

## February 25, 2009 - How a New Fleet of White House Choppers Spiraled Out of Control

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### How a New Fleet of White House Choppers Spiraled Out of Control

By Mark Thompson, Time Magazine

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One response of the Bush Administration to the attacks of 9/11 was to invade Iraq. Another was to order up a new fleet of hyper-secure helicopters to transport the commander-in-chief — out of concern that a president borne by the current generation of choppers could be cut off from the rest of the world. But like the war in Iraq, the new helicopter is taking much longer, and costing far more, than originally anticipated. But as President Obama winds down the war, it's looking increasingly likely that he'll also end the Pentagon's four-year old effort to buy him a new fleet of aircraft.

The 28 VH-71 choppers, originally estimated to cost \$6.2 billion, were slated to make their first take-off from the White House lawn in 2012. But their cost has soared from an estimated \$6.1 billion in 2005 to \$13.4 billion today. "We're not going to pay \$500 million for one helicopter. Period," Rep. John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat who chairs the House Appropriations Committee's defense subcommittee, declared recently. At \$480 million a piece — roughly the price of the 747s fitted as Air Force One — Lockheed Martin's VH-71 program is "in deep trouble," Pentagon officials said Tuesday.

With most taxpayers counting pennies and preparing to file tax returns, Obama made it clear in a Monday exchange with his former rival, Republican Senator John McCain, that he finds his current, aging fleet of Marine One "white-tops" perfectly adequate. Many of their trips are short hops, like the 10 minutes between the White House and Andrews Air Force Base. "It is an example of the procurement process gone amok," Obama said after McCain queried him about the new helicopters ("I didn't have as much interest in the presidential helicopter," McCain noted Tuesday, "as I had several months ago.")

Only the Pentagon could turn a \$60 million helicopter &mdash; the European-made EH-101 &mdash; into a \$480 million whirlybird. The Pentagon's Defense Science Board, in a report released earlier this month, didn't mince words in assigning blame for the fiasco. "The schedule was acknowledged at the start to be high-risk and very aggressive," it said, "driven by post-9/11 global war on terror urgency." The costs started climbing as the White House informed the Pentagon and its contractors of its wish-list of encrypted video, telephone and electronic capabilities it wanted aboard the new birds.

The post-9/11 need for security led to secret requirements for on-board jammers to thwart radars and missiles. Then there was the required shielding to help protect the choppers' electronic guts from being fried by electro-magnetic pulses generated by nuclear blasts (as well as separate systems to protect against biological and chemical weapons). Pentagon officials say the VH-71 isn't so much a modified EH-101 as it is "a whole new helicopter." Then, of course, there was the kitchen and bathroom for the 14 passengers (the new choppers can fly 300 miles, triple the range of the current Marines Ones, making such facilities desirable). The Navy, which buys all Marine aircraft, and its contractors simply saluted and passed on the escalating costs to the taxpayers.

In a familiar Pentagon-procurement pattern, the Navy and its contractors have been blaming each other for the spiraling costs once the program came under a critical spotlight. John Young, the Pentagon's outgoing acquisition czar, recently blamed both. He cited the program as emblematic of a Pentagon culture wedded to rosy cost projections. "Higher costs, whether based on low estimates or poor enterprise management, is unacceptable and harmful to the defense enterprise," he wrote Defense Secretary Robert Gates last month. "The acquisition team bears significant responsibility for moving forward with these programs built on inadequate foundations."

The 28-helicopter buy has been broken down into two pieces, with the first five aircraft better than the ones the President currently uses. But they're not the equivalent of the "flying Oval Office" with all the communication and security gear slated for the final 23, due to be delivered by 2019. With the first batch currently beginning flight tests, the Connecticut congressional delegation has been urging the Pentagon to shift some of the work

to Sikorsky Aircraft. That Connecticut firm built every presidential helicopter since President Eisenhower was the first to regularly fly in one, until the tradition was broken by the 2005 award to Lockheed Martin and its European partners, Italy's Augusta and Britain's Westland.

Obama told McCain that he and Gates share the senator's view that sometimes pushing for too much in a new piece of equipment makes little sense. Gates "recognizes that simply adding more and more does not necessarily mean better and better," Obama said. But for a Pentagon accustomed to having its way with the White House — and nervously awaiting Obama's imprint on its 2010 budget — those are fighting words.