

Up in the Air: A Study of Presidential Travel and its Uncertain Costs

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Introduction

In November 2010, National Taxpayers Union Foundation (NTUF) published a study that detailed how President Barack Obama spent more time abroad than any other U.S. President after two years in office.¹ Since then, President Obama has left the country less frequently, but after a historic trip to Southeast Asia in November 2012, he still has been officially out of the country more days than all but one other U.S. President in a first term. He has done so by taking more journeys than most previous Chief Executives, even as they are of shorter duration compared to past history.

Though President Obama's foreign travel slowed in his second, third and fourth years in office, data indicates that Presidents tend to leave the country more often during their second term. With four trips abroad over 18 days through the first six months of 2013, Obama is on pace to set the record for the most travel in a fifth year in office. If that precedent continues, he will be among the most-traveled U.S. Chief Executives in history by the time he leaves office.

NTUF does not dispute the widely-held belief that a vital component of the President's duties is to represent our nation in foreign countries. This update to our 2010 research is provided in the interest of fostering rational public discussions over the transparency as well as the costs and benefits of such activity.

Where the President Went

In 2009, President Obama spent 40 days out of the U.S., traveling on 10 separate occasions to 21 different countries (4 of which were visited more than once). In fact, he traveled more in the first year of his term than any other President during the same period in office. In 2010, Obama took 6 trips spanning 20 days. Also, as detailed in NTUF's previous report, he traveled more frequently in his first two years as President than any other; the previous record holder had been George H.W. Bush, who spent 54 days abroad compared to Obama's 60. Subsequently, however, the total number of days the President spent abroad has steadily decreased.

In 2011, Obama took 4 trips totaling 20 days. In 2012, the President spent 15 days abroad on 5 separate trips. In March of last year he flew to Seoul, South Korea, to participate in the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit and meet with then-Chinese President Hu Jintao. He followed that up with a 3-day trip in April to Colombia as part of the 6th Summit of the Americas. He was also away for 3 days in June to attend the G-20 Summit in Mexico.

In addition to these traditional diplomatic trips, the President garnered significant media attention by embarking on some less customary voyages. On May 1, 2012, the ninth anniversary of George W. Bush's now infamous "Mission Accomplished" announcement and the first of Osama bin Laden's death, President Obama left Washington in secret to head to Afghanistan. There, he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul to discuss and sign the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement. Afterwards, he addressed the nation from Bagram Airfield on the eventual end to military operations in the region before departing for Washington.

After his re-election in November, the President promptly began setting up meetings with foreign officials. Within about 48 hours after the votes were cast and tallied in his favor, Obama announced a historic 4-day trip to Southeast Asia, during which he would visit Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar (also referred to as Burma); his trip to the latter would mark the first time any U.S. President has been to that nation.²

So far in his second term, Barack Obama has taken 4 major international trips. In March of 2013, he spent 4 days in the Middle East, visiting Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan.³ In May, he made a 3-day trip to Mexico and Costa Rica to discuss economic relations between the U.S. and Central America.⁴ In June, he made two additional trips: from the 17th-18th, he visited the United Kingdom for the G-8 Summit before making a single-day stop in Berlin on the 19th; and, as noted above, the President then embarked on an 8-day trip to Africa from June 26 to July 3.

The President will be making at least 2 more trips abroad in 2013. In September, he will likely be participating in the 2013 G20 Leaders' Summit in Moscow, Russia. For October, Obama is expected to travel to Southeast Asia again, first to Indonesia for the 2013 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit, and then to Brunei for the 8th East Asia Summit.

If one assumes that he stays for the entirety of each of the above-mentioned conferences, he will have made 6 trips, 13 visits, and spent 26 days abroad in the first year of his second term. That would be similar to the pace set by his predecessor, George W. Bush.

The table below shows how President Obama's fifth-year travels thus far compare to those of other two-term Presidents.

| President | Trips | Visits | Days |
|-------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Eisenhower | 2 | 2 | 11 |
| Johnson | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| Nixon | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Reagan | 3 | 7 | 19 |
| Clinton | 7 | 17 | 33 |
| Bush, G.W. | 6 | 18 | 28 |
| Obama* | 4 | 10 | 18 |

Sources: State Department data, media reports.
 *Note: Figures current through first six months of 2013.

Presidential Travel in Review

While only one other President has spent more time out of the country after four years than the current President, Mr. Obama has taken fewer trips recently. During his first two years, he took a total of 16 trips and spent 60 days away from the White House. At that point he was on pace to spend 120 days abroad in his first term, the most of any President for such a period. Over the next two years, however, he only made 9 trips and was out of the country for 35 days. Still, the President did spend 95 days out of the country over the course of his first term, edging out George W. Bush's 88 days for the second-most of any President in his first four years – behind only the elder Bush's 102 days.

| President | Trips | Visits | Number of Days |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Eisenhower | 6 | 6 | 20 |
| Johnson | 9 | 16 | 31 |
| Nixon | 11 | 31 | 58 |
| Carter | 12 | 31 | 67 |
| Reagan | 11 | 23 | 54 |
| Bush, G. H.W. | 25 | 60 | 102 |
| Clinton | 20 | 51 | 80 |
| Bush, G.W. | 22 | 58 | 88 |
| Obama | 25 | 50 | 95 |

Notes:

1. Sources: State Department data, media reports.
2. Visits are defined as the number of countries traveled to during a trip (e.g., if the President spends time in 4 countries before returning to the U.S., that is counted as 4 visits).
3. President Johnson assumed office November 22, 1963. Data reflects the travel made over the 4 years beginning on that date.
4. Presidents included in the table are those who served at least a full 4 years in office.

If the President travels in his second term at the same pace he did throughout his first, he will have spent 190 days abroad during his time in the Oval Office. That would put him behind only George W. Bush and Bill Clinton as the most-traveled two-term Presidents.

It is not unreasonable to expect that Obama's time abroad will increase in his second term: Bush, Clinton, Reagan, and Eisenhower all traveled significantly more in their second terms than they did in their first four years. Clinton, the most-traveled President in history, nearly doubled his time outside the U.S., spending 80 days beyond the border in his first term and 153 in his second.

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

Source: State Department, media, previous NTUF studies.

Obama's Trips Marked by Shorter Stays

One particularly notable aspect of Obama's foreign travel compared to that of other Presidents has been the brevity of his stays in any one country. During his landmark trip to Myanmar, for instance, he spent a total of 6 hours on the ground. Over the entire four days traveling to, within, and from Southeast Asia on that trip, Obama was on the ground for 47 hours and in the air for 41.⁵ He spent a mere 6 hours in Afghanistan in May, and a quick 26 hours in Australia last year.

In fact, by using the data in Table 2 to compare the ratio of days spent abroad to the number of trips taken, we see that although Presidential travel began to rise significantly after Reagan's terms, trips on average seem to be getting shorter.

| Table 4. Days Spent Abroad Relative to Foreign Trips During First Term | | | |
|---|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| President | Trips | Days Spent Abroad | Days Abroad per Trip |
| Eisenhower | 6 | 20 | 3.33 |
| Johnson | 9 | 31 | 3.44 |
| Nixon | 11 | 58 | 5.27 |
| Carter | 12 | 67 | 5.58 |
| Reagan | 11 | 54 | 4.91 |
| Bush, G. H.W. | 25 | 102 | 4.08 |
| Clinton | 20 | 80 | 4 |
| Bush, G.W. | 22 | 88 | 4 |
| Obama | 25 | 95 | 3.8 |

Sources: State Department data, media reports.

There are a number of plausible reasons that may explain why President Obama’s trips, specifically, were of limited duration. For one, lavish, extended foreign stays funded by taxpayer dollars are generally seen as political liabilities, especially during economically challenging times such as those dominating his tenure so far.

Additionally, domestic policy issues have limited Mr. Obama’s travel time while in office: in 2010, lobbying for support of his hotly-contested healthcare law and addressing the Exxon oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico forced him to postpone an Australian trip twice that year. His fourth year in office, of course, was spent juggling time between Presidential responsibilities and tending to his re-election campaign, affording him less time for foreign excursions.

Given all that was going on at home during Obama’s first term as well as the political implications of elaborate, extended stays, he may have felt less inclined to take longer foreign trips. Nevertheless, he has still managed to spend more time overseas and take more trips abroad than all but one of his predecessors.

The Nature and Costs of Presidential Travel

Of course, even a brief Presidential trip abroad requires extensive planning and logistical support: appropriate security precautions must be taken; travel costs – including lodging, food, and fuel – must be accounted for; and a massive entourage of diplomatic, communications, and policy personnel often accompany the President (and sometimes, his family) as well.

The true cost of Presidential travel is very difficult to obtain; in fact, no complete, official account of the expenses has ever been made available to the public. However, the data that is available can give a sense of how complicated and expensive it is to move the President abroad.

In May of 2012, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) released a report entitled “Presidential Travel: Policy and Costs.” The document, which has been occasionally revised, detailed when public funds are used to cover presidential travel, and offered for consideration various factors that may affect a trip’s cost.⁶

According to CRS, all trips by the President, Vice President, and First Lady are evaluated and considered as official, unofficial, or political in nature. Whether or not a trip’s primary purpose is “official” is generally left to White House personnel to decide. Both foreign travel and vacation trips are always considered official business because, as CRS notes, “the President and Vice President are always on duty.”⁷

Aircraft Costs for Trips Abroad

The vast majority of costs associated with Presidential travel come from operating the President’s aircraft, and the per diem expenses for staff and crew. The U.S. Air Force’s 89th Airlift Wing operates two Boeing 747 jets, also called VC-25s (designated “Air Force One” for Presidential trips). Air Force officials reported to CRS in 2012 that the cost per hour associated with these planes’ operation is \$179,750, which includes “fuel, flight consumables, depot repairs, aircraft overhaul and engine overhaul.”⁸

Based on that figure, the operational costs alone for the 41 hours President Obama spent on Air Force One during his trip to Southeast Asia last year would be \$7,369,750. In 2010, an official from the 89th Airlift Wing told NTUF that the cost per hour was even higher, at \$181,757. Using that information, the same trip cost almost \$100,000 more, roughly \$7,452,037.

It is important to note that these figures only reflect the costs associated with flying Air Force One. When the President travels outside of the country, several passenger and cargo aircraft, in addition to a “backup” VC-25, accompany him.⁹ During President Bill Clinton’s trip to Africa in 1998, GAO reported that C-5 cargo planes flew a total of 1,975.6 flight hours at an hourly rate of \$12,605 for an aggregate cost of just under \$25 million to carry supplies needed for the trip. As of April 2013, the cost per flight hour for the C-5B Galaxy cargo plane stood at \$78,817.¹⁰

Additionally, military and government personnel make several “advance trips” before the President departs from Washington in order to prepare for any logistical unknowns. All told, the true purely flight-related costs are substantially higher due to the sheer size of the Air Force fleet that must accompany the President. But the complement of machines is not the only expense taxpayers bear.

The President’s Entourage

While details are always limited, there are some incomplete accounts of who travels with the President when he goes abroad. Ahead of Obama’s 2009 trip to London for the G20 summit, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported “more than 500 officials and staff” were to accompany the President. That figure included 200 Secret Service agents; staff from the White

House Military Office, Transportation Agency, and Medical Unit, among others; eight staff members for the First Lady; and a team of White House chefs to prepare the Obamas' food.¹¹

President Clinton's trip to Africa in 1998 involved a support team of 1,302 people, not including Secret Service members (or private citizens who paid for their own expenses).¹² Of that group, 904 were with the Department of Defense. Other personnel were from the Executive Office of the President (204), the U.S. Information Agency (103), and the Department of State (60, including 16 Members of Congress), among other agencies. GAO also reported that Clinton's 9-day trip to China in the same year cost \$18,830,092, and that he was accompanied by 510 support staff. There were 592 on his trip to Chile.

Beyond flight-related expenses, bringing along the President's entourage of press crew, security personnel, and policy advisors carries its own price tag. Unfortunately for curious taxpayers, the White House and the State Department have never publically disclosed the full magnitude of those expenses.

The government does not reveal, for example, how many Secret Service agents it sends with a President on foreign trips, usually on the grounds that it would compromise classified information. Even in three of the most recent estimates for Presidential journeys available from the GAO, per-diem and travel-related expenses other than operational costs are not included. We do know that the Secret Service had an enacted budget authority of \$832 million in fiscal year 2012 for the purpose of "protection of persons and facilities," but there are no breakdowns of how much the agency spends on overseas protection assignments.¹³

The Washington Post obtained confidential documentation from White House and Secret Service staff that detailed some of the elaborate preparations that will be going into the latest Africa trip.¹⁴ At least 100 Secret Service protection agents will be needed to occupy security checkpoints along the journey, and an additional 100 will be flown in to ensure 24-hour staffing of the President's immediate security detail. The document also revealed that in light of lower quality hospitals and health care in the region, the U.S. Navy planned to send a vessel with a fully equipped medical center and staff to be kept offshore in the event of an emergency. Military cargo planes planned to airlift 56 support vehicles – including 14 limousines and 3 trucks tasked with carrying bulletproof glass for the President's hotel windows – and U.S. fighter jets will operate in shifts to provide 24-hour air protection.

All told, the plans for the event were estimated to cost between \$60-100 million, or \$7.5-12.5 million per day. However, the actual cost of the trip could vary substantially depending on whether the U.S. government follows through with those preliminary efforts. Also, it is unclear if there are additional costs that are not recorded in the planning documents at all.

A May 2013 article in *The Weekly Standard* published contract awards for the President's 2012 trip to Mexico. Those documents authorized spending not to exceed \$2,078,327.46 for hotel services, and \$693,836 for vehicle rentals.¹⁵

While these reports offer a broad range of costs associated with the President's travels, there are virtually no specific estimates available to the public.

The First Lady Abroad

The Chief Executive is not the only resident of the White House afforded the opportunity to travel abroad for official purposes. Often times, the First Lady will accompany the President on high-profile trips or make trips of her own, and her doing so likewise entails substantial security and logistical preparations.

For example, Michelle Obama accompanied the President to Northern Ireland in June 2013, but made a separate, solo stop in Dublin, where she stayed in the \$3,300 per night Princess Grace suite at the Shelbourne Hotel. Reports suggested a total of 30 rooms were booked for her security detail. The same 2012 CRS report cited above stated that the First Lady typically travels in a U.S. Air Force C-40 passenger jet, or, alternatively, the C-32 (as used by the Vice President). The cost per flight hour of the C-32 has been listed at \$42,936, according to a *Time* Magazine report based on Air Force Comptroller information obtained by well-known defense expert Winslow Wheeler.¹⁶

That trip was not the first time Michelle Obama's travels have attracted the scrutiny of some in the media. In June 2011, she paid a highly publicized visit to several African nations along with daughters Sasha and Malia, and in 2009, she traveled on a separate plane to join the President in Copenhagen. There, they lobbied (unsuccessfully) for the International Olympic Committee to select their home city of Chicago to host the 2016 Olympics. In spite of the intense coverage these trips garnered, Mrs. Obama is hardly the only First Lady to avail herself of taxpayer-subsidized travel plans.

In 1907, First Lady Edith Roosevelt became the first to travel abroad when she accompanied then-President Teddy Roosevelt to Panama. Edith Wilson, wife of Woodrow, sailed with the President to Paris in 1918 as part of the diplomatic procedures held after the end of World War I. While it is difficult to say conclusively which First Lady is the most traveled, some have taken a more active role in foreign relations than others while their husbands have held office.

Jacqueline Kennedy traveled to Europe in 1961, making stops in Paris, Vienna, London, and Greece. She then traveled as a "goodwill ambassador" to India and Pakistan the following year, and took a vacation in Italy. Pat Nixon traveled extensively as well, making trips to China, South America, and Africa at various points throughout her time in the White House.¹⁷

Laura Bush frequently traveled abroad with and without President George W. Bush during his two terms in office. Among her trips was a 10-day European excursion that included stops in Paris, Budapest, and Prague in 2002. She also made 5 separate trips to Africa to raise awareness about malaria and HIV/AIDS, a trip to Burma, and a stop in Panama.¹⁸

Presidential Travel Going Forward

There are good sociopolitical reasons to believe that Obama's international travel will increase in his second term. Scholars at the Brookings Institution released a report in December

2012 entitled “What to Expect in the Second Term: Presidential Travel and the Rise of Legacy Building, 1957-2009.” In that study, the authors noted that with the rise of the 24-hour news cycle, a “permanent campaign” strategy of sorts emerges in a President’s first term, which confines him more to domestic than international travel as he seeks to maintain a highly visible “public Presidency.”

Indeed, for all Presidents since Eisenhower, Brookings found that first-term travel has been focused largely on domestic locales – especially “swing states” that can make or break reelection efforts – while second-term travel is marked by a significant increase in foreign trips, perhaps as Presidents seek to cement a historical legacy. As noted in the study:

[A Presidential] legacy might be built atop signature domestic policy issues, but arguably, international travel provides a less contentious and, perhaps, personally appealing way to raise their stature. Presidents often shine most brightly and are perceived as most statesmanlike when representing the United States abroad. We would therefore expect that as ... domestic travel becomes less dependent on Electoral College strategies, presidents would venture outside of the country more frequently.¹⁹

Conclusion

The President has the important responsibility of representing the nation on a global scale, as well as maintaining key diplomatic relationships with other world leaders. For many reasons, foreign travel is a necessary, albeit expensive, part of the job. Given that reality, and that official travel is funded with public dollars, taxpayers should be offered greater accountability regarding the full cost of these trips, especially as modern Presidents take more of them.

About the Author

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The data and analysis in this report were compiled with the assistance of Director of Research Demian Brady.

Notes

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