



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on April 18, 2012

Leon Panetta's Flights Home Cost Taxpayers \$860,000

"For 40 years that I've been in this town, I've gone home because my wife and family are there and because, frankly, I think it's healthy to get out of Washington periodically just to get your mind straight and your perspective straight," [asserted](#) Panetta, who owns a home with his wife in Monterey, California.



The Defense Secretary's seeming imprudence is a U-turn from his so-called "deficit hawk" days in Congress, where he served from 1977 to 1993. Similar to other lawmakers who flew home to their districts for the weekend, Panetta paid for his own commercial flights during his tenure in Congress. He adhered to the same guidelines later on when he served as Budget Director and Chief of Staff to the Clinton administration.

"I think the most dangerous threat to our national security right now is debt, very heavy debt, that we confront in this country," Panetta [told](#) former Defense Secretary Richard Cheney, and Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a 1992 hearing. "I don't question anything you're saying in terms of the role that this country ought to perform. My problem is how the hell are we going to pay for it?"

Panetta did not mince words during his congressional tenure, when he pushed for a more fiscally responsibility military. But his reputation as a "deficit hawk" is likely deteriorating, as people learn that his frequent travels home are squandering a hefty sum of their tax dollars.

Ironically, while the Defense Secretary is charging hundreds of thousands of dollars to the government's already maxed-out credit card, Pentagon officials say they are [barely scraping by](#) as they acclimate to the "new era of fiscal austerity." Under a budget proposal announced earlier this year, the Obama administration call for trimming the size of the Army and Marine Corps, reducing the number of aircraft and ships, and it has submitted a request to Congress for a second round of military base closures. At the time, Panetta referred to the cuts as a "difficult undertaking." Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, added, "Make no mistake, the tradeoffs were tough [and] the choices were complex."

The exorbitant costs of Panetta's weekend flights are partly due to government rules established by the Bush administration, which require the Defense Secretary to travel on military aircraft installed with communication links to the Pentagon and White House. President Bush's rule also require the Defense Secretary to reimburse the government for a commercial flight to the same location, which, naturally, has a price tag that is a mere fraction of the expense to operate a military aircraft.

The *Washington Post* [expounded](#) on the expenses of Panetta's numerous flights:



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The Associated Press reported this month that Panetta had reimbursed the government about \$17,000 for 27 personal trips since becoming Pentagon chief. The AP calculated that the expense of operating Panetta's military aircraft — usually an Air Force C-37A — totaled about \$860,000 for those trips.

It costs the Pentagon about \$3,200 per hour to operate a C-37A on Panetta's trips, according to the AP. Defense officials said the expense of Panetta's individual flights can vary, depending on the number of staff and crew members who accompany him and the itinerary. The defense secretary often schedules stops for official business at military bases while en route to California or on the way back to the Pentagon.

The C-37A is similar to a Gulfstream business jet. It is considerably smaller than the Air Force's E-4B, or National Airborne Operations Center, a modified Boeing 747 that Panetta flies when traveling overseas. He does not use that aircraft when going home for the weekend.

Some critics, such as Jena McGregor of the *Washington Post*, [suggest](#) that the extraordinary pressures of Panetta's job entitle him to some downtime, such as the trips he takes to his California residence. "Should the government pick up the tab for Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta to fly home nearly every weekend at an eye-popping cost of roughly \$3,000 per hour?" Ms. McGregor posits. She answers:

The answer isn't simple. Panetta is doing an extraordinarily difficult job — one that he surely does not need at age 73 after a long and successful career — and deserves to make it home in his downtime. And unlike other powerful people with demanding jobs in other cities, he cannot be expected to hop on a commercial jet or even fly in a private plane that is not properly secured, especially if he is taking sensitive military communications equipment with him. I also highly doubt there is much downtime during those weekends, as Gen. Martin E. Dempsey confirmed during a news conference Monday.

While conceding that 27 weekend getaways — at a cost of more than \$30,000 per flight — may "look a bit excessive," McGregor affirms that the answer to Panetta's ethical dilemma in this situation "is somewhere in the middle." However, considering the nation's grim budgetary status, which has pressured significant cuts in defense spending, one might suggest that the answer is pretty clean cut: Taxpayers cannot afford to subsidize more than \$800,000 in flight expenses for the Defense Secretary's weekend getaways.

Photo of Leon Panetta: AP Images



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