

President's Secret Air Force



The photo this winter of a smiling Mar-a-Lago guest with the uniformed military aide who carries the “nuclear football” was a rare—and unease-inducing—public reminder that just steps from the president at all times are the keys to end the world as we know it. Americans normally see very little of the massive apparatus that surrounds the modern presidency—and it’s easy to forget that much of it exists primarily to help ensure that the commander in chief, wherever he is in the world, is able to access the nation’s nuclear weapons and launch a retaliatory strike.

That communications and security infrastructure drives the enormous cost of moving a president around the country. Critics have said that President Donald Trump’s weekend jaunts to Mar-a-Lago cost upward of \$3 million each, but even that is just a rough estimate. The true costs of presidential travel are spread through so many offices, budgets and secret funds that it’s unlikely that even the government has any real sense of the precise cost of White House travel. One GAO study in recent years suggested it was upward of \$100 million a year, with much of that price tag reflecting the roughly \$180,000-an-hour cost of flying the Boeing 747s that normally operate as “Air Force One,” the codename for any Air Force plane carrying the commander in chief.

But that famous blue-and-white Boeing 747 is just the most visible symbol of presidential travel. There’s much more that unfolds behind the scenes. A presidential trip involves hundreds of military and government personnel and often requires dozens of flights, including a backup for Air Force One and transport planes that move the motorcade, helicopters and communications gear. And for shorter trips or smaller airports, other planes can step in too: The Boeing 757s that normally fly the vice president as Air Force Two might be used this summer to shuttle Trump on the short hop to his expected summer escape at the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey.

And then there's a whole other fleet that the Air Force tries to keep out of sight. Ever since the 1960s, the United States has been building and equipping a special set of planes whose sole purpose has been to evacuate the president in the event of a nuclear war and allow him to command a war from wherever he may be.

The airplanes, while not technically secret, are rarely mentioned—the Air Force does not even publicly acknowledge owning some of them—even though they're always at the president's beck and call. Through interviews, declassified records and a careful review of Air Force manuals and other historical documents, though, it's possible to piece together a window into this secret fleet. As it turns out, the biggest secret surrounding the fleet isn't the planes themselves—it's where the planes are supposed to land after scooping up the president, an answer that lies in a key friendship of first lady Jackie Kennedy.

The special presidential evacuation procedures begin with the primary Air Force One planes themselves: On September 11, 2001, as President George W. Bush raced into the air following his school appearance in Sarasota, Florida, the crew activated a secret, classified capability aboard the 747 that speeds emergency launches, rocketing the plane into the sky at what seemed to passengers and observers like an impossibly steep pitch to minimize its exposure to any lurking surface-to-air missiles. "There are only two 747s in the world that can take off like that," one of the flight stewards said that day, leaning over to a congressman who was aboard. "And they're both called Air Force One."



On September 11, 2001, George W. Bush spent the day aboard Air Force One, arguing with his closest advisers about whether or not to go back to Washington, DC, from Sarasota, Florida, where they were making a routine education trip. Throughout the course of the day, the plane snaked from Sarasota, over the Gulf of Mexico, to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, and eventually back to Andrews Air Force Base outside of Washington, DC.



President Bush watches TV news coverage (left) of the attacks from his office on Air Force One and ush conferring with Andrew Card in the President's bedroom aboard Air Force One



An F-16 escorts Air Force One, September 11, 2001, from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska to Andrews Air Force Base.

Then an even larger presidential fleet is kept ready for special emergency use: The Air Force has four specially outfitted Boeing 747s, known as E-4B Nightwatch planes, that could serve as the “National Airborne Operations Center.” In operation since the 1970s, these airborne command posts were long considered the best chance for a Cold War president to survive a nuclear attack. Unlike the ceremonial and comfort-focused Air Force One, the E-4B airborne command posts are flying war-rooms—staffed by dozens of military analysts, strategists and communication aides who would guide the president through the first days of a nuclear war. The planes also include special gear like a five-mile-long trailing wire antenna that would ensure that the president could remain in contact with the nuclear submarine fleet even after ground-based communications had been destroyed.

Through the final decades of the Cold War, an E-4B Nightwatch plane always stood on alert at Andrews Air Force Base, ready to whisk the president skyward with just 15 minutes' warning. Even today, one of those four "Doomsday" planes, known to their crews as "Air Force One When It Counts," regularly travels with or near the president, particularly on overseas trips. When the president is in the United States, an E-4B always remains on alert at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska, its engines turning 24 hours a day, ready to launch and rendezvous with the president in the event of an emergency evacuation.

Yet even those Doomsday planes represent just one corner of the emergency air fleet at the president's fingertips, all of which is easy to hide inside the large-scale logistics of a presidential trip.

A day ahead of President Barack Obama's visit to Germany in June 2009, a white unmarked Gulfstream III touched down at Stuttgart Airport. As with all presidential and vice presidential travel, preparations began months before liftoff, and U.S. military aircraft had been streaming into nearby Dresden for weeks, shuttling staff, communications gear, security teams, helicopters and armored vehicles ahead of the president.

The Air Force groups those missions into three main categories—codenamed PHOENIX BANNER, PHOENIX SILVER and PHOENIX COPPER. A PHOENIX BANNER mission is a "special air mission" directly supporting the president; PHOENIX SILVER designates a flight supporting the vice president; and "PHOENIX COPPER" denotes flights flown in support of the Secret Service for VIPs other than the president and vice president. The basic procedures for such flights fill page after page of a manual, [*Air Force Instruction #11-289*](#), and carefully delineate how seats should be configured on transport aircraft (one of the six seats must be reserved for Marine One security personnel if a helicopter is on board), how presidential limousines should be loaded (driven forward, not backed in), how weapons can be carried aboard (Secret Service agents are limited to three clips of ammo on their person and three more in their baggage), whether alcohol can be served to passengers (sometimes), and the specific tie-downs necessary for transporting various helicopters.

As part of those PHOENIX BANNER flights—even though most of the presidential motorcade for that Germany trip would be made up of local black Mercedes sedans—the Secret Service and the Air Force had flown to Dresden multiple heavily armored limousines, Secret Service Suburbans and communications vans for the president, staff and security to use, a normal configuration of vehicles known as the "secure package." Helicopters from the Marine One squadron, HMX-1, had been flown over aboard transport planes to help the president travel around Germany.

But at first glance, none of that was related at all to the \$40 million Gulfstream that landed in Stuttgart—an hour's flight away from Dresden—a day ahead of Obama's Germany visit. The white unmarked jet blended in among the anonymous luxury jets that fill many major airports around the

world—yet it had no apparent business in Stuttgart, and its crew hung close to the plane. It was in Germany only for a day and then promptly took off around the time the president departed Germany for the next leg of his trip, to France. As Air Force One went to Caen, the Gulfstream flew across the English Channel to the UK’s Mildenhall Air Force Base, where it waited in a hangar just an hour’s flight away from Obama’s visit to the beaches of Normandy for the anniversary of D-Day on June 6. Then the Gulfstream flew back to Andrews Air Force Base in the United States. On no leg of the trip did the plane appear to have any purpose whatsoever. Only someone who looked up its tail number, 60403, would discover its secret.



The C-20C in flight.

The Gulfstream was the Air Force’s plane 86-0403, one of three special presidential aircraft long tasked with evacuating the president in an emergency and preserving the so-called National Command Authorities, the officials with authority to launch nuclear weapons. Known as C-20Cs, the planes don’t really officially exist. But for years, they have gone nearly everywhere the president travels, paralleling presidential trips, serving as his chameleons, blending in anonymously at airports close by presidential visits—but never at the same airport where Air Force One itself is landing. During one of Bush’s trips to Homestead Air Force Base in Miami in 2001, for example, a C-20C shadowed the trip, standing by at Patrick Air Force Base near Cape Canaveral.

The Air Force’s website doesn’t acknowledge the existence of the C-20Cs; neither did the listing of aircraft maintained by the 89th Airlift Wing, the Air Force unit at Joint Base Andrews that runs presidential missions. As one Air Force official put it when asked years ago, “Our position is that we do not have any aircraft called a C-20C.” One of the only references to the planes is on the government’s official [official master list](#) of aircraft designations, which offers only the vaguest

information on a similar Gulfstream jet known as a C-20B, explaining that that plane “operates on DC power” and offers “upgraded avionics used for the President and other high-ranking officials.” The C-20C it then describes only as a “modified C-20B with enhanced, secure communications. Used to support senior-level personnel and to provide backup for Air Force One.”

The planes in the C-20C fleet, known by their tail numbers as 50049, 50050 and 60403, were delivered to the Air Force in 1985, as the Reagan administration’s massive investment in “continuity of government” operations upgraded the government’s command-and-control systems. Like the E-4B National Airborne Operations Center planes, the C-20Cs were purposefully kept a little antiquated, with slightly older dial-and-gauge cockpits, rather than the more modern all-glass computer displays, to help protect the plane from the electromagnetic pulse that would accompany a nearby nuclear explosion. But the gear aboard is top-notch, with special satellite communications networks and special classified defensive measures that would protect the plane during an attack.

Over the years, as different missions have called for it, the planes’ livery has switched back-and-forth between a basic unmarked white and the standard distinctive blue-and-white marking made famous by industrial designer Raymond Loewy during JFK’s administration. Regardless of how they’re painted, though, wherever the president is, a C-20C plane is usually nearby. When the C-20C known as tail-number 50049 traveled to the Czech Republic in April 2010 to support Obama’s visit to Prague to sign the new START treaty with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, it was an unmarked white, as it was the following March 21, 2011, when it traveled incognito to Santiago, Chile, to support the president’s Latin American swing. The following year, it shadowed Obama and Air Force One on a surprise trip to Afghanistan on May 1, 2012, to mark the first anniversary of the death of Osama bin Laden. Its sister plane, 50050, was in Beijing for Obama’s November 2009 trip.

Under normal circumstances, the presidential traveling party never even sees the C-20s, but in special (and often high-risk) situations, presidents have actually traveled aboard the planes. In 2000, President Bill Clinton flew anonymously aboard an unmarked C-20 Gulfstream into Pakistan, while another aircraft followed as a decoy a few minutes behind on the same route using the call sign “Air Force One.” (Obama used another Air Force Gulfstream in the fleet, a standard Gulfstream V known in the military as a C-37, to take Michelle Obama out for a date night in 2009.)

The main purpose of the covert Gulfstreams, however—and the reason for their secrecy—is ensuring that the president maintains control of the nation’s nuclear weapons and can be safely evacuated in an emergency, particularly if the primary Air Force One is disabled or attacked or if the president can’t make it back to the airport where Air Force One was located. While the E-4B Nightwatch planes are meant to be long-term command centers, the C-20 aircraft—much smaller and able to carry far fewer passenger than a 747—are not meant as a long-term solution. Instead, their goal is to get the president to one of the roughly dozen major ground command posts scattered around the country from which he could securely lead the nation into war. In fact, this plan was nearly activated on September 11, 2001; after Bush took off from Florida, his staff’s original plan, before they realized the scope of the attacks that morning, had been to fly Air Force One to an airport near the

capital—like Norfolk, Virginia—where he could be transferred to a small jet like the C-20 and brought either back to D.C. or to an emergency command post.

The ability of the C-20s to land on a runway just half the length required for a 747 means that they're agile enough to use at nearly any airport in the world—which could be very useful if you were suddenly going to be trying to hide a president somewhere in the United States.

Specifically, if you're trying to hide a president at Mount Weather in Virginia.



Since the 1950s, Mount Weather—a mountain about 45 minutes from downtown Washington—has served as the nuclear redoubt for the executive branch. An old weather-research station—hence its name—that once held conscientious objectors during World War II, the mountain was hollowed out during the Eisenhower administration to serve as the primary evacuation point for the executive branch, where the president, or his successor, would reconvene the remnants of government after an attack and start to rebuild the United States. Over the years, Mount Weather—long known in government parlance by its codename HIGH POINT—has grown into a sprawling city, a government-in-waiting, that spent decades shrouded in secrecy until the 1970s, when an accidental aircraft crash nearby led reporters and Congress to begin asking questions. Despite its public exposure, the facility continued operation, and, on September 11, the congressional leadership was evacuated to it by helicopter from the Capitol. It's been run since the 1980s by the Federal Emergency Management Agency—which, little known to the public, oversees the government's secret continuity planning—and today sports its own fire department, its own police force and even a bar, known as the Balloon Shed. To view a News 4 NBC 2015 video on Mount Weather refer to <http://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/Mt-Weather-Governments-Backup-Emergency-Operations-Center-Activated-for-Power-Outage-in-April-308565781.html>

But Mount Weather had a problem when it was first built: It has no plane runways, just a long grass strip and, later, concrete helipads. As planes became the primary way that presidents traveled, government planners were forced to find a convenient solution in the event that a president or other senior officials needed to be brought in by airplane. The solution turned out to be just a few miles

away, down at the base of the mountain in Upperville, Virginia: The sprawling, palatial 2,000-acre estate of the late Paul Mellon, known as Oak Spring Farms, which features an odd amenity for horse country—a paved private airstrip.

Paul and “Bunny” Mellon combined two large fortunes when they married in 1948—he a banking heir, she heir to the Gillette fortune—and they devoted themselves to horse-breeding, art collecting and Washington society, where they enjoyed close relationships with the upper echelon of D.C. It was Bunny Mellon, a famed landscape architect, who worked with Jackie Kennedy in the 1960s to make over a stale and worn-out garden dating to the Wilson administration into the modern White House Rose Garden. Mellon in a 1969 interview described her gardening aesthetic as “nothing should be noticed,” but the phrase also appeared to help explain the couples’ reclusive and publicity-shy lifestyle in Virginia’s horse country. Given their ties to the Washington elite and their aversion to publicity, they appeared to have the perfect place to hide an airfield for Mount Weather.

The estate’s private airstrip, which Bunny and Paul Mellon used for their own private plane, originally came into existence in the 1950s, just as government miners began to carve out the bunker at Mount Weather. On charts from the early 1960s, the Mellon runway was just 3,500 feet long—sufficient, for instance, to land a Lockheed JetStar C-140, the plane that served as the day-to-day workhorse of the presidential fleet for staff and VIPs. (Lyndon Johnson, who used Jetstars to ferry back and forth to his Texas ranch, referred to the diminutive planes good-naturedly as “Air Force One-Half.”) By 1962, as the Kennedys became frequent guests at Oak Springs—Jackie had her own cottage on the estate—the Mellons’ runway had been lengthened to 4,100 feet, and in the 1970s the paved runway underwent a third expansion to 5,100 feet (i.e. The landing requirement for a C-20). By then, it also included lighting to ease night approaches.

When the Reagan administration began a heavy investment in “continuity of government” and command-and-control networks in the 1980s, the Air Force selected the Gulfstream III jet—what became known as the C-20—as a replacement for the Jetstars that had long served as the smaller staff and VIP ferries in the presidential fleet.

The preceding was expanded and adapted from <i>Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government’s Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die</i> (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

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