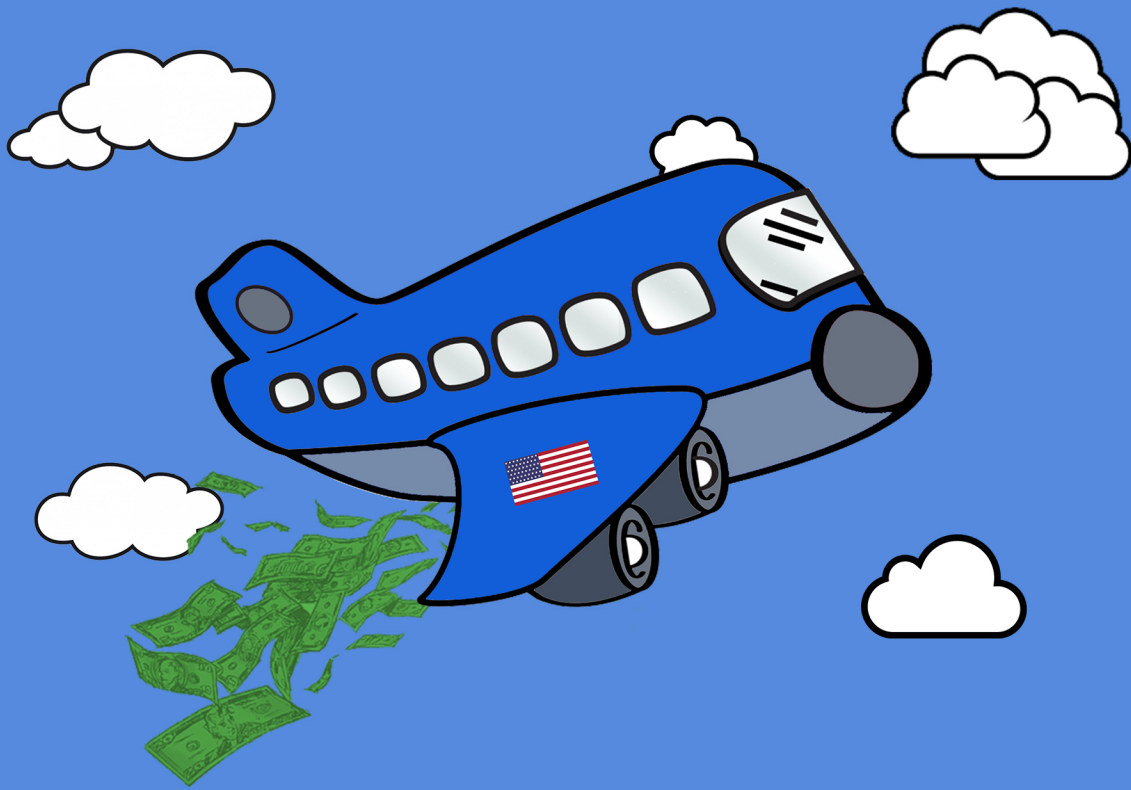


# TRUMP'S HIGH-FLYING CABINET



SPECIAL REPORT  
DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE

President Trump has made a mockery of his campaign pledge to “drain the swamp.” As past [Democracy Reform Task Force](#) reports have shown, the President has surrounded himself with a cadre of big money donors and corporate lobbyists, pursued public policy for his personal benefit and raided the Treasury to pay for vacations and private business promotion. This special report from the [Democracy Reform Task Force](#), as part of its *Culture of Corruption* series, highlights in granularity the profligate use of privately-chartered flights by members of President Trump’s cabinet.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: TRUMP’S HIGH-FLYING CABINET**

The President’s attitude toward government service – that public service ought to come with private perks – seems to have infected his Administration, as demonstrated by several of his cabinet officials’ inappropriate use of taxpayer-funded private jets. Former Secretary of Health and Human Services Tom Price displayed an insatiable appetite for hopping private planes at public expense, running up a tab of more than \$1 million and costing him his job. In the process, he pulled back the curtain on what appears to be commonplace behavior by members of the Trump Cabinet.

Recent reporting indicates that, in addition to former Secretary Price, officials including Secretaries Steve Mnuchin, Ryan Zinke, Rick Perry, Elaine Chao and EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt may have violated at least the spirit, if not the letter, of ethics laws regarding noncommercial travel. Worse yet, some of these flights may have been for personal trips, with limited official business choreographed to justify the expense.

The Code of Federal Regulations provides that “because the taxpayers should pay no more than necessary”<sup>1</sup> for official travel, cabinet members generally can only use government aircraft – defined as “any aircraft owned, leased, chartered, or rented and operated by the Government”<sup>2</sup> – “when a Government aircraft is the most cost-effective mode of travel.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, government officials should only travel on noncommercial flights if it can be



shown that private travel is more cost-effective. Even short of any legal violations, the frequent use of private jets for official travel reflects a culture of entitlement that seems to permeate the Trump Administration and results in ethical abuses and taxpayer-funded extravagances. It also highlights the importance of strengthening and codifying travel rules once taken for granted. Put simply, the American people deserve better.

### Tom Price

(Former) Secretary of Health and Human Services

A host of recent press reports have documented former Secretary Price's frequent travel by private plane. Before his resignation, reporting found that Price took more than 25 flights on government aircraft at a cost of at least

\$1,000,000.<sup>4</sup> Among these flights were a \$17,760 roundtrip between Washington, D.C. and Nashville and a \$25,000 roundtrip between Washington and Philadelphia. Four Nashville-bound direct flights left Washington-area airports within a two-hour window that morning with tickets available at \$202. Similarly, commercial flights to Philadelphia run between \$447 and \$725 – and in the case of Price's flight, one markedly less expensive flight left within minutes of his private flight. What's more, train tickets can be found for as little as \$72.<sup>5</sup>



**\$2,049,194**

DISCLOSED COSTS OF PRIVATE  
FLIGHTS BY TRUMP CABINET  
SECRETARIES



**\$2,648**

AVERAGE ANNUAL  
FEDERAL INCOME  
TAX PAID BY A FAMILY  
OF FOUR\*



**744**

NUMBER OF AMERICAN  
FAMILIES IT WOULD TAKE  
TO PAY FOR CABINET  
SECRETARIES' DISCLOSED  
PRIVATE FLIGHTS

\*Annual estimated federal income tax liability for married couple with two dependent children.



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**IT WOULD TAKE THE AVERAGE  
AMERICAN FAMILY ROUGHLY  
378 YEARS OF ANNUAL TAX  
PAYMENTS TO FUND TOM PRICE'S  
DISCLOSED PRIVATE FLIGHTS.\***

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Despite the exorbitant cost of the flight to Nashville, Price spent just five-and-a-half hours in the city; 80 minutes at two work-related events and the rest having lunch with his son. It has also been reported Price took a private flight – one leg of a 4-day, \$86,000 trip – to Brunswick, Georgia, where he owns property on St. Simons Island, an exclusive resort. Price's flight landed 40 hours before he was due to address a medical

association in Brunswick, while commercial flights could have gotten him there that same evening.<sup>6</sup>

The scandal ended in Price's resignation, but spokesmen for HHS had initially defended the flights as proper and necessary. Price promised to start flying commercial and declared that American taxpayers wouldn't pay for his "seat" on the flights. While Price said he would "reimburse" the federal government for about \$50,000 of the more than \$1,000,000 already spent, it is unclear if the former secretary intends to follow through.<sup>7</sup>

## **Steve Mnuchin**

### **Secretary of the Treasury**

A recent post on Instagram from Secretary Mnuchin's wife Louise Linton resulted in an Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigation of Mnuchin's flying habits. That trip – during which the Secretary became the first to visit the gold reserves at Fort Knox since 1948 – coincided with the first total solar eclipse in the United States since 1979. Fort Knox happened to fall in a prime viewing location, just outside the "path of totality."<sup>8</sup> While the OIG ultimately found that the flights didn't violate ethics laws, the report stated that the Treasury Department had not initially provided sufficient evidence of the official nature of the trips to justify the expense of private travel.<sup>9</sup>

The flight to Kentucky was not Mnuchin's only questionable travel arrangement. In August, Mnuchin flew on an Air Force C-37 from New York to Washington – an extremely common route on which some airlines offer hourly shuttles – at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$25,000.<sup>10</sup> Mnuchin also requested a military jet for his and Linton's honeymoon in Europe





this past summer, though the request was ultimately withdrawn. Mnuchin insists that the request was made only to ensure access to secure communications during his honeymoon and that he withdrew the request after making alternate arrangements. The Treasury Secretary, unlike the Attorney General and Secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security, is not required to fly on government planes for security reasons.<sup>11</sup> Revelations of Mnuchin's

pricey travel habits came as the Secretary, a former Goldman Sachs banker with a nine-digit net worth, was preparing to release a tax plan with Congressional Republicans that would slash taxes for the ultra-wealthy while raising them on millions of working Americans.

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**IT WOULD TAKE THE AVERAGE  
AMERICAN FAMILY ROUGHLY  
302 YEARS OF ANNUAL TAX  
PAYMENTS TO FUND STEVE  
MNUCHIN'S DISCLOSED  
PRIVATE FLIGHTS.\***

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## **Scott Pruitt**

### **Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency**

Already the subject of an EPA OIG inquiry for his frequent taxpayer-funded weekend trips home to Oklahoma, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt joined the ranks of cabinet officials reported to have inappropriately flown on noncommercial flights. Pruitt racked up more than \$58,000 in government flights since February. These include a nearly \$15,000 flight from Tulsa, Oklahoma to Guymon, Oklahoma and a more than \$36,000 flight from Cincinnati to New York.<sup>12</sup> The EPA has defended Pruitt's flights, insisting he only took noncommercial flights when commercial flights were unavailable or would not meet his scheduling demands and that his air travel in first- and business-class is permitted by EPA guidelines for security purposes.<sup>13</sup>

Pruitt's private flights fit into a pattern of suspicious spending. The EPA recently spent nearly \$25,000 installing a soundproof and secure phone booth in Pruitt's office. The EPA claimed that Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities (SCIFs) are common across federal agencies, though EPA already has a SCIF and the contractor hired to construct the booth claimed the goal was to allow Pruitt to make phone calls without risk of being overheard.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Pruitt has hired an unprecedented security detail that includes 18 officers providing round-the-clock protection. EPA has been forced to pull officers from investigating



environmental crimes in order to meet Pruitt's demands; the cost of the detail exceeded \$800,000 for a single quarter.<sup>15</sup> Placed in the context of the proposed massive cuts to EPA's budget, Pruitt's behavior fits the disturbing pattern of Trump Administration officials spending more on themselves and less on their missions.

## Ryan Zinke

### Secretary of the Interior

Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke has also come under fire for his use of chartered flights, visits to his campaign supporters and fundraisers on official trips, though in his mind, the matter is just "a little BS."<sup>16</sup> This past June, Zinke flew on a private jet from Las Vegas to Kalispell, Montana at a taxpayer cost of more than \$12,000. The trip – which can be flown commercial for as little as \$300 – put Zinke just a short drive from his home in Whitefish.<sup>17</sup> Zinke would have been able to fly commercial if he had not stayed in Las Vegas long enough to give a speech to a hockey team owned by a major contributor to his congressional campaign – a speech the Secretary claimed was official business.<sup>18</sup>

Following the revelation of the flight to Montana, the Interior Department cited three trips on chartered flights which, per the Department, were cleared by ethics officials. The other two flights included one to the Arctic Circle and another within the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI).<sup>19</sup> While visiting the USVI, Zinke headlined a Republican Party fundraiser where donors ponied up \$5,000 to take photos with the Secretary.<sup>20</sup> Zinke has also attended fundraisers at a Montana ski resort and a steakhouse in Alaska while traveling on official business.<sup>21</sup> The Department of the Interior OIG has opened an investigation into Zinke's flights, while the Interior Office of Special Counsel is investigating Zinke's speech to his donor's hockey team.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the noncommercial flights and fundraisers on official business, Zinke's travel has also come under scrutiny for his wife's frequent presence on official trips. While the Interior Department has insisted that the government did not cover Lola Zinke's travel costs and that travel by secretaries' wives is not unusual,<sup>23</sup> she was left off of multiple flight manifests and the Department acknowledged discrepancies on the Secretary's travel records.<sup>24</sup> Social media and press reports have placed Mrs. Zinke – who is currently the campaign chair for a Senate candidate from Montana – in an official meeting with California Governor Jerry Brown, while anonymous Department officials have described receiving instructions to crop



her out of any photos of official trips.<sup>25</sup> Ethics rules exist to prevent this type of blurring of official and political business and public and personal interests.

## Rick Perry

### Secretary of Energy

In the midst of the firestorm surrounding Price's use of chartered flights, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry chartered a flight that took him from Washington to eastern Pennsylvania to southern Ohio. At the request of the White House, Perry visited a coal mine with a Pennsylvania congressman and senate candidate then toured an Ohio uranium facility.<sup>26</sup> The Pennsylvania airport Perry departed from does not offer commercial flights but is only an hour away from airports in Scranton and Allentown.<sup>27</sup> The airport Perry arrived at is less than 90 minutes from both Cincinnati and Columbus.

The flight was one of four noncommercial flights that the Energy Department has disclosed. The other three were for trips to Department facilities in Idaho, New Mexico, Washington state and Kansas.<sup>28</sup> On the trip to Kansas, Perry took noncommercial flights into and out of New Century AirCenter at a cost to taxpayers of \$35,000, even though New Century is only a 45-minute drive from Kansas City International Airport, where commercial flights fly directly to and from Washington.<sup>29</sup> All told, Perry has billed the taxpayer more than \$56,000 for noncommercial travel. While these flights were approved by Department ethics officials, the constant stream of ethical issues from the Administration raises questions about judgement and suspicions about even potentially innocent situations.

## Elaine Chao

### Secretary of Transportation

Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao made use of her department's fleet of taxpayer-funded aircraft at least seven times since her confirmation, including official trips to France and Italy. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which falls under the Department of Transportation, maintains three private jets that it rents out across the federal government for approximately \$5,000 per hour. Chao also joined Mnuchin on the latter's \$25,000 flight from New York to Washington. The Transportation Department claims that all flights were approved by internal ethics officials.<sup>30</sup>



## CONCLUSION

The use of private air travel by members of the Trump Administration has already resulted in one resignation and spurred OIG investigations across the federal government. Whether or not they are found to be illegal, these superfluous trips are a violation of the public trust and an indication of the Administration's attitude toward ethics. Most importantly, they signal further erosion of the norms that should govern our leaders. Meeting the bare minimum of legal requirements is too weak a standard of conduct for high-ranking government officials. As the Office of Government Ethics recently advised, such officials should not ask themselves if an action is legal, but rather if it is right and if it is in the interests of the American people.

Beyond the optics of cabinet secretaries flying in private jets while seeking to cut funding for their departments and for programs on which millions of Americans rely, these flights actually redirected agencies' limited resources away from their missions to the personal benefit of their leaders. As this and other scandals are exposed, it is incumbent on the American people and their representatives in Congress to step back from the specific instances of misbehavior and demand a broader response of strengthened ethics laws and codification of norms once taken for granted.

Politicians often say that it is an honor to serve in government; if the honor of public service isn't sufficient to keep officials from seeking private gain, then our laws must step in instead. The American people deserve no less.





## ABOUT THE DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE

The **Democracy Reform Task Force** is a concerted effort in the House of Representatives to build a government that puts public interests ahead of special interests. Despite promises to “drain the swamp,” President Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress are pursuing an agenda that primarily benefits the wealthy and well-connected, while flouting the long-established norms and laws that prevent public corruption.

To fight back, the **Democracy Reform Task Force** – chaired by Congressman John Sarbanes – is working to confront the Trump Administration’s conflicts of interest and ethical lapses and fight back against special-interest policies in Congress, while advancing positive reforms to improve accountability and transparency in government.



## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 41 CFR 301-10.260

<sup>2</sup> 41 CFR 301-10.403

<sup>3</sup> 41 CFR 301.10.260

<sup>4</sup> [POLITICO: "Price took military jets to Europe, Asia for over \\$500K," September 28, 2017.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [POLITICO: "Price's private-jet travel breaks precedent," September 19, 2017.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [POLITICO: Price's private-jet travels included visits with colleagues, lunch with son," September 26, 2017.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [CBS News: "Top Democrat asks Treasury Dept for copy of Tom Price's check for private flights," October 4, 2017.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [The Washington Post: "Ethics group wants to know what led Mnuchin to view eclipse in Kentucky," August 24, 2017.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [POLITICO: "Treasury inspector general finds no wrongdoing in Mnuchin plane travel," October 5, 2017.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [ABC News: "Mnuchin's travel: Investigators now probing another costly government flight," September 22, 2017.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The Washington Post: "Mnuchin pushes back against reports that he requested government jet for His European honeymoon," September 14, 2017](#)

<sup>12</sup> [The Washington Post: "EPA's Pruitt took charter, military flights that cost taxpayers more than \\$58,000," September 27, 2017.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> [The Washington Post: "EPA spending almost \\$25,000 to install a secure phone booth for Scott Pruitt," September 26, 2017](#)

<sup>15</sup> [The Washington Post: "At EPA, guarding the chief pulls agents from pursuing environmental crimes," September 20, 2017.](#)

<sup>16</sup> [CNN: "Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke calls news on his private jets 'a little BS'," September 29, 2017.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> [POLITICO: "Trump's Interior chief 'hopping around from campaign event to campaign event'," October 5, 2017.](#)

<sup>19</sup> Supra, 16

<sup>20</sup> [Billings Gazette: Interior Department inspector general opens investigation into Secretary Ryan Zinke's use of private air charters," October 2, 2017.](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Salon: "Ryan Zinke's magical taxpayer tour: Ski resort, Alaskan steakhouse," October 11, 2017](#)

<sup>22</sup> [CNN: "Group sues Interior Dept. for Lola Zinke travel records," October 6, 2017](#)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> [Mic: Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's travel discrepancies raise questions about wife's role in department," October 8, 2017.](#)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid



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<sup>26</sup> [The Hill: "Energy Dept: Perry flew charter plane on White House-requested trip," October 6, 2017.](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Reuters: "Energy secretary took charter flight day before Price resigned," October 4, 2017.](#)

<sup>28</sup> Supra, 26

<sup>29</sup> [The Houston Chronicle: "Perry defends travel, as inquiry widens," October 10, 2017.](#)

<sup>30</sup> [The Washington Post: "Chao used government planes seven times when cheaper flights would not work," October 5, 2017.](#)

