

GAO

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Report to the Ranking Minority Member,
Committee on Government Operations,
House of Representatives

April 1992

MILITARY AIRCRAFT

Policies on Government Officials' Use of 89th Military Airlift Wing Aircraft



146374



**United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548**

**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

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April 9, 1992

**The Honorable Frank Horton
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives**

Dear Mr. Horton:

This report responds to your request that we review the policies governing the use of military aircraft from the Air Force's 89th Military Airlift Wing by executive branch officials and Members of Congress. To provide more assurance that the 89th Wing aircraft are being used appropriately and consistently, our report recommends clarification of the policies on use of the aircraft.

We are sending copies of this report to the congressional leadership, the Executive Office of the President; the Secretaries of Defense, State, Energy, Treasury, and the Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Attorney General; the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; and to other congressional committees and offices. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

This report was prepared under the direction of Norman J. Rabkin, Associate Director, who may be reached on (202) 275-4361 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix I.

Sincerely yours,

**Frank C. Conahan
Assistant Comptroller General**

Executive Summary

Purpose

The Air Force's 89th Military Airlift Wing provides worldwide airlift for the President, the Vice President, and other high ranking dignitaries of the United States and foreign governments.

The Ranking Minority Member of the House Committee on Government Operations requested that GAO review the use of military aircraft by executive and legislative branch officials. Specifically, GAO agreed to examine the policies that prescribe the use of 89th Wing aircraft and to determine whether (1) the policies were consistent and uniform for both branches, (2) they were adequate to prevent abuse, (3) proper reimbursement policies existed where appropriate, and (4) sufficient enforcement safeguards existed to ensure policy compliance.

Background

When not used for higher priority purposes, 20 of the 22 aircraft in the 89th Wing's inventory are available for use by many executive and legislative branch officials and their parties. The Wing's other two aircraft are for the President's exclusive use. In addition, the military departments have about 390 operational support aircraft that are generally available for use by government officials. The use of the 89th Wing aircraft as well as other military aircraft by government officials is addressed in a variety of official policy documents, including Office of Management and Budget Circular A-126. The policies generally describe circumstances under which use of the aircraft may be authorized but do not dictate or prescribe their use.

The 89th Wing has averaged about 900 trips each of the last several years. The President, White House officials, and others traveling for the White House are the most frequent users of the 89th Wing aircraft, with Department of Defense officials a close second, and congressional travelers third. GAO estimates that the cost of operations, excluding depreciation, for the 89th Wing for fiscal year 1991 was at least \$150 million.

Results in Brief

The policies that address the use of military aircraft are so broad and vague as to have little impact on the use of the 89th Wing aircraft by either executive or legislative branch officials. The use of the aircraft is free of charge to all but a few users and no one independently verifies compliance with the policies. GAO believes the policies and their implementation are inadequate and do not provide assurance that the Wing is being used appropriately and consistently. GAO believes that the policies should clearly state that the 89th Wing should be used only on an exception basis

and that a documented justification be available to demonstrate that each use was appropriate.

Principal Findings

Policies Do Not Define or Specify Who May Travel

Although the policies state that the 89th Wing aircraft are to be used only for official business, they do not define "official business" or the circumstances in which use of these aircraft would or would not be appropriate. Accordingly, almost any travel by high-level executive branch officials or Members of Congress can be justified, at the traveler's discretion, as "official" and qualify for use of 89th Wing aircraft. Also, several executive branch officials, in addition to the President and Vice President, have special authorization to use government aircraft whenever they travel by air. About 26 percent of the trips on 89th Wing aircraft during GAO's review period were taken by such individuals.

Policies Do Not Guide or Restrict Officials' Travel

A general policy established by Circular A-126 is that the use of government aircraft should be restricted to situations where it is cost-effective or where commercial aircraft services cannot meet the travel requirement. However, those restrictions do not have a major impact on officials' travel on 89th Wing aircraft. For example, the cost of using the 89th Wing aircraft is rarely considered because (1) travelers can readily assert that commercial aircraft services were not available to adequately meet their needs and, therefore, do not need to prepare a cost comparison, and (2) most user agencies, including the White House, Congress, and Department of Defense, do not reimburse the Air Force for using the aircraft.

Policies Are Not Actively Enforced

The Air Force limits its role to scheduling and operating the 89th Wing aircraft. While Circular A-126 states that each use of the aircraft is to be justified and documented, the Air Force does not, nor does anyone else, independently verify that officials requesting use of the 89th Wing aircraft have complied with the policies. The assumption by the Air Force is that travelers have complied with the policies.

Policies Unclear on Spouses Traveling With Officials

The Secretary of Defense may, under certain conditions, approve the travel of officials' spouses and/or dependents. For at least some trips taken during GAO's review period, spouses of executive and legislative branch officials were approved to travel without reimbursement. GAO believes that a governmentwide policy is needed to clarify the circumstances when nonofficial passengers may travel on government aircraft and when reimbursements may be required. While some reimbursements are made, no one independently verifies that all nonofficial passengers on 89th Wing aircraft that should have reimbursed have done so and at the appropriate rates.

Recommendations

GAO recommends that Circular A-126 and the other policies that address executive branch use of the 89th Wing aircraft be clarified to provide better assurance that the aircraft are being used appropriately and consistently, as discussed below. GAO also recommends that Congress adopt similar policies for the legislative branch officials' use of 89th Wing aircraft.

The revised executive branch policy and the new congressional policy should (1) clearly describe how, when, by whom, and for what purposes the 89th Wing aircraft should be used; (2) provide specific guidance on how travelers should determine whether commercial aircraft services are available; (3) provide explicit guidance as to when and how travelers are to make cost comparisons; (4) clearly identify the circumstances under which both official and nonofficial travelers should reimburse the government for their travel and the appropriate amount to be reimbursed; and (5) clearly specify the extent to which compliance with each of these policies should be documented and controlled.

Agency Comments

As requested, GAO did not obtain agency comments on a draft of this report. However, GAO sought the views of responsible executive and legislative branch officials during the course of its work and incorporated them where appropriate. GAO held discussions with officials from the Office of Management and Budget, which recently proposed revising its Circular A-126. On April 8, 1992, those officials agreed to consider this report's conclusions and recommendation in revising the Circular.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
GAO	General Accounting Office
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense

Introduction

The 89th Military Airlift Wing, located at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, is a component of the Air Force's Military Airlift Command. The mission of the 89th Wing is to provide safe and reliable worldwide airlift for the President of the United States, the Vice President, cabinet members, and other high-ranking dignitaries of the United States and foreign governments.

Assets of the 89th Wing

The first "special mission" aircraft were specifically designated to transport high-ranking government officials in 1936. The 1254th Air Transport Squadron, which subsequently became the 89th Wing, was established in 1948 with 11 aircraft. As of December 1991, the 89th Wing had 22 fixed-wing aircraft and 19 helicopters. The helicopters are used to meet transportation needs in the Washington, D.C., area and are not discussed in this report. The Wing also has two C-12 aircraft that are used for training and, according to Air Force officials, are generally not available for transporting government officials. Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 show several of the Wing's aircraft. Table 1.1 lists the 89th Wing aircraft and some of their key characteristics.

Table 1.1: The 89th Wing's Inventory of Aircraft as of December 1991

Type	Quantity	Model year	Maximum range (hours)	Seating capacity
C-9C	3	1973	5.5	42
C-20B	7	1986	8.0	12
C-20C	3	1986	8.0	12
C-137B	3	1958	8.0	59
C-137C	4	1962-70	10.0	61
VC-25A	2	1988	12.0	70

The two VC-25As are the most recent additions to the inventory and are for the President's exclusive use. However, on occasion, he also uses other aircraft, such as the C-20Cs, as his travel needs dictate. When the President is on board any of these aircraft, it is referred to as "Air Force One."

Figure 1.1: C-20



Figure 1.2: C-9

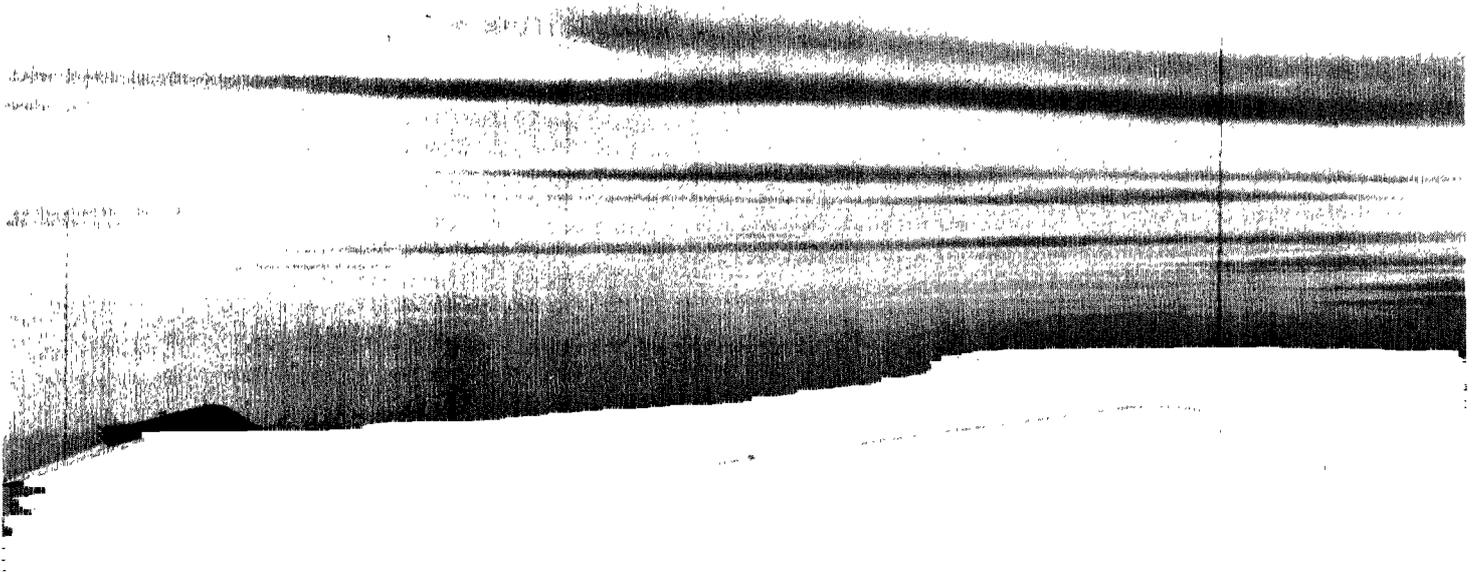
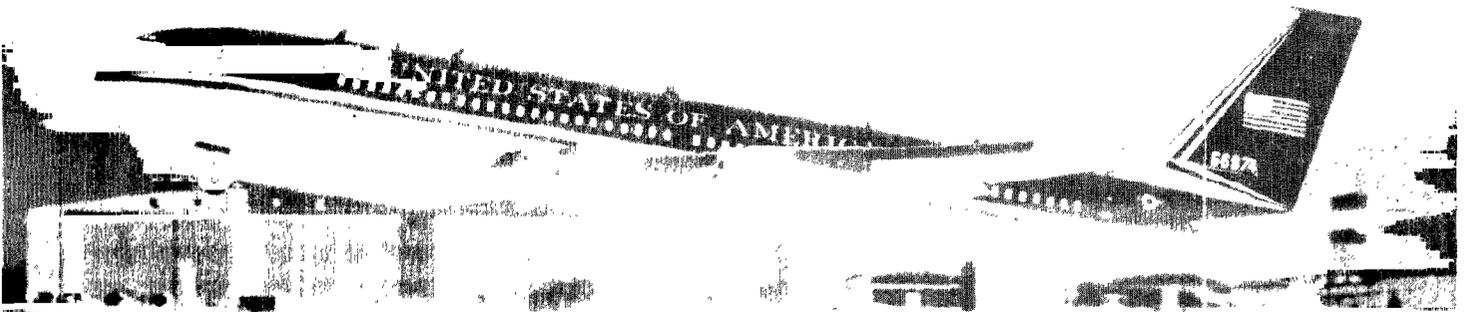


Figure 1.3: C-137



At any one time, some of the Wing's aircraft may be out of service for regularly scheduled maintenance. According to an Air Force official, an average of about 17 to 19 of the 22 aircraft are available on a daily basis. The 89th Wing has averaged about 900 trips for each of the last several years.

Annual funding for the operation of the 89th Wing is spread over several program elements, and a complete estimate of the annual cost to operate the Wing was not available. Using Air Force data, we estimate that the Wing's cost of operations for fiscal year 1991 was at least \$150 million. That estimate includes pay for about 1,600 military and civilian personnel,

aircraft fuel,¹ contractor logistics support for aircraft maintenance, and a variety of other operating and maintenance expenses. The estimate does not include any depreciation of existing aircraft, acquisition costs for new aircraft, or any costs for construction of military facilities.

According to Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and Air Force officials, the number of fixed-wing aircraft in the Wing's inventory is not based on a projection of the expected number and types of missions to be flown. These officials stated that the 22 fixed-wing aircraft currently in the inventory have been accumulated over the years in a number of ways. For example, when the two VC-25A aircraft entered the inventory in 1990, the two C-137s that had served as Air Force One were retained and are now used primarily by the Vice President and other officials.

Use of 89th Wing Aircraft

Other than the two aircraft set aside for the President's exclusive use, the remaining 89th Wing aircraft are made available for executive, legislative, and judicial branch officials to use when not employed for higher priority purposes. Essentially, travel by the President and heads of state of foreign countries have the highest priority; followed by the Vice President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Supreme Court Justices, the Cabinet, Members of Congress,² presidential missions and delegations, and other high-level executive branch officials; and then by assistant secretaries, generals and admirals, and other comparably ranked officials. However, the 89th Wing aircraft are only one of the transportation options available to federal government officials. Others include commercial airlines, commercial aircraft charter service, civilian agency aircraft, other military aircraft,³ and various types of ground transportation.

According to Air Force officials, the Office of the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, Special Air Missions, is responsible for scheduling use of the 89th Wing aircraft and receives requests for travel on the 89th Wing aircraft for officials of the executive and legislative branches. Upon receiving the travel request, the staff of the Special Air Missions office checks the availability of aircraft that will meet the specific travel requirements, such

¹The amount of fuel used in the estimate understates the total fuel used by the Wing because it does not include any fuel used on presidential trips. According to the Air Force, the White House does not divulge the distances and hence, the fuel consumed, on the President's trips.

²Other than the Speaker of the House, no other officers of the Congress, such as the President pro tempore of the Senate or Majority and Minority Leaders of the House and Senate, are specifically listed in the Department of Defense's priority lists.

³For example, the military departments had, as of mid-1991, about 390 operational support aircraft that are used for, among other things, passenger airlift.

as the number of passengers and destination. If an appropriate aircraft is available, the trip is scheduled, subject to change if a higher priority mission is later scheduled. If an aircraft is not available, the staff checks the priority level of the existing reservations. If one or more reservations has a lower priority, the lowest priority reservation could be canceled and replaced by a higher priority trip. If all have higher priority, the staff of the Special Air Missions office notifies the travel requester of the situation and suggests that the trip dates or aircraft requirements be changed. On occasion, some travel requirements have been combined or other changes made based on discussions with the travelers.

According to Air Force and OSD officials, almost all travel requests can normally be accommodated except for brief periods during the year—typically during congressional recesses—when they are unable to schedule some requests by both executive and legislative officials because of the unavailability of aircraft. The resolution of these scheduling problems is usually elevated to higher authorities in OSD or the White House. Although the number of such situations is unknown because records on informal travel requests and their disposition are not maintained, the Air Force says it is a relatively small number and, very often, it can find acceptable alternatives and/or compromises. We could not verify the accuracy of these statements.

Prior GAO Reports

We have not previously reviewed the policies and procedures in place on the use of the 89th Wing aircraft. We have reported on the overall management and use of government aircraft by federal civilian agencies, specific aircraft management issues at individual agencies, and specific questions concerning the use of both government and military aircraft in certain situations. (A list of our related reports is included under "Related GAO Products.") On April 7, 1992, we reported on our review of the travel on military aircraft by selected high-level officials of the executive branch.⁴

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

On April 25, 1991, the Ranking Minority Member, House Committee on Government Operations, asked us to review the use of military aircraft by senior government officials in the executive and legislative branches. During discussions with the Ranking Minority Member's staff, we agreed to examine the policies that prescribe the use of military aircraft from the 89th Military Airlift Wing by executive branch officials and Members of Congress. Specifically, we set out to determine whether (1) the policies

⁴Military Aircraft: Travel by Selected Executive Branch Officials (GAO/AFMD-92-51, Apr. 7, 1992).

were consistent and uniform for both branches, (2) they were adequate to prevent abuse, (3) proper reimbursement policies existed where appropriate, and (4) sufficient enforcement safeguards existed to ensure policy compliance.

Our review focused on the use of the 89th Wing aircraft, rather than commercial airline services or other means, by executive and legislative branch officials.⁵ We did not review (1) the need for each trip, (2) per diem or other travel expenses, or (3) any travel on other military or government aircraft. We obtained and analyzed information on the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Department of Defense (DOD), White House, congressional, and other executive agency policies and procedures on the use of government aircraft in general and those of the 89th Wing in particular. We held discussions with officials from OSD and the Air Force on how they implemented the various policies affecting the operation of the 89th Wing. We also held extensive discussions with Air Force officials on how requests for travel on the 89th Wing aircraft are made, who approves those requests, and how the aircraft reservation system works.

We obtained, organized, and analyzed available information on flights made by the 89th Wing aircraft during the January 1, 1989, through March 31, 1991, period. We worked closely with the Office of the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Special Air Missions, to ensure that our presentation of flight-related summary information was complete and accurate. We also visited the 89th Wing to learn about its history and mission and how flights are planned and conducted and to tour the aircraft and facilities.

We also held discussions with representatives of OSD, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Air Force, and the Departments of Treasury, Justice, State, and Energy on the policies and processes in requesting and approving the use of the 89th Wing aircraft and the policies for reimbursements. We also held similar discussions with senior staff personnel from the leadership offices and several committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate. In our discussions, we used actual trip examples to determine if those processes were being implemented as planned. We also requested any relevant documentation that showed that the trips complied with existing policies.

To estimate the annual costs to operate the 89th Wing, we obtained (1) operations and maintenance funding information from the Wing's

⁵According to the Air Force, judicial branch officials have traveled on the 89th Wing aircraft in the past but did not during the January 1989 through March 1991 period.

financial plans, (2) contractor logistics support costs from the actual and projected contracts, (3) fuel usage and unit cost estimates, and (4) actual and projected costs for military and civilian personnel assigned to the Wing. We provided our cost estimate to the Air Force for review, and with some adjustments, the Air Force determined that it was accurate, complete, and reasonable. We also obtained information on the hourly rates charged by the Air Force for each type of aircraft. Although we used those rates to compare the cost of using commercial aircraft services to the cost of using military aircraft, we did not verify their accuracy or completeness.

During our review, we obtained data and/or held discussions with officials from the following organizations:

**Executive Office of the
President**

**Office of the Associate Counsel to the President
Office of Management and Budget**

Congress of the United States

**Office of the Speaker of the House of Representatives
Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives
House Committee on Administration
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
House Committee on Armed Services
Office of the Secretary of the Senate
Senate Committee on Armed Services
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**

**Office of the Secretary of
Defense**

**Office of the Executive Secretary
Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense—Production and Logistics
(Transportation Policy)
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs
Office of the General Counsel**

Department of the Air Force

**Office of the Secretary of the Air Force
Office of the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, Special Air Missions
Office of Legislative Liaison
Headquarters, Military Airlift Command
Accounting and Finance Center, Bolling Air Force Base
89th Military Airlift Wing, Andrews Air Force Base**

Department of the Navy

Office of Legislative Affairs

Department of the Army	Office of Legislative Liaison
Joint Chiefs of Staff	Office of the Chairman
Department of Justice	Office of the Deputy Assistant Attorney General—Administration Office of the Deputy Assistant Attorney General—Personnel and Administration
Department of the Treasury	Office of the Secretary of Treasury Office of the Comptroller
Department of State	Office of the Secretary of State
Department of Energy	Office of the Secretary of Energy Office of the Comptroller

As requested, we did not obtain agency comments on a draft of this report. However, we sought the views of responsible officials within the Air Force, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Office of Management and Budget, selected congressional committees, and the leadership offices of the Senate and the House of Representatives during the course of our work and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

We conducted our review from May 1991 to March 1992 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

89th Military Airlift Wing Activity

For the 27-month period of our review, the President, White House officials, and others traveling for the White House were the most frequent users of the 89th Wing aircraft, with officials from DOD a close second, and congressional travelers third. While about one-third of all trips on 89th Wing aircraft were to destinations outside the United States, about 58 percent of the congressional trips were to such destinations. Other than the name of the person reserving the aircraft, little information on any of the trips is retained by DOD or the Air Force.

Number of 89th Wing Trips by Authorizing Agency

Using data from the Air Force's Special Air Missions office, we calculated that the 89th Wing made a total of 2,047 trips from January 1, 1989, through March 31, 1991. We defined a trip as the flights of a specific aircraft from the time it leaves Andrews Air Force Base until it returns. A trip usually consisted of the flights to the destination(s) and the return flight to Andrews. However, on some occasions, one trip consisted of the flights to take the travelers to their destination and then return to Andrews; a second trip consisted of the flights to retrieve them. Many trips involved several stops at different locations or destinations. Our review included trips with any flights during the period and, as a result, a few trips ended after March 31, 1991.

With the exception of congressional trips, the Air Force's Special Air Missions office classified each of the trips on the 89th Wing by the agency that authorized the trip. Using these classifications, we calculated that, of the 2,047 trips, the White House authorized 868, or about 42 percent of the total; the military organizations—the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army, Navy, and Air Force—authorized 790, or about 39 percent of the total; and other executive branch agencies authorized the remaining 52 trips, or about 3 percent of the total. On the other hand, all requests for Members of Congress or other legislative branch officials to travel on the 89th Wing aircraft are processed through the legislative affairs office in OSD to the Air Force's Special Air Missions office. Based on those requests, 337 trips, or about 16 percent of the total, were classified as congressional trips. However, because some of those trips were taken at the invitation of OSD or the military departments, the Air Force's classification of congressional trips may be somewhat misleading. In addition, the number of trips in the White House total may also be somewhat misleading because it includes, as separate trips, the trips by aircraft that, as a matter of policy, accompany the President as a backup aircraft. Finally, not all trips authorized by an agency are taken by officials of that agency. For example, many of the Secretary of State's trips on the

89th Wing aircraft are included in the White House's total because those trips are considered presidential missions. Table 2.1 shows the total number of trips by agency—as classified by the Air Force—and whether the trips were to U.S. or non-U.S. destinations.

Table 2.1: Total Number and General Destination of Trips on 89th Wing Aircraft by Agency From January 1, 1989, Through March 31, 1991

Agency	Number of trips		
	Total	U.S.	Non-U.S.
White House	868	657	211
Department of Defense	790	548	242
OSD	228	172	56
Air Force	210	164	46
Army	206	108	98
Joint Chiefs of Staff	129	96	33
Navy	17	8	9
Congress	337	143	194
Department of State	38	33	5
Other agencies	14	4	10
Total	2,047	1,385	662

As shown in table 2.1, 662 trips, or about 32 percent of the total, were to non-U.S. destinations. Some of the agencies—the White House, OSD, and the Air Force—used the 89th Wing primarily for domestic trips, while others, such as Congress and the Army, used it more frequently for trips to non-U.S. destinations. For example, of the 337 congressional trips, 194, or about 58 percent, were to non-U.S. destinations.

Over 500 trips, or about 26 percent of the total, were taken by individuals who have special authorization by White House and agency policies to use government aircraft—such as those from the 89th Wing—whenever they travel by air. (These and other policies on the use of the 89th Wing aircraft are discussed in chapter 3.) In addition, 206 of the trips, or about 10 percent of the total, were taken by foreign dignitaries. These trips are included in the totals for the White House, OSD, Army, Air Force, and Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Air Force data included the number of passengers on most but not all trips. For example, the number of passengers traveling with the President on each of his trips and on some other White House trips was not available. For the 1,817 trips for which the number of passengers was available, a total of 27,233 people traveled on the 89th Wing aircraft during

our review period. The trips by White House and congressional officials included, on the average, about 19 passengers, while the trips by DOD officials included an average of about 10 passengers. As shown in table 2.2, 847 trips, or about 47 percent of those for which data was available, included fewer than 10 passengers.

Table 2.2: Total Number of Trips on 89th Wing Aircraft by Number of Passengers From January 1, 1989, Through March 31, 1991

Number of passengers	Number of trips
No data	229
0-9	847
10-19	460
20-29	219
30-39	200
40-49	71
50 and above	21
	2,047

Data Lacking on All Passengers' Names and Other Trip Details

Although the Air Force's Special Air Missions office maintains some data on all trips on 89th Wing aircraft and the DOD legislative affairs offices have some information on some congressional trips, a complete documented history of each trip and the specific justification for using the 89th Wing aircraft is not available within the Air Force or elsewhere in the DOD. Additional information on each trip, such as its purpose, the detailed trip agenda, and the justification for using military aircraft versus commercial aircraft services, is available only from the individual travelers (if available at all).

The Air Force maintains a data base only on some aspects of each trip. For example, the Office of the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Special Air Missions, maintains data on the name of the person reserving the aircraft, the total number of passengers,¹ the dates and destinations, the aircraft used, and the total time and distances flown. The Air Force has access to but does not retain some additional information on each trip. For example, the Air Force retains a list of all passengers' names for 30 days after the trip and then destroys it. Other than the number of passengers on each portion of the trip, the Air Force retains no information on the names of the other passengers or their relationship to the person reserving the aircraft.

¹The number of passengers on all presidential trips and some other White House trips was not available.

In May 1991, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs released some information on the congressional travel supported by the military services' legislative affairs offices from May 1, 1990, through April 30, 1991. These offices provide a variety of services to congressional travelers, including obtaining reservations on military aircraft when available, hotel and local travel arrangements, and any necessary security clearances as well as acting as escorts during the trip. The released information included a list of travelers,² the approving official, and a brief statement on the purpose of each trip—typically given as "Committee business." Our review of this information found that the congressional travel was not done exclusively on military aircraft (89th Wing or other aircraft) but also on commercial airlines, trains, and other ground transportation. There were about 1,100 of these trips. About 44 percent of that travel was by Members of Congress and the remainder by legislative branch staff. Most of the congressional travel supported by DOD's legislative affairs offices was on military aircraft other than that of the 89th Wing. Executive branch officials also traveled on the approximately 390 operational support aircraft outside of the 89th Wing, but DOD does not centrally maintain data on the details of this use.

We also reviewed the working files of the legislative affairs offices for each of the congressional trips on 89th Wing aircraft that they supported. These files are retained for no more than 1 year and contained worksheets on per diem and other expenses of the trip. Many of the files also contained approval letter(s) from the committee chairmen or leadership offices, and some had information on the trip's itinerary. The approval letters usually contained a general statement regarding the trip's purpose and destination(s), the Members and staff expected to make the trip, and a statement authorizing the expenditure of DOD funds to support the trip. Depending on the type and destination of the trip, the letters often included a statement authorizing spouses to travel with the Members. Our review of the information released by the Office of Legislative Affairs in OSD found that spouses and/or dependents traveled with the Members on about 40 percent of their trips on 89th Wing aircraft during the May 1990 through April 1991 period. Most of those trips were to overseas locations.

Currently, very few details of trips on 89th Wing aircraft are required to be publicly disclosed. Some of the costs of congressional overseas travel on 89th Wing or other military aircraft are disclosed regularly in the Congressional Record. However, other information on those trips, such as

²Legislative liaison officials from OSD considered the lists of travelers to be fairly accurate, stating that, since the material was released, very few inaccuracies have been identified.

the trips' purpose and full passenger list, as well as all information on congressional trips to domestic locations (on 89th Wing or other military aircraft) is not required to be disclosed. No information on executive branch travel on military aircraft is disclosed on a regular basis. In addition, according to Air Force officials, the operation and use of the 89th Wing have not been independently audited on a regular basis.

Existing Policies Do Not Effectively Guide, Restrict, or Limit Use of the 89th Wing

The use of government or military aircraft by legislative and executive branch officials is addressed in several policy statements, but those policies are very broad, vague, and subject to varying interpretations. As a result, they do not effectively guide, restrict, or limit who uses the 89th Wing. In many cases, it is up to the discretion of the travelers and their agencies to decide to use military or commercial aircraft. Most travelers use the 89th Wing aircraft without considering cost. In addition, no independent review is conducted or questions asked about the trips on a regular basis. The Air Force relies on the travelers and their agencies to comply with the policies and to make the “appropriate” decisions.

According to DOD regulation, the Secretary of Defense and his designees have the authority to approve the travel of executive, legislative, and judicial branch officials’ spouses and/or dependents. As a result, spouses of both executive and legislative branch travelers are permitted to travel on 89th Wing aircraft, and at least some are not required to reimburse the Air Force. Reimbursement situations involving official and nonofficial travelers are left to the travelers’ agencies to account for and collect.

Several Policy Statements Address Use of 89th Wing Aircraft

The use of government or military aircraft is addressed in a variety of official policy statements. In addition, the use of government aircraft is limited by 31 U.S.C. 1344, which provides that “funds available to a Federal agency, by appropriation or otherwise, may be expended by the Federal agency for the maintenance, operation or repair of any passenger carrier only to the extent that such carrier is used to provide transportation for official purposes.”

Most of the official policy statements that discuss the use of military or government aircraft generally describe opportunities and circumstances under which use of the aircraft may be authorized but do not dictate or prescribe their use. However, based on long-standing practice, the 89th Wing has served the transportation needs of the President and the Vice President. In addition, certain other executive branch officials, as a matter of official White House and agency policies, fly on government aircraft for security and/or communications reasons. These officials are the Secretaries of State¹ and Defense, the Attorney General, the Chairman of

¹According to a State Department official, the Department has reviewed the Secretary of State’s use of military aircraft for personal travel. This review indicated that the Secretary’s communication concerns and security needs can now be met for personal domestic travel on commercial aircraft, except when there is a threat that could endanger other American lives or when continuous 24-hour secure communication with the President and others in the national defense community is required. This new policy went into effect on April 3, 1992.

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chief of Staff for the President, and the National Security Advisor to the President.² Although other government or military aircraft are available for them to use, the 89th Wing is used most frequently for these officials' travel.

Executive branch officials' travel on military aircraft, including the 89th Wing aircraft, is addressed in an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) circular, a DOD directive and regulation, and a variety of other policy memorandums.

OMB Circular A-126, "Improving the Management and Use of Government Aircraft," applies to all government-owned, leased, chartered, and rental aircraft and related services operated by executive branch agencies. The purpose of the Circular,³ dated January 18, 1989, is to improve the management of government aviation resources and to ensure that agencies rely on commercial airline or aircraft services to meet their aircraft support needs, where possible and cost-effective. It states that "government aircraft shall be used only when such use is more economical than commercial airline or aircraft services, or when commercial service is not available to meet effectively the agency's transportation need." It also states that each use of the aircraft is to be justified and documented as well as approved by the agency head or officials designated by the agency head.

DOD Directive 4500.9, "Transportation and Traffic Management," dated January 26, 1989, prescribes general DOD policies. It states the following:

"The DOD shall maintain and operate in peacetime only those owned or controlled...transportation resources needed to meet approved DOD emergency and wartime requirements that cannot be met from commercial transportation sources. Those transportation resources shall be used during peacetime as efficiently as possible to provide essential training for operational personnel and to meet logistic needs consistent with fostering the development of military-useful commercial capabilities. Requirements in excess of DOD capability shall be met by the use of commercial carriers. DOD-owned or controlled transportation resources shall be used for official purposes only."

The directive goes on to specify that an agency head must request a non-DOD use of DOD transportation and must provide a determination that

²The May 9, 1991, White House travel policy now requires that all requests for travel on military aircraft by the Chief of Staff and National Security Advisor be reviewed and approved in advance by the Counsel to the President.

³Guidance similar to that in Circular A-126 on the management of government aircraft is contained in the Federal Property Management Regulations.

the request is in the government's best interest and that commercial transportation is not available or, for reasons that must be specified, is not capable of meeting the requirement.

DOD Regulation 4515.13-R, "Air Transportation Eligibility," dated January 1980, prescribes, among other things, policies for transportation by DOD-owned and controlled aircraft as well as reimbursement for the use of such transportation. The regulation states that "Special Air Mission...aircraft (currently assigned to the 89th Military Airlift Wing) will not be used except when travel is in the national interest and commercial transportation is not available or capable of meeting the movement requirement." It also states that non-DOD requests to travel on military transportation must be screened by the agency head.

In a memorandum dated November 11, 1989, to various DOD officials, the Deputy Secretary of Defense stated that special air mission aircraft are assigned to the 89th Military Airlift Wing and comprise a very limited inventory to support national interest traffic. Nevertheless, the memorandum authorized assistant secretaries of defense and the military departments, generals and admirals, and officials of equivalent ranks to reserve 89th Wing aircraft in their own names.

On November 5, 1991, the Department of the Army issued a policy letter on the use of special air mission aircraft. It stated that "special air mission aircraft will be authorized for use only in instances where travel is plainly in the national interest and for official purposes, and only where commercial transportation is clearly incapable of meeting the requirement for security or other significant reasons. The operating cost of these aircraft will be carefully considered before requesting support." This policy letter, which closely parallels guidance issued by the Secretary of the Army on May 16, 1990, goes on to discuss (1) the Army officials who are eligible to use these aircraft, (2) the procedures to be followed in obtaining approval to request the use of these aircraft, and (3) record-keeping requirements.

In an April 11, 1989, memorandum to senior White House staff, members of the cabinet, and other agency heads, the White House Chief of Staff stated the following:

"Commercial airline accommodations will normally be utilized as the most economical means to conduct official White House travel. In exceptional cases, military aircraft may be used for White House missions. Situations in which commercial accommodations are not

available, or those in which commercial travel is inappropriate for the missions involved, fall into this category.”

The memorandum went on to describe the procedures for White House approval of requests originating within the White House and other requests for travel on military aircraft.

Although each of the executive branch agencies, other than DOD and the White House, that authorized travel on the 89th Wing aircraft during the period of our review have their own travel regulations and policies, only the State Department policies specifically address the use of military aircraft and the 89th Wing aircraft. For example, the Department of State has issued two policy memorandums to its officials. One discusses the need to strongly consider the cost to the Department of taking military aircraft and the second points out that travel on special air mission aircraft by assistant secretaries will be considered only under exceptional circumstances.

Travel by Members of Congress and congressional employees on military aircraft is addressed in DOD regulation 4515.12, “Department of Defense Support for Travel of Members and Employees of the Congress,” dated December 12, 1964. The regulation states that DOD’s policy is to support, on an economical basis, approved travel upon request of Congress pursuant to law or where necessary to carry out DOD’s duties and responsibilities. Among other things, DOD requires that the request be submitted in writing to the Secretary of Defense.

The committee chairmen of the House and Senate are authorized to approve travel by Members of Congress when they are on official congressional business. DOD also accepts requests from the leadership offices⁴ for travel on military aircraft. The Senate Leadership and the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct have issued guidelines on travel to Members of Congress. However, the guidelines focus on, among other things, which staff members may accompany the travelers and applicable disclosure requirements and do not specifically address the use of military aircraft. In addition, both the House and Senate Handbooks address the authorization for and expenses of travel by Members and employees of Congress. However, the handbooks do not address the issues surrounding the use or cost of government or military aircraft.

⁴According to an OSD legislative affairs official, the four major leadership offices are the Speaker of the House, Minority Leader of the House, Majority Leader of the Senate, and Minority Leader of the Senate.

DOD's policy on congressional travel also allows the Secretary of Defense or the service secretaries to invite Members of Congress to travel on military aircraft, including the 89th Wing, on a nonreimbursable basis when the purpose of the travel is of primary interest to and bears a substantial relationship to DOD programs or activities. However, DOD Regulation 4515.12 states that DOD support of congressional travel should not compete with commercial transportation when it is available and adequate, and its use is not inconsistent with the purpose of the travel. According to OSD officials, most congressional trips are directly requested by committee chairmen or congressional leadership offices, but some are initiated at the invitation of the Secretary of Defense or one of the secretaries of the military departments. Data was not readily available to determine how many congressional trips were made under each situation.

Policies Do Not Define or Specify Who May Travel

The intent of most of the policies discussed above is to manage or restrict the use of government or military aircraft. For example, OMB Circular A-126 states that, in addition to being used to meet mission requirements, agency-owned or -operated aircraft shall be used only to transport agency employees, government-authorized cargo, other official government passengers, and others whose transportation on these aircraft is permitted by statute or an official agency directive or policy. Therefore, except for personal and political trips by those officials who have special authorization to travel exclusively on government aircraft, all other trips on 89th Wing aircraft must be for "official business."

None of the policy statements, however, define "official business" or provide specific guidance on how, when, by whom, and for what purposes the 89th Wing aircraft are to be used.⁵ Similarly, even though DOD Regulation 4515.13 states that the 89th Wing aircraft "...will not be used except when travel is in the national interest...", "national interest" is not defined. Other policy documents and statements also state that the 89th Wing or other military aircraft should be used only on an exception basis, but none explain those exceptions. Accordingly, almost any travel by high-level executive branch officials or Members of Congress can be justified, at the traveler's discretion, as "official" and qualify for use of 89th Wing aircraft. This is because the policies are subject to a wide variety of interpretations and do not, in our view, adequately define the types of travel by government officials that may or may not be appropriate for use of 89th Wing aircraft.

⁵In our June 24, 1983, report Federal Civilian Agencies Can Better Manage Their Aircraft and Related Services (GAO/PLRD-83-64), we recommended that such guidance be adopted for the civil agencies.

In addition, most of the policies do not specify those officials who may or may not use 89th Wing aircraft for their travel. While most of the other policies are silent on the matter, a 1989 memorandum from the National Security Council in the White House to the Department of State specified that

“...Requests for Special Air Missions for Assistant Secretaries of State are expected to be rare and exceptional and clearly justified by special circumstances, since it would clearly overtax available aircraft assets to provide these Missions to Assistant Secretaries of the State Department and other Departments routinely...”

The Department of State limits travel on 89th Wing aircraft by its assistant secretaries. Only four trips were taken by officials at the level of assistant secretary or below during the period of our review. On the other hand, the policy memorandum issued by the Deputy Secretary of Defense states that 89th Wing aircraft can be reserved for official travel by OSD and military department officials at or above the assistant secretary or general and admiral levels. Accordingly, 360 of DOD's 790 trips on 89th Wing aircraft, or about 46 percent, were taken by officials at or below those levels.

According to an OSD legislative affairs official, DOD encourages Members of Congress, when using the 89th Wing, to travel with as many other Members as possible. For most of those congressional trips taken from May 1990 through April 1991 and for which a list of passengers was available, more than one Member traveled. We are not aware of any policy guidance that encourages executive branch officials to travel with as many other officials as possible.

Policies Do Not Guide or Restrict Officials' Travel

One of the general policies established by Circular A-126 is that the use of government aircraft should be restricted to situations where it is cost-effective or where commercial aircraft services are not available or capable of meeting the travel requirement. However, those restrictions do not have a major impact on officials' use of the 89th Wing. If an official or group of officials within either branch of the government wants to travel on an 89th Wing aircraft, and an aircraft is available,⁶ that trip is likely to occur without (1) a comparison of the costs of military aircraft with commercial aircraft services or (2) a realistic determination of the availability and suitability of commercial aircraft services.

⁶Although OSD and Air Force officials stated that most requests for use of 89th Wing aircraft are fulfilled, we could not verify the accuracy of these statements.

**Travelers Can Readily
Assert That Commercial
Aircraft Services Were
“Unavailable”**

Most of the policies specifically state that, before using government aircraft, the traveler is to consider the availability and capability of commercial aircraft services to meet the travel requirement. The Federal Travel Regulation goes further in stating that common carrier (air, rail, or bus)

“...shall be used whenever it is reasonably available. Other methods of transportation may be authorized as advantageous only when the use of common carrier transportation would seriously interfere with the performance of official business or impose an undue hardship upon the traveler, or when the total cost by common carrier would exceed the cost by some other method of transportation. The determination that another method of transportation would be more advantageous to the Government than common carrier transportation shall not be made on the basis of personal preference or minor inconvenience to the traveler resulting from common carrier scheduling.”

However, those provisions have little or no impact on travel on 89th Wing aircraft. For example, although OMB Circular A-126 requires each use of government aircraft to be justified and documented, it only requires a determination that no commercial airline or aircraft service was reasonably available to effectively fulfill the transportation requirement. The Circular and the other policies do not provide criteria to be used in evaluating whether commercial service is reasonably available, nor do they specify supporting documentation.

While there could have been extenuating circumstances in some cases, it appears that for some of the trips, such as those to and from major U.S. and European cities, regular, nonstop commercial airline service was available. For example, several commercial air carriers offer nonstop service several times a day from Washington area airports to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Miami, Dallas, Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Denver, and other major U.S. cities. Also, commercial air carriers offer regular service, similar to that available when flying on the 89th Wing aircraft, to many major cities in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. However, because the policies do not provide criteria for evaluating its availability, commercial airline services could be considered as “unavailable” if a nonstop flight is not available to the desired location at the desired time. As a result, travelers can readily cite the “unavailability” of commercial aircraft services as their justification for requesting use of the 89th Wing aircraft.

On the other hand, we recognize that regular commercial airline service may not typically be available to many military installations in the

continental United States and to some foreign countries. However, the policies are silent on, and no one that we spoke to had considered, the availability and cost of using commercial charter aircraft services.

Several travel coordinators who schedule and arrange travel for high-level agency officials said that their primary goal was to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the official's time while traveling. Although some generally considered the purpose of each trip along with the availability and suitability of commercial airline services, the travel coordinators emphasized the schedules of the traveler rather than the policy of reliance on commercial airline services. In addition, the justifications for using the 89th Wing aircraft were not documented. According to the travel coordinators for some of the officials, internal agency processes for approving travel on the 89th Wing are informal and agencies have not provided detailed guidelines.

Members of Congress are permitted to travel on military aircraft without first determining that no commercial aircraft service is available or capable of meeting the travel requirement. For example, the committee chairmen and leadership offices approve official travel of Members at their discretion, provided only that the travel falls within their committee's or office's jurisdiction.

However, that approval does not necessarily include a determination (formal or informal) of whether the trip should be taken on commercial or military aircraft. Once the trip is approved as official business, the traveler and DOD decide—without a formal, documented determination—whether to use 89th Wing aircraft, other military aircraft, a commercial airline, or other means.

**Policies Do Not Require
Use of the Most
Cost-Effective
Transportation Alternative**

OMB Circular A-126 states that each use of agency-owned or -operated aircraft to transport passengers and/or cargo must be justified and documented. One of the ways cited for agencies to justify the use of the aircraft is that "the variable cost of using a government-operated aircraft is not more than the cost of using commercial airline or aircraft service." The variable cost of using a government aircraft is defined as either (1) the amount the agency will be charged by the organization that provides the aircraft or (2) a usage rate based on those costs that vary depending on how much the aircraft are used.

Nevertheless, in determining whether to use the 89th Wing aircraft, very little attention is given to comparing commercial airline fares to the reimbursement rates charged by the Air Force for using the 89th Wing aircraft and even less attention is given to documenting the cost comparison. The Air Force charged from about \$5,300 to \$15,000 per flying hour in fiscal year 1991,⁷ depending on the type of aircraft. The cost of using the 89th Wing aircraft is rarely a consideration because (1) Circular A-126 states that the use of government aircraft can be justified where commercial aircraft services were not "available" to meet the travel needs and, in those cases, a cost comparison is not required and (2) only Members of Congress on non-DOD related travel and those executive branch agencies other than DOD and the White House are required to reimburse the Treasury for using the 89th Wing's aircraft.

In most cases, the use of the 89th Wing aircraft is considerably more expensive than commercial aircraft for similar trips. For example, round-trip commercial coach tickets to Los Angeles for 12 government officials (the maximum capacity of a C-20), at the October 1991 government contract fare of \$396 each, would cost \$4,752. The total reimbursement required, using the rates in Air Force regulation 173-13, to fly up to 12 people to Los Angeles on a C-20 from the 89th Wing would be approximately \$50,626,⁸ or over \$45,000 more than the commercial rates. With larger delegations, the cost differential is even more dramatic. For example, round-trip commercial coach tickets to Paris, France, for 61 passengers (the maximum capacity of a C-137C aircraft), at the October 1991 government contract fare of \$680, would cost \$41,480. The total reimbursement required to fly up to 61 people to Paris on a C-137C from the 89th Wing would be about \$191,630,⁹ or over \$150,000 more than the commercial rates.

**Most Usage of 89th Wing
Aircraft Is on a No-Cost Basis**

OMB Circular A-126 states that agencies must recover the costs of operating all aircraft used to serve other agencies or when otherwise appropriate. However, a variety of policy provisions and statutes provide exceptions

⁷Even though few agencies are charged for using the 89th Wing aircraft, these are rates applicable to non-DOD agencies of the executive and legislative branches. The rates applicable to DOD organizations are slightly lower. We have not verified the accuracy or completeness of these rates.

⁸The average round-trip flying time to Los Angeles for 12 trips was about 9 hours and 30 minutes. At the Air Force's flying hour rate of \$5,329, which is the rate charged to executive branch agencies in fiscal year 1991 for the C-20B aircraft, the cost of the round-trip from Andrews Air Force Base to Los Angeles would be \$50,626.

⁹The average round-trip flying time to Paris for six trips was about 15 hours and 45 minutes. At the Air Force's hourly rate of \$12,167, which was the amount charged to executive branch agencies in fiscal year 1991 for the C-137C aircraft, the cost of the round-trip from Andrews Air Force Base to Paris would be \$191,630.

for reimbursement by most users of the 89th Wing. For example, Congress does not reimburse the Air Force for travel on 89th Wing or other military aircraft justified in the following ways:¹⁰ (1) at the invitation of either the Secretary of Defense or a service secretary, (2) when traveling on behalf of the President, or (3) when the written request from the Congress cites 31 U.S.C. 1108(g). This provision, cited in most, if not all, congressional request letters, authorizes the expenditure of agency (in this case, DOD) funds for the actual and necessary expenses and transportation as may be required to support congressional field examinations of appropriations estimates. When military aircraft are used, that provision exempts those congressional trips from reimbursement where DOD appropriations estimates are being verified.

In addition, DOD Regulation 4515.13R, "Air Transportation Eligibility," has a provision stating that the cost of missions performed in the interest of DOD will be charged to the Air Force. Therefore, none of the trips on 89th Wing aircraft by the military services, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or OSD are subject to reimbursement at the hourly rates listed in Air Force regulation 173-13. Similarly, all travel on 89th Wing aircraft approved by the White House—whether done by White House officials or officials of other agencies—is performed on a nonreimbursable basis. According to Air Force officials, only the remaining agency users, such as the Departments of Energy, State, Justice, and Treasury, have to reimburse the Air Force at the prescribed hourly rates. However, those agencies used the 89th Wing aircraft for only 52 trips of the 2,047 total trips during our 27-month review period.

Policies Are Not Actively Enforced

The Air Force limits its role to scheduling and operating the 89th Wing aircraft. The Air Force does not, nor does any other agency or staff, independently verify that the travelers on the 89th Wing aircraft and their agencies have complied with the various DOD policies, OMB Circular A-126, and any other pertinent policies. If a travel request is received from an authorized source, such as the White House or OSD, officials in the Air Force's Special Air Missions office assume it to be fully appropriate and the only question is whether an aircraft will be available to meet the travel requirement. Similarly, according to an OSD legislative affairs official, DOD does not question requests for travel from the congressional leadership or committee chairmen. Although Circular A-126 states that each use of the aircraft must be justified and documented, the Air Force assumes that,

¹⁰DOD Directive 4515.12 provides that requests for travel by Members and employees of Congress with reimbursement may be granted under certain conditions.

since the travel requests have been approved by high level government officials, they have taken responsibility to make the “appropriate” decisions. Neither the Air Force nor any other group independently requests, on a regular or special test basis, additional information on, reviews, or otherwise questions the travel requests of high level government executives.

In addition, OMB Circular A-126 states that agencies are responsible for establishing clear accountability for aircraft management at a senior management level. Accordingly, DOD Regulation 4515.13-R, “Air Transportation Eligibility” states that the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretaries of the military departments, or their designees will approve the travel on 89th Wing aircraft by personnel within their organizations. The regulation also states that the Secretary of Defense will approve requests for travel by officials of other executive branch agencies after those requests have been screened and approved by the head of the official’s agency. In some cases, requests for travel on the 89th Wing aircraft are processed through and approved by the head of the traveler’s organization. For example, any OSD official requesting travel on 89th Wing aircraft must process the request through the OSD executive secretariat. In May 1990, the Department of the Army established procedures to obtain approval from the Secretary of the Army or the Chief of Staff, Army for each use of 89th Wing aircraft. In addition, travel requests for Department of State officials on 89th Wing aircraft are processed through the Deputy Secretary. On the other hand, many other DOD officials—civilian and military—at or above the level of assistant secretary or general and admiral are permitted to contact the Air Force directly, rather than seeking approval through the head of their organization, to reserve an aircraft from the 89th Wing.

Policies Unclear on Spouses Traveling With Government Officials

No single, uniform policy clearly and comprehensively addresses reimbursements for spouses and/or dependents of executive and legislative branch officials who travel on the 89th Wing aircraft. Although not contained in any official DOD policy or regulation, spouses and other unofficial passengers are generally expected to reimburse the government at a rate equal to the appropriate commercial airline “coach” fare plus \$1.

According to DOD Regulation 4515.13R, “Air Transportation Eligibility,” the Secretary of Defense and his designees may approve the travel of dependents of executive and legislative branch officials when authorized as being (1) in the national interest, (2) essential to the proper

accomplishment of the mission, (3) desirable because of diplomatic or public relations, or (4) as necessary for the health and morale of the individuals concerned. Although the policies are not explicit on this issue, if dependents are approved as part of the official traveling party, reimbursement may not be required.

Spouses of both executive and legislative branch officials were approved to travel on at least some of the trips completed during our review period, on a nonreimbursable basis, for reasons of "official protocol." Because the passenger lists for most trips are not readily available, we could not determine how often spouses travel with executive branch officials on 89th Wing aircraft. Spouses and/or dependents traveled with Members of Congress on about 40 percent of their trips on 89th Wing aircraft during the May 1990 through April 1991 period, and most of those trips were to overseas locations. According to Air Force and OSD legislative affairs officials, most, if not all, of these spouses were authorized to travel without reimbursement.

We previously recommended¹¹ that OMB develop clear executive branch policy on the transportation of spouses and other unofficial passengers aboard government aircraft. However, as of January 1992, OMB had not done so.

We ruled¹² that it is permissible for spouses to travel on government vehicles within the United States when accompanying a government official on official business and it is in the government's interests for the dependent to accompany the official. In addition, the provision of transportation to nonofficial passengers would be permissible only if it is incidental to the otherwise authorized use of the aircraft and does not result in additional cost to the government. However, because spousal travel could give the appearance of impropriety or cast doubt on the true purpose of the trip, we continue to believe¹³ that a governmentwide policy is needed to clarify the circumstances under which spouses may accompany government officials to official functions aboard government aircraft.

¹¹Government Civilian Aircraft: Central Management Reforms Are Encouraging but Require Extensive Oversight (GAO/GGD-89-86, Sept. 29, 1989).

¹²57 Comptroller General 226 (1978).

¹³Government Civilian Aircraft: Use of Government Aircraft by the Attorney General and FBI Director (GAO/GGD-90-84, June 15, 1990).

Enforcement of Reimbursement Policies Left to the Travelers' Agencies

A centralized system has not been established to account for and manage all reimbursements by travelers on the 89th Wing aircraft. The Air Force does not retain information on the names of the passengers, their relationship to the government officials, or the justification for their travel. In terms of enforcing the current policies on reimbursements by unofficial passengers, the Air Force leaves it up to the travelers and/or their agencies to decide if a reimbursement is necessary and to ensure that the reimbursement is collected. According to the Air Force, some agencies receive some checks from individuals and groups as payment for their travel and forward them to the Air Force's Special Air Missions office. However, no one independently verifies that (1) all of the reimbursements were made and (2) the "proper" reimbursements were made. The Air Force's Special Air Missions office simply forwards any checks to its local Accounting and Finance Center for deposit to the general fund of the Treasury.

On at least some trips, members of the news media are permitted to travel with some executive branch officials. Due to the lack of an overall system to account for and manage reimbursements, we could neither readily determine whether reimbursements were consistently required from the media nor verify that the proper payments had been made. Some groups, such as the Public Affairs Office within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, systematically bill for and collect reimbursements from members of the news media traveling with the Secretary of Defense. However, the billing for and collection of media reimbursements is done on the personal initiative of an individual working in that office; there does not appear to be any official guidance on how it should be done.

Conclusions

The 89th Wing exists primarily to provide air transportation for the President and Vice President and secondarily for other high-ranking government officials. Because the estimated annual cost to the taxpayers to operate the Wing is at least \$150 million and lower-cost transportation alternatives are available in many cases, we believe that better accountability is needed over its use.

Use of the 89th Wing's airplanes by travelers in the executive and legislative branches is governed by a variety of policies, including OMB Circular A-126. The current policies are very broad, vague, and subject to varying interpretations and have little impact in guiding, restricting, or limiting the amount or types of travel on 89th Wing aircraft. In addition, we believe that the policies and their implementation by the Air Force and

DOD are inadequate and do not provide (1) assurance that the Wing is being used appropriately and consistently and (2) an adequate deterrent to abuse. As long as an aircraft is available, it can be used by a wide variety of high-level government officials—most on a nonreimbursable basis—for a wide variety of purposes, even though commercial airline service may be available and generally capable of meeting the travel requirement at less cost. Moreover, no one has been assigned to monitor the use of the 89th Wing aircraft and to look for, identify, question, or otherwise prevent abuse.

We believe the current policies need to be clarified to provide better assurance that the 89th Wing's assets are being used appropriately and consistently. We believe that the revised policies should (1) clearly state that the 89th Wing should be used only on an exception basis, (2) clearly define those exceptions, and (3) require that a documented justification be available to demonstrate that each use was appropriate.

We recognize that the critical decisions about the use of the 89th Wing aircraft are made by the approvers of the travel requests, such as chairmen of congressional committees and high-level officials of the executive agencies, and not by the Air Force or the 89th Wing. To ensure compliance with the revised policies, we believe that the documentation on each use of the aircraft should be independently reviewed.

Recommendations

To provide better assurance that the 89th Wing's assets are being used appropriately and consistently, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense, appropriate White House officials, and the Director, Office of Management and Budget, revise the policies that address executive branch officials' use of the 89th Wing aircraft, including OMB Circular A-126, as discussed below. We also recommend that Congress adopt similar policies for the travel on 89th Wing aircraft by legislative branch officials.

The revised executive branch policy and the new congressional policy should (1) clearly define key terms such as "official business" and describe how, when, by whom, and for what purposes the 89th Wing aircraft should be used (or alternatively, those purposes for which the 89th Wing should not be used); (2) provide specific guidance on how travelers should determine whether commercial aircraft services are available; (3) provide explicit guidance as to when and how travelers are to make cost comparisons and when it may be permissible not to use the most cost-effective transportation alternative; (4) clearly identify the

circumstances under which both official and nonofficial travelers should reimburse the government for their travel and the appropriate amount to be reimbursed; and (5) clearly specify the extent to which compliance with each of these policies should be documented and controlled, where that documentation should be retained, and that it should be retained for at least 2 years after the date of the trip.

Agency Comments

As requested, we did not obtain agency comments on a draft of this report. On February 27, 1992, a proposed revision of Circular A-126 was published in the Federal Register. According to OMB, the revision strengthens the guidelines on use of government aircraft and imposes stricter approval and reporting requirements. On April 8, 1992, OMB officials told us they would consider this report's conclusions and recommendation in revising the Circular.

Major Contributors to This Report

**National Security and
International Affairs
Division,
Washington, D.C.**

**Norman J. Rabkin, Associate Director
William R. Graveline, Evaluator-in-Charge
Michelle AC Fallat, Evaluator
Jane S. Wilson, Evaluator**

Related GAO Products

Actions Taken to Improve Management and Reduce Costs of Interior's Aircraft Operations and Further Improvements Needed (GAO/NSIAD-84-45, Apr. 2, 1984).

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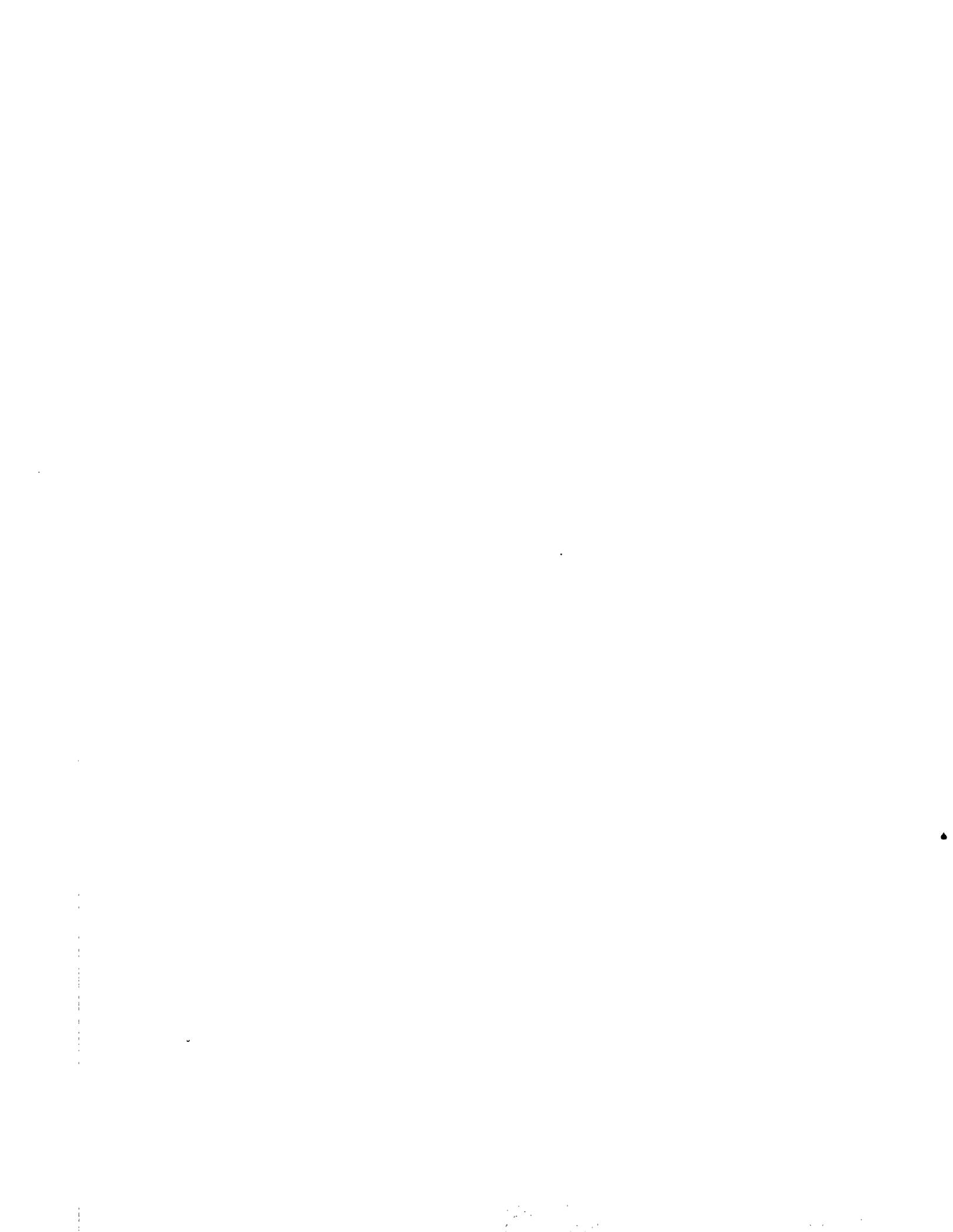
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