this is an area of the budget that the light of transparency has failed to fully illuminate. Few estimates are available, and those that have been produced are often incomplete.

In early November, 2010, The Drudge Report website highlighted an article from an Indian news service contending that President Obama would be accompanied by an entourage of 3,000 on his trip to that country and that the trip would cost U.S. taxpayers \$200 million per day.¹ Yet, the source for this claim was an unnamed Indian official. Presidential travel is often expensive, but an amount of \$200 million *per day* is wildly exaggerated. A White House communications official refuted the figure – as well as related reports claiming that 34 Navy ships were being deployed to the Indian Ocean as part of the security plans for the trip – but an actual estimate of the costs per day was not provided.²

By way of comparison, the General Accounting Office (GAO, since renamed the Government Accountability Office) determined that three of President Clinton’s trips taken in 1998 cost taxpayers at least a total of \$72.1 million.³ It is very likely that these are conservative estimates because they do not take into account additional Secret Service costs (which are classified) or the complete expenses to agencies involved in planning. It is also unclear whether they include per diems for meals and incidental charges.

The military bears the bulk of the cost of presidential travel for the operation, fuel, maintenance, and support of the aircraft used. Recent media reports about the cost of the President’s primary aircraft, Air Force One, the reconfigured Boeing 747, have varied widely, but most of them were based either on a 1998 White House Military Office estimate (\$34,400 per hour to operate),⁴ or a GAO report from 2000 that puts the figure at \$56,800 per hour.⁵ Other estimates over the past few years adjusted those figures for inflation to bring them in line with current values. After Air Force One was used for a controversial “photo op” over Manhattan last year, White House correspondent Steven Thomma reported that the Air Force stated the price was \$100,219 per flight hour to operate.⁶

It turns out that the actual costs are much higher than have been reported. In reply to a request for information to clear up this confusion, Master Sergeant Jeff Capenos, the Public Affairs Superintendent of the 89th Airlift Wing, told NTUF that, “The cost per flight hour [(CPFH)] of the US Air Force’s VC-25 (Air Force One) is \$181,757. This CPFH figure includes fuel, flight consumables, depot level repairables, aircraft overhaul and engine overhaul.”

Given the publicly available itinerary of President Obama's trip to Asia, Air Force One accumulated approximately 47.9 hours of flight time. Based on the information provided by the 89th Airlift Wing, the whole journey cost at least \$8.7 million just for Air Force One. The subsequent 14.9-hour round trip flight to Lisbon adds another \$2.7 million to the total.

Table 4. Flight Hours of Obama's Trip to Asia		
Travel From:	Travel To:	Flight Hours
Washington, DC	Ramstein Air Base, Germany	8.3
Ramstein Air Base	Mumbai, India	8.7
Mumbai, India	New Delhi, India	1.8
New Delhi, India	Jakarta, Indonesia	6.4
Jakarta, Indonesia	Seoul, South Korea	6.8
Seoul, South Korea	Yokohama, Japan	1.7
Yokohama, Japan	Tokyo, Japan	0.0
Tokyo, Japan	Anchorage, Alaska	7.3
Anchorage, Alaska	Washington, DC	7.0
Total Flight Hours:		47.9
Notes:		
1. Itineraries available from news sources: http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2010/11/president_obama_official_sched_461.html , http://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory?id=12058351 , and http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2010/11/president_obama_official_sched_469.html .		
2. Flight hours estimated using http://www.happyzebra.com/distance-calculator/ .		

But of course, this is just one of the planes used during a trip. Air Force One is accompanied by a back-up VC-25, additional transport vehicles for any other traveling officials, larger equipment transport vehicles, and security aircraft. The most detailed look at the Department of Defense's support costs for presidential travel, including aircraft in addition to Air Force One, was provided in a GAO study on President Clinton's trip to Africa. Refueling, passenger, and strategic lift missions added up to \$32.7 million.⁷

Bureaucrats Abroad

The same report that said Obama's trip to India would cost \$200 million per day also claimed that the President would be traveling with an entourage of 3,000 people. It remains unclear how many officials traveled with the President to Asia. Apart from accounts that over 200 chief executive officers (CEOs) from private sector enterprises would be joining the President at a conference sponsored by the U.S.-India Business Council,⁸ there was virtually no media coverage about this.^c While the White House has disputed the 3,000 figure (again, without

^c It was unclear from the reports whether any of the CEOs actually accompanied the President or simply traveled to Asia using their own means. In any event, according to the Department of State, nonfederal officials and private citizens who travel on federal aircraft are supposed to reimburse the government for their travel costs. At least two of the CEOs who attended the conference are advisers to the President: Jeffery Immelt of General Electric is on the President's Economic Recovery Advisory Board, and Jim McNerney of Boeing heads the President's Export

providing a more accurate count), it is not uncommon for a President to be accompanied by a large retinue.⁹ GAO reported that 1,302 federal officials traveled with President Clinton on his trip to Africa in 1999.¹⁰ In 2003, when President George W. Bush traveled to London for a G-20 summit, Reuters produced an infographic of his entourage, which included:

- 250 Secret Service agents;
- 150 National Security advisors;
- 50 White House political aides;
- 15 “sniffer dog” teams;
- A personal chef and his team of four cooks;
- 200 representatives of other U.S. departments;
- Two identical Boeing 747-200s and a third chartered jumbo jet;
- A Sikorsky Sea King helicopter;
- A Black Hawk helicopter; and
- Two identical motorcades of 20 armored vehicles including limousines.¹¹

On his trip to London in late March 2009 for a G-20 summit, media accounts reported that Obama was accompanied by Marine One (the Presidential helicopter) and a fleet of duplicates along with 500 staff personnel, “including 200 Secret Service agents, a team of six doctors, the White House chef and kitchen staff with the [P]resident’s own food and water.”¹²

As usual, taxpayers are generally in the dark about how much it costs to bring the traveling White House and the legions of federal officials with the President abroad. GAO’s 1999 report to Congress about three of Clinton’s 1998 trips found that agencies outside of the Department of Defense accrued costs totaling \$5.1 million for the Africa trip, \$1.7 million for the Chile trip, and \$4.8 million for the China trip. As mentioned earlier, however, such expenses can be difficult to capture completely.

Conclusion

Presidents must balance the necessity of meeting foreign leaders and conducting diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected world with the high costs of travel abroad. Incoming Speaker of the House John Boehner has vowed to fly from his Ohio district to the Capitol using commercial airlines.¹³ Similarly, British Prime Minister David Cameron flew home from the U.S. on a British Airways flight in a business-class seat as a way to save money. While he was here he rode from New York to Washington on Amtrak’s Acela train.¹⁴ These options aren’t readily available to the President of the United States. Nonetheless, taxpayers deserve better information on the details and costs of presidential travel.

We know that the Secret Service received \$1.5 billion in appropriations for Fiscal Year 2010, included \$756 million for the “protection of persons and facilities,” but we do not have access to a breakdown of the expenditures.¹⁵ Security is cited as the primary reason to withhold

Council. A third CEO, David Cote of Honeywell International, is a member of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, otherwise known as the deficit commission.

specific information, but would knowing how much is spent on travel really endanger the President's safety? Or, would it just shock taxpayers to learn how much it actually costs when the Chief Executive goes abroad? It seems that the details about some of Air Force One's capabilities available from a Department of Defense website would potentially do more to put the President's security at risk than would a better accounting of expenses.¹⁶

There is room for cooperation on this issue: Democrats complained vigorously about President Bush's use of Air Force One on domestic trips to promote his Social Security reform efforts, and similarly Republicans were up in arms about Obama's domestic flights to promote health insurance reform. The parties can and should work together to open up the books on the costs associated with Presidential travel – both international and domestic – so that taxpayers can better assess whether all pomp and spectacle is worth the investment.

About the Author

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Notes

¹ Press Trust of India, "US to Spend \$200 Mn a Day on Obama's Mumbai Visit," November 3, 2010.

² White House Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer, "Attacks on President Obama Going to Asia: A Long Trip from Reality," The White House Blog, November, 5, 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/11/05/attacks-president-obama-going-asia-a-long-trip-reality>.

³ Government Accountability Office, *Presidential Travel: Costs and Accounting for President's 1998 Trips to China, Chile, and Africa* (NSIAD-99-164), September 21, 1999. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1999/ns99164.pdf>.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Presidential Travel: Policy and Costs* (RS21835), April 10, 2007. http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RS21835_20070410.pdf.

⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Presidential Travel: DOD Airlift Cost for White House Foreign Travel* (NSIAD-00-209), August 4, 2000. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/2000/ns00209.pdf>.

⁶ Steven Thomma, "Obama's First-year Travel Sets Presidential Record," McClatchy Newspapers' *The Daily Herald*, October 8, 2009. http://www.heraldextra.com/business/article_e965f054-fe36-5b56-b894-566e0babc4fc.html.

⁷ Government Accountability Office, *Presidential Travel: Costs and Accounting for President's 1998 Trips to China, Chile, and Africa* (NSIAD-99-164), September 21, 1999. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1999/ns99164.pdf>.

⁸ Uttara Choudhury, "Jetting in with Obama, Largest Lot of Businessmen Ever," *Daily News & Analysis*, Mumbai, India, October 27, 2010;

Hans Nichols, "Immelt, McNerney Among CEOs to Meet Obama," Bloomberg News Service, October 26, 2010.

⁹ FactCheck.org, "Trip to Mumbai," November 3, 2010. <http://factcheck.org/2010/11/ask-factcheck-trip-to-mumbai/>.

¹⁰ GAO, *Presidential Travel: Costs and Accounting for President's 1998 Trips to China, Chile, and Africa* (NSIAD-99-164), September 21, 1999. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1999/ns99164.pdf>

¹¹ Reuters Graphic, "Bush's Travelling Entourage," November 12, 2003.

¹² Dale McFeatters, "Editorial: An Entourage More Royal than the Queen's," Scripps Howard News Service, March 31, 2009. <http://www.scrippsnews.com/node/42183>.

¹³ Felecia Sonmez, "John Boehner Says He'll Fly Commercial as Speaker," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2010. <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/11/john-boehner-says-hell-fly-com.html?hpid=topnews>.

¹⁴ Robert Hutton, “U.K.’s Cameron, Pinching Pennies, Goes Commercial,” Bloomberg News Service, July 21, 2010. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-07-21/cameron-travels-commercial-to-show-britons-he-pinched-pennies-on-u-s-trip.html>.

¹⁵ Congressional Research Service, *The U.S. Secret Service: An Examination and Analysis of Its Evolving Missions* (RL34603), December 16, 2009. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/RL34603.pdf>.

¹⁶ <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=131>.