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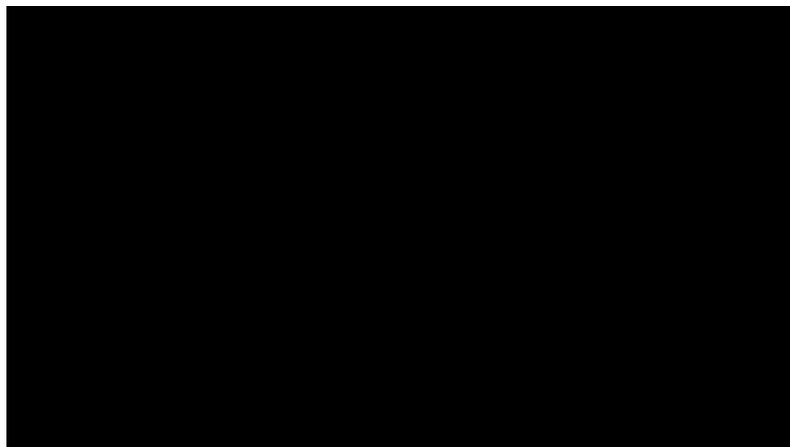
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# White House's \$17 billion helicopter fleet

By [Kyle Mizokami](#)  
 13 hours ago  
 The Daily Beast



The Pentagon has [awarded a contract](#) to begin development of the most expensive helicopters ever made.

Each helicopter will probably cost at least \$400 million. The entire project, to build at least 23 helicopters, [has been estimated](#) to eventually cost between \$10 billion to \$17 billion. By comparison, the project could pay the combined defense budgets of [Finland, Norway, and Sweden](#) for one year (\$16.9 billion).

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The passengers for this enormously expensive helicopter fleet? The President of the United States and his entourage.

The first president to fly regularly in helicopters was Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower faced a two-hour commute to and from his summer home in Rhode Island, a commute that could be shaved down considerably if taken by helicopter. In these early days of the Cold War the president needed to be moved around quickly—the president could not be stuck on a ferry for an hour in case the Soviet Union launched a nuclear attack.

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The South Lawn of the White House was designated as the official presidential helicopter landing pad, and official flights to Andrews Air Force Base began.

A Marine Corps helicopter squadron, HMX-1 ("[The Knighthawks](#)") is responsible for flying and maintaining the fleet of presidential helicopters. The current Marine One helicopters are derivatives of the Sikorsky Sea King helicopter, which was phased out of the U.S. military during the 1990s. Those currently flying were built somewhere around 1975, making them only 14 years younger than President Obama himself.

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In 2002, the U.S. government solicited proposals for replacing the Sea Kings with a new, modern helicopter. In the wake of 9/11, with concerns about terrorist attacks against the president, the call went out for a helicopter that could fend off a terrorist shoulder-fired surface to air missile and keep functioning in the wake of a nuclear attack on Washington, D.C.

In 2005, the Department of Defense announced that the team of Lockheed Martin and the Anglo-Italian helicopter giant AgustaWestland had won the contract to build 28 presidential helicopters. The helicopters would be known as the VH-71 Kestrel. (The "V" stands for "[VIP Transport](#)")

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At the time the contract was signed, the estimated cost of the program was \$6.5 billion, or \$232 million per helicopter, including development costs. Unfortunately, the Kestrel program spun rapidly out of control, dragged down by the weight of program requirements and other "good ideas."

Marine One helicopters must satisfy a number of requirements. The president's helos must be small enough to land

Marine One helicopter waits for President Barack Obama near the Rijksmuseum where Obama was visiting ...

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The president's helicopters must have a full suite of defensive countermeasures to throw off the targeting and guidance systems of missiles. They must be "hardened" against the electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear blast that could fry electronics and knock out everything from smartphones to helicopters.

Secure communications are must-haves. Marine One must be able to send and receive encrypted communications and hold secure videoconferences with U.S. military and government leaders worldwide, including those in charge of U.S. nuclear forces.

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Finally, the president's helicopter must include a toilet.

So many requirements were piled on the Kestrel program that it was decided the helicopters would need new engines, gear boxes, and drive trains just to lift everything, not to mention a 180-pound President of the United States. The program quickly became so expensive each helicopter—then estimated to cost about \$400 million in 2009 dollars—[rivalled the cost of Air Force One](#), the president's Boeing 747 jumbo jet.

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Even President Obama seemed bewildered by the runaway program. "The helicopter I have seems perfectly adequate to me," Obama said. "Of course, I've never had a helicopter before. Maybe I've been deprived and I didn't know it."

The program was cancelled in 2009, with \$3 billion already spent.

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The new, initial contract awarded to the American defense contractor Sikorsky, is valued at \$1.24 billion. Under the terms of the new contract, the U.S. military will take delivery of two prototype helicopters—based on the Sikorsky S-92 medium helicopter—in 2016. Another 21 fully capable helicopters will follow.

Why so many helicopters, essentially for one person? Marine One always flies with decoys—as many as five—when transporting the president. Multiple helicopters are also needed when the president travels outside Washington D.C., as fresh helicopters are cached along the route ahead of time.

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Time will tell if Sikorsky can hold down costs and deliver the helicopter on time. One thing's for sure, though: President Obama himself will never ride on one, except as a guest. The fleet of new presidential helicopters [should be fully operational by 2022](#), long after Obama has left office.

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### Man Killed Wife and Kids, Set Home Ablaze, Deputies Say

A Florida man shot his wife and two teenage children in the head, then scattered gasoline and fireworks around the mansion they rented before setting the home ablaze and killing himself, deputies said.

[ABC News](#)

### Teacher Slaps 9-Year-Old Boy, Then Slaps Him AGAIN

A Fremont, California, family plans to file a lawsuit against their nine-year-old son's teacher, who slapped the boy twice during class.

[The Daily Caller](#)

### Texas police officer shoots dead 93-year-old woman

A small town Texas police officer responding to an emergency call about a female with a gun has been suspended for shooting dead a 93-year-old woman in her home, authorities said on Thursday. Hearne police officer Stephen Stern

[Reuters](#)

### Lawyer: Parents blindsided by deal with teacher

DETROIT (AP) — The parents of a Michigan elementary school student who was videotaped while stuck in a classroom chair "have no recourse" but to sue now that the school district has decided not to follow through on its plan to

[Associated Press](#)

### There's Only One Butt Selfie Queen

Jen Selter has turned photos of her sculpted derriere into a moneymaking career. But copycats, don't get your hopes up. It's unlikely this level of selfie success will happen again.

[The Daily Beast](#)

### Curious squirrels make for hilarious photos (12 photos)

Photographer Max Ellis has become an internet star - after posting wacky photos of squirrels in hilarious situations, from being sent flying through the air in fear by a Buckaroo to lifting weights. Max

[Yahoo News](#)



### Chelsea Clinton to receive doctorate from Oxford

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton are in Oxford, England, this weekend to attend the graduation ceremonies of their daughter, Chelsea.

[Associated Press](#)

### A seemingly innocent Texas license plate got a man stopped by Mexican soldiers at the border

A man from Weslaco, Texas was driving with his parents Tuesday afternoon over the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge across the United States-Mexico border, when he was stopped for what

[Odd News](#)

### Fisherman Saves Baby Whale Tangled in Rope

It's not often you see a fisherman cutting a fish free, but that's exactly what one New Zealand man did after a baby humpback whale became trapped in cray pot lines off the coast of Australia. Fisherman Joe Brogan, 42, grabbed his knife and jumped...

[ABC News](#)

### NATO, facing assertive Russia, ponders what to do

BRUSSELS (AP) — Russia's ongoing confrontation with the West has ignited debate inside and outside the U.S.-led NATO alliance about what its responsibilities are, and how much of its time and effort should be spent to prepare for and if necessary counter Russian President Vladimir Putin's mili-

[Associated Press](#)

### Even though she's been paying rent, woman may be evicted from her home because she's been hospitalized for too long

Janice Crawford of Florida stands to be evicted from her home unless she's back in it by May 23.

[Odd News](#)

### NFL DRAFT: Texans pick Clowney; Manziel to Browns

NEW YORK (AP) — For nearly three years, Jadeveon Clowney couldn't wait to get to the NFL, and the league was just as eager to add the player some called the best defensive prospect in a decade.

[Associated Press](#)

### New frog species found in troubled Indian habitat (7 photos)

Scientists have discovered 14 new species of so-called dancing frogs in the jungle mountains of southern India — just in time, they fear, to watch them fade away. Indian biologists say they found

[Yahoo News](#)



### Elderly Missouri woman found guilty of killing husband 40 years ago

An elderly Missouri woman accused of killing her husband four decades ago and burying his body in an abandoned Wyoming gold mine was found guilty on Thursday of second-degree murder, a court official said. Alice Uden, 75, of

[Reuters](#)

### Female Columnists Still Deeply Concerned About Monica Lewinsky's Sexuality

Vanity Fair released its photo shoot with Monica Lewinsky on Wednesday, and we thought the pictures were great — tasteful, artistic even. Columnist Ruth Marcus at The Washington Post dis-

[The Atlantic Wire](#)

### Five items Congress deleted from Madison's original Bill of Rights

When James Madison spoke to the First Congress he proposed 20 amendments for a Bill of Rights, and not the 10 we all know about. So what did Congress delete from the final list that was ratified by the states?

[National Constitution Center](#)

### Witnesses: Mom was depressed before killing teens



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### The 3D printing revolution (20 photos)

Would you buy a \$300 3D printer? Apparently lots of people would, judging by the phenomenal success of the Micro 3D Printer on crowdfunding platform Kickstarter. With hours still to go in its cam-  
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