

Report: Pentagon Officials Fly in Style

By LARRY MARGASAK - AP Online

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Military and civilian defense officials improperly used government credit cards to buy 68,000 first-class or business-class airline seats when they were supposed to fly coach, congressional investigators concluded Thursday.

Several high-ranking political appointees were among the 44,000 people who bought premium tickets that cost \$124 million over two years. The investigators' report did not estimate how much extra money that meant, but coach tickets typically range from a few dollars to thousands of dollars less.

"Our goal today is to ground the high flier who abuse the system and to ensure DOD (Department of Defense) is committed to implementing long-term solutions to this costly problem," said Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., one of three lawmakers who requested the investigation.

The General Accounting Office report is the latest in a series documenting how government employees have misused their official credit cards. Past studies showed the cards were used for personal items ranging from electronic equipment and jewelry to visits to strip joints and sporting events.

Charles Abell, assistant secretary of defense for force management policy, acknowledged the problem and said the Pentagon was forming a task force to address it.

"Our policies must leave no room for misunderstanding or abuse," he said. Abell added that new regulations will state that premium class travel must be authorized and used only when exceptional circumstances warrant the extra cost.

While the report didn't name the travelers, investigators identified several presidential and political appointees in a separate letter - responding to requests by Coleman, Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, and Rep. Janice **Schakowsky**, D-III.

In all of the examples, the GAO said the justifications were not in compliance with travel regulations, which allow first-class travel under three circumstances and business class tickets under eight categories.

The GAO said John Stenbit, as assistant secretary of defense for command, control, communications and intelligence, used 17 first-and-business class tickets costing nearly \$68,000 - citing on official forms an unspecified medical condition.

"About a month after we requested additional documentation for these airline tickets, DOD provided us with a letter from a physician dated Sept. 11, 2001, requesting that the traveler be authorized to fly first class so that the traveler could stretch his legs," the GAO report said.

Stenbit now has a different title but remains in the Pentagon.

Jack Dyer Crouch, as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, took 15 premium class trips costing \$70,000. The justification was the need for Crouch - who has left the department - to be ready for meetings upon arrival, the investigators found.

"Traveler's assistant said that the traveler flies premium class to minimize his time away from the office," the GAO said. The assistant, however, "could not demonstrate a cost savings caused by lost productivity," the report said.

Bernd McConnell, deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs in the Clinton administration, had 10 premium flights at a cost of \$48,000 but his justifications didn't always fit the itinerary.

During 12 days in late August 2001, McConnell flew business class from Washington to six European cities and South Africa for more than \$8,800. He then traveled business class from South Africa to Atlanta, and first class from Atlanta to the nation's capital.

"The documentation supporting the trip was an order signed by the military assistant to the undersecretary, that authorized the traveler to fly first class from Washington to Tampa, Fla.," the GAO said.

One unidentified civilian Pentagon employee and three family members flew a combination of first-and-business class when they moved from London to Honolulu. Traveling without authorization to fly premium class, the tickets cost nearly \$21,000 compared to an estimated \$2,500 for coach class, the report said.

Rep. **Schakowsky** said she would introduce legislation that would prevent the Defense Department from receiving budget increases until its books are in order.

She said that unless Congress takes decisive action against Pentagon waste, "we will spend years offering piecemeal solutions and reading countless GAO reports with similar conclusions while ... taxpayers will continue to pay the price."

Grassley commented, "Apparently, some high-ranking bureaucrats feel they are entitled to luxury air travel. We've got people who are supposed to be public servants stretching their legs with a hot towel and a cocktail, even if it costs the taxpayer thousands of dollars."