



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

May 5, 2009

The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator McCain:

I am writing in response to your April 28, 2009, letter regarding the flight of an Air Force VC-25 over New York City on April 27, 2009. The White House Military Office (WHMO) has issued a statement expressing regret over the incident, and the President has asked his staff to conduct a review of the circumstances in order to prevent a future incident. The reaction to the low-flying VC-25 and F-16 fighter aircraft over New York City (NYC) is understandable, and we deeply regret the anxiety and alarm that resulted from this mission.

The preliminary information I have received on this event is as follows: the April 27, 2009, flight was a continuation training pilot currency sortie, and the crew flew a total of three hours, of which a portion was used to update the official photograph of the VC-25. With the exception of one combat photographer, a standard crew complement performed the mission in accordance with Air Force instructions and at Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) approved altitudes. There were no non-duty personnel or passengers on board.

Our preliminary review also shows that the Presidential Airlift Group, whose parent service is the Air Force and which is one of the seven operational units in WHMO, began planning this mission in late March 2009 and initiated numerous teleconferences to coordinate and finalize the flight profile. The mission was coordinated with FAA liaisons, Systems Operations Security team members, and traffic managers; New York air traffic control representatives; and Newark and LaGuardia tower supervisors. On April 24, 2009 the FAA notified multiple agencies of the impending flight, including the U.S. Park Police, NYC Mayor's Office, NYC Office of Emergency Management, NYC Police Department Operations, New Jersey State Police Regional Coordination Center, and several New Jersey area emergency operations centers, to include Newark, Jersey City, Bayonne, Hoboken, and Elizabeth.



In conjunction with the aerial photograph, the mission included practice instrument approaches and landings at Atlantic City International Airport, an approved training location. The aircraft then returned to Andrews Air Force Base for landing.

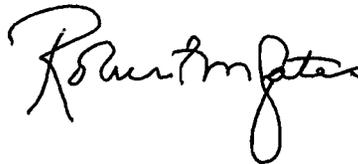
The cost of this mission can be viewed as only those costs classified as direct reimbursables, or the annualized average maintenance costs per flying hour. Reimbursable costs total \$49,770 for the three aircraft participating in this mission. This includes primarily fuel, depot level repairables, and consumables for the F-16 and fuel only for the VC-25 (since it is maintained through a contractor logistics support contract). The standard methodology prescribed in the OSD Financial Management Regulation includes not only these reimbursables but also annualized average maintenance costs allocated on a per flying hour basis. This includes depot level maintenance, engine overhaul, and all contractor logistics support costs characterized as variable. Using this methodology, the mission cost is estimated to be \$328,835 - \$300,658 for the VC-25 and \$28,177 for the two F-16s.

I am concerned that this highly public and visible mission did not include an appropriate public affairs plan nor adequate review and approval by senior Air Force and DoD officials. On April 30, Secretary Donley and General Schwartz directed Air Mobility Command to conduct an end-to-end review of VC-25 flights, with particular emphasis on notification procedures for high-visibility training events.

In addition, I am concerned about the use of an Air National Guard aircraft operating in Title 32 status as a participant in this event. I have asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to ensure that the Military Service and National Guard Bureau procedures for such activities include appropriate safeguards, checks and balances to ensure missions of this type are properly reviewed, vetted and announced in the future.

We are reviewing the incident carefully and will keep you and your colleagues updated as further information becomes available.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert M. Gates". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

cc:

The Honorable Carl Levin