

Presidential wings

As *Air Force One*, the 747 transformed air travel for U.S. presidents and became a symbol of democracy

By Jarrod Bartlett and Forrest Gossett



"I was overwhelmed by its size and beauty. I still am. It's an impressive plane, which is a bit of an understatement."

— Former President George H.W. Bush to *Boeing Frontiers*



Seal of approval

Boeing airplanes have carried heads of state from around the world, but they have an especially long association with U.S. presidents.

Franklin Roosevelt was the first sitting president to fly, and in 1943 he flew in a Boeing 314 Clipper to Casablanca, Morocco, where he and U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill mapped out war strategy against Germany. During the flight, Roosevelt celebrated his 61st birthday in style in the 314's spacious dining area. Roosevelt also was the first to have a dedicated presidential airplane, a Douglas C-54 (DC-4) nicknamed Sacred Cow.

President Harry Truman used a Douglas VC-118 (DC-6) called Independence, after his hometown.

Jets were introduced to the presidential fleet while Dwight D. Eisenhower was president. Three Boeing 707-120 aircraft were purchased and given the designation VC-137A. The first flew on April 7, 1959.

In 1961, the first aircraft built just for the president was ordered from Boeing. Based on the intercontinental 707-320B, the aircraft was designated VC-137C and given the serial number 26000. First lady Jacqueline Kennedy selected interior and exterior colors, including the distinctive exterior blue that identifies the aircraft.

— Mike Lombardi

PHOTOS: (Left) The Boeing 747 has been serving as *Air Force One* since 1990, entering service under George H.W. Bush and still serving today. SHUTTERSTOCK **(Inset)** President George H.W. Bush arrives at Forbes Field in Topeka, Kan., on the inaugural flight of the 747 as *Air Force One* on Sept. 6, 1990. TOPEKA CAPITAL JOURNAL

Twenty years ago, U.S. President George H.W. Bush ushered in a new era of presidential travel when he flew from Washington, D.C., to Topeka, Kan., aboard a heavily modified Boeing 747-200B making its first flight as *Air Force One*.

The new airplane's capabilities allowed the president to effectively run the nation 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from anywhere in the world—a significant advancement over the modified Boeing 707 models that had served as *Air Force One* since 1959.

"I was overwhelmed by its size and beauty. I still am. It's an impressive plane, which is a bit of an understatement," former President Bush said in response to questions for this story.

"When that beautiful plane lands in a foreign country, it means so many things: freedom, friendship and, yes, power. But the power of democracy," he added.

The U.S. Air Force designation for these unique Boeing 747-200Bs is VC-25A. The aircraft is a fully functioning Oval Office, connecting the president and his staff with events around the world. "Air Force One" is a radio call sign used only when the president is aboard any U.S. Air Force aircraft.

Retired Air Force Col. Danny Barr was chief pilot for both former President Bush and former President Bill Clinton. He was at the controls for that first flight to Topeka on Sept. 6, 1990.

"Everything associated with presidential air travel took a step forward when the

747 made its arrival, and the actual presence that it imposed when it arrived became that much greater," Barr said.

Former President Bush said the new plane was like "taking the Oval Office with me" while flying to conduct the nation's business.

"There was nothing we could not do, which means no time was lost while in the air," he said. "I also don't want to undervalue the bed! I could fly all night and land in Europe and be ready to go to work."

With some 4,000 square feet (370 square meters) of interior space, the plane is equipped with state-of-the-art communications, conference and dining rooms, quarters for the president and the first lady, a senior staff office area, an office that converts into a medical facility,

work and rest areas for the presidential staff, media representatives and Air Force crews, and two galleys that can provide 100 meals at one sitting.

Boeing delivered two VC-25 aircraft in 1990 to the Air Force to serve as the primary presidential aircraft. Both airplanes were built in Everett, Wash., and modified into a flying Oval Office at Boeing facilities in Wichita, Kan.

Boeing people who helped transform the 747-200s into *Air Force One* say they still feel pride and accomplishment whenever they see the airplanes.

"I'm an old military man and I get sentimental when 'The Star Spangled Banner' is played, and when I saw that plane fly away 20 years ago, it touched me," recalled Bob Banta, a quality

assurance administrator in Wichita who worked on the first plane.

Added Pam Breece, a supplier management analyst who also worked on the first VC-25:

"We worked endless hours all the time, but we didn't care because it was just something we wanted to do. It was just phenomenal working on it. A lot of us just can't explain it. ... it's just a feeling we have in our heart."

Boeing employees continue to provide maintenance, modification and contractor logistic support for the two airplanes that serve as *Air Force One*. ■

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