



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on October 5, 2011

Michelle Obama's Africa Trip Cost Taxpayers Over \$400,000

First Lady Michelle Obama's June 2011 African safari is now being considered a half-million-dollar taxpayer-funded boondoggle, due to newly-released accounting information gathered by Judicial Watch, a nonpartisan government watchdog. Judicial Watch acquired passenger manifests and expense records from the U.S. Air Force pursuant to an August 19 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit. Although touted as a working tour intended to spread goodwill in Africa, the trip's travel amenities and recreational "distractions" have brought political turbulence to the White House.



The objective of the First Lady's excursion to Africa, the White House [stated](#), was to inspire and interact with young people who have meaningful influence in academics and civic leadership. Trekking through Botswana and parts of South Africa, Michelle and her two daughters, Malia and Sasha, were to promote health and wellness and encourage young people to become active in national affairs.

But Mrs. Obama's professed "work trip" was not exclusively bound to spreading the goodwill of "democracy" and global unity. It also included tourist attractions such as historical museums and landmarks, and a casual, non-business-related meeting with Nelson Mandela (who was once quoted as saying, We communist party members are the most advanced revolutionaries in modern history"). The First Lady [described](#) the visit with Mandela as "surreal."

"Shes coming on this trip to talk about women's development and youth development, and South Africa is a leader in that, not only on the continent but globally," said U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau, in an interview with a South African online newspaper. "A visit to South Africa is important for them as a family. Shell be visiting many Struggle-era landmarks, including the Apartheid Museum [and] the Hector Pieterse Memorial."

Not only are critics questioning the intent of the Obamas' trip, but also the exorbitant price tag, as Judicial Watch's total of expenditures of the trip shows numbers far surpassing \$400,000. On June 28, Judicial Watch filed a FOIA request and returned with an intriguing, yet somewhat disturbing, analysis:

- According to U.S. Department of Defense's published hourly rates for the C-32A aircraft used for the trip, we calculated the total cost to American taxpayers was \$424,142 for the flight and crew. (The C-32 is a specially configured military version of the Boeing 757.) Other expenses meals (off the plane), transportation, security, various services, etc. have yet to be reported.
- The expense records also indicate \$928.44 were spent for "bulk food" purchases on flight. Overall, during the trip, 192 meals were served for the 21 passengers on board.
- The passenger manifests confirm the presence of Obamas daughters, Malia and Sasha on the trip. The two girls are listed as "Senior Staff." The manifests also list Mrs. Obama's mother, Marian Robinson, and niece and nephew, Leslie and Avery Robinson, as well Mrs. Obama's makeup [man]



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and hairstylist (Carl Ray and Johnny Wright).

“This trip was as much an opportunity for the Obama family to go on a safari as it was a trip to conduct government business,” declared Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton. “This junket wasted tax dollars and the resources of our overextended military. No wonder we had to sue to pry loose this information.”

Although crew and aircraft expenses have been revealed, other expenses Secret Service, staff expenses, ground transportation costs, and the preparation carried out by administration officials in Africa are difficult to appraise. In fact, the total expenditures may be much higher than the stated numbers, according to an [analysis](#) by *White House Dossier*, the blog of White House reporter Keith Koffer. After factoring in all the undocumented expenses, Koffer predicted that the overall cost of the trip greatly exceeds \$500,000 possibly in the range of \$700,000 to \$800,000. *White House Dossier* reported:

According to publicly available Defense Department figures, DOD charges other federal agencies \$12,723 an hour to cover expenses for the use of a C-32. Based on the distance traveled and the flight speed of the plane, this adds up to about \$430,000 for use of the aircraft alone.

Perhaps the best estimate of the other costs involved in such a trip comes not from official sources but from a reporter, Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post*. In a 2002 article, he wrote that his reporting had found that a single presidential fundraising trip within the United States by then-President George W. Bush could cost close to \$100,000 for items like staff, Secret Service and advance work.

While the first lady would certainly have a smaller retinue than a president, it seems very safe to say that a weeklong trip by Mrs. Obama to a high-crime country like South Africa would involve at least the expense of a single domestic trip by a president ten years ago, and probably much more.

Predictably, the White House has disputed Judicial Watch’s findings, especially the alleged expenses of the aircraft. “The number stated is misconstrued and out of context,” [insisted](#) a White House spokesperson. “The hourly rate is not the marginal cost of operating the plane it is an accounting figure that prices in a number of fixed costs from maintaining the Air Force fleet for this kind of plane over a year. For example, it includes estimated replacement parts, depreciation, repairs, and costs that would have been incurred regardless of this flight.”

The White House also disputes the watchdogs claim that Sasha and Malia Obama were listed as “Senior Staff.” “The Obama daughters were not listed as Senior Staff that only designates the area of the plane where they were seated,” the spokesperson asserted. “The Air Force categorizes the passengers by compartment on the plane.”

But regardless of the trips *exact* costs, and the passenger status of the Obama daughters, the mere act of traveling abroad on the taxpayers’ money while exploring African landmarks is highly inappropriate. After all, while Michelle and the girls were perusing historical museums, Americans back home were battling to contain a runaway federal deficit, desperately seeking a long-awaited “solution” to prevent a U.S. default which, if it has occurred, would have been “historic” in itself.

Photo: First lady Michelle Obama and daughters Malia, right, and Sasha, are draped in blankets given to them upon landing in Pretoria, en route to Johannesburg, South Africa, June 20, 2011: AP Images



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