



# Air Force One

For the current aircraft most commonly used as Air Force One, see **Boeing VC-25**. For the 1997 film, see **Air Force One (film)**. For other uses, see **Air Force One (disambiguation)**.

**Air Force One** is the official **air traffic control call sign** of a **United States Air Force** aircraft carrying the **President of the United States**.<sup>[1]</sup> In common parlance the term refers to those Air Force aircraft specifically designed, built, and used for the purpose of transporting the president. The Presidential aircraft is a prominent symbol of the American presidency and its power.<sup>[2]</sup>

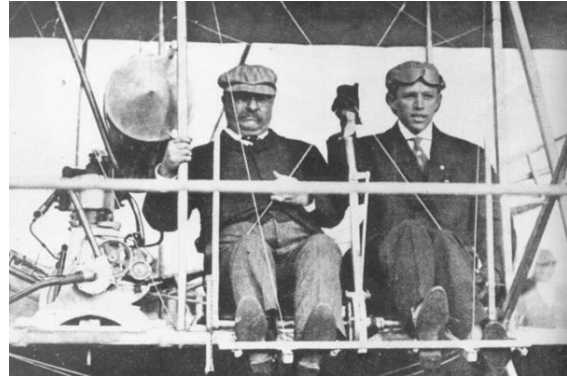
The idea of designating specific military aircraft to transport the President arose in 1943, when officials of the **United States Army Air Forces** – the predecessor to the U.S. Air Force – became concerned with relying on commercial airlines to transport the President. A **C-87 Liberator Express** was reconfigured for use as a presidential transport; however, it was rejected by the **Secret Service** amid concerns over the aircraft's safety record. A **C-54 Skymaster** was then converted for presidential use; this aircraft, dubbed the *Sacred Cow*, transported President **Franklin D. Roosevelt** to the **Yalta Conference** in February 1945, and was subsequently used for another two years by President **Harry S. Truman**.

The “Air Force One” call sign was created after a 1953 incident during which a **Lockheed Constellation** named **Columbine II** carrying President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** entered the same airspace as a commercial airline flight using the same call sign.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>

A number of aircraft types have been used as Air Force One since the creation of the presidential fleet, starting with 2 **Lockheed Constellations** in the late 1950s: **Columbine II** and **Columbine III**. It also has included two **Boeing 707s** introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively; since 1990, the presidential fleet has consisted of two **Boeing VC-25As** – specifically configured, highly customized **Boeing 747-200B** series aircraft. The Air Force plans to procure the **Boeing 747-8** to be the next version of Air Force One.

## 1 History

On 11 October 1910, **Theodore Roosevelt** became the first U.S. President to fly in an aircraft, an early **Wright Flyer** from **Kinloch Field** near **St. Louis, Missouri**. However, he was no longer in office at the time, having been



*Theodore Roosevelt and pilot Arch Hoxsey before their flight, St. Louis October 11, 1910*

succeeded by **William Howard Taft**. The record-making occasion was a brief overflight of the crowd at a county fair but was nonetheless the beginning of presidential air travel.<sup>[6]</sup>

Prior to World War II, overseas and cross-country presidential travel was rare. Lack of wireless telecommunication and quick transportation made long-distance travel impractical, as it took much time and isolated the president from events in Washington, D.C. Railroads were a safer and more reliable option if the President needed to travel to distant states. By the late 1930s, with the arrival of aircraft such as the **Douglas DC-3**, increasing numbers of the U.S. public saw passenger air travel as a reasonable mode of transportation. All-metal aircraft, more reliable engines, and new radio aids to navigation had made commercial airline travel safer and more convenient. Life insurance companies even began to offer airline pilots insurance policies, albeit at extravagant rates, and many commercial travelers and government officials began using the airlines in preference to rail travel, especially for longer trips.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt** was the first president to fly in an aircraft while in office. The first aircraft obtained specifically for presidential travel was a **Douglas Dolphin** amphibian delivered in 1933 which was designated **RD-2** by the US Navy and based at the Naval base at **Anacostia D.C.** The Dolphin was modified with a luxury upholstery for four passengers and a small separate sleeping compartment.<sup>[7]</sup> The aircraft remained in service as a presidential transport from 1933 until 1939.<sup>[8]</sup> There are no reports as to whether the president ever flew in the aircraft though. During World War II, Roosevelt traveled on the *Dixie Clipper*, a Pan Am crewed **Boeing 314** flying



boat to the 1943 **Casablanca Conference**, in Morocco, a flight that covered 5,500 miles (in three “legs”).<sup>[9]</sup> The threat from the German submarines throughout the **Battle of the Atlantic** made air travel the preferred method of VIP transatlantic transportation.<sup>[10]</sup>



President Franklin D. Roosevelt's **C-54 Skymaster** aircraft, nicknamed “the Sacred Cow”.

Concerned about relying upon commercial airlines to transport the president, USAAF leaders ordered the conversion of a military aircraft to accommodate the special needs of the Commander in Chief.<sup>[11]</sup> The first dedicated aircraft proposed for presidential use was a **C-87A** VIP transport aircraft. This aircraft, number 41-24159, was re-modified in 1943 for use as a presidential VIP transport, the *Guess Where II*, intended to carry President Franklin D. Roosevelt on international trips.<sup>[12]</sup> Had it been accepted, it would have been the first aircraft to be used in presidential service, in effect the first Air Force One. However, after a review of the C-87's highly controversial safety record in service, the Secret Service flatly refused to approve the *Guess Where II* for presidential carriage.<sup>[12]</sup> Also, the C-87 was a derivative of the **Consolidated B-24 Liberator** bomber, so it presented strong offensive impressions to both enemy fighter aircraft as well as foreign dignitaries being visited, an issue not present with airframes that were used purely for transport. The *Guess Where II* was then used to transport senior members of the Roosevelt administration on various trips. In March 1944, it transported **Eleanor Roosevelt** on a goodwill tour of several Latin American countries. The C-87 was scrapped in 1945.<sup>[12]</sup>

The Secret Service subsequently reconfigured a Douglas **C-54 Skymaster** for duty as a presidential transport. This VC-54C aircraft, nicknamed the *Sacred Cow*, included a sleeping area, radio telephone, and retractable elevator to discreetly lift Roosevelt in his wheelchair. As modified, the VC-54C was used by President Roosevelt only once, on his trip to the **Yalta Conference** in February 1945.<sup>[11]</sup>

After Roosevelt died in spring 1945, Vice President **Harry S. Truman** became President. The legislation that created the U.S. Air Force, the National Security Act of



The VC-118 Independence used primarily by President Truman

1947, was signed by Truman while on board the VC-54C.<sup>[11]</sup> He replaced the VC-54C in 1947 with a modified **C-118 Liftmaster**, calling it the *Independence* (also the name of Truman's hometown in **Missouri**). This was the first aircraft acting as Air Force One that had a distinctive exterior—a **bald eagle** head painted on its nose.

The presidential call sign was established for security purposes during the administration of **Dwight D. Eisenhower**. The change stemmed from a 1953 incident where an **Eastern Airlines** commercial flight (8610) had the same call sign as a flight the president was on (Air Force 8610). The aircraft accidentally entered the same airspace, and after the incident the unique call sign “Air Force One” was introduced for the presidential aircraft. The first official flight of Air Force One was in 1959 during the Eisenhower administration.



The VC-121 Columbine III used by President Eisenhower

Eisenhower introduced four propeller driven aircraft to presidential service. This group included two **Lockheed C-121 Constellations**, the aircraft *Columbine II* (VC-121A 48-610, stored and decaying since 2003 at **Marana Regional Airport** in Arizona)<sup>[13][14]</sup> it is the only primary presidential airplane ever sold to a private person, and it was reported in a 2014 video the plane is currently looking for a museum that is willing to restore and exhibit the plane.<sup>[15]</sup> and *Columbine III* (VC-121E 53-7885, transferred to the **National Museum of the United States Air**

Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in 1966 and placed on display).<sup>[16]</sup> They were named by First Lady Mamie Eisenhower after the columbine, the official state flower of her adopted home state of Colorado. Two Aero Commanders were also added to the fleet and earned the distinction of being the smallest aircraft ever to serve as Air Force One. President Eisenhower also upgraded Air Force One's technology by adding an air-to-ground telephone and an air-to-ground teletype machine.

## 1.1 Boeing 707s

Main articles: VC-137C SAM 26000 and VC-137C SAM 27000

Towards the end of Eisenhower's term in 1958, the Air Force added three Boeing 707 jets (as VC-137s designated SAM 970, 971, and 972), into the fleet.<sup>[17]</sup> Eisenhower became the first president to use the VC-137 during his "Flight to Peace" Goodwill tour, from 3 December through 22 December 1959. He visited 11 Asian nations, flying 22,000 miles (35,000 km) in 19 days, about twice as fast as he could have covered that distance on one of the *Columbines*.

### 1.1.1 SAM 26000: Official entry to jet age



*Boeing 707 SAM 26000 served Presidents Kennedy to Clinton, and was the primary transport from Kennedy to Nixon.*

Under John F. Kennedy presidential air travel officially entered the jet age.<sup>[18]</sup> He had used the Eisenhower-era jets for trips to Canada, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom.<sup>[19]</sup> However, in October 1962, the administration purchased a Boeing C-137 Stratoliner, a modified long-range 707—Special Air Mission (SAM) 26000.<sup>[20]</sup>

The Air Force had attempted a special presidential livery of their own design: a scheme in red and metallic gold, with the nation's name in block letters. Kennedy felt the aircraft appeared too regal, and, on advice from his wife,

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, he contacted the French-born American industrial designer Raymond Loewy for help in designing a new livery and interiors for the VC-137 jet.<sup>[21]</sup> Loewy met with the president, and his earliest research on the project took him to the National Archives, where he looked at the first printed copy of the *United States Declaration of Independence*, and saw the country's name set widely spaced and in upper case in a typeface called *Caslon*. He chose to expose the polished aluminum fuselage on the bottom side, and used two blues; a slate-blue associated with the early republic and the presidency, and a more contemporary cyan to represent the present and future. The presidential seal was added to both sides of the fuselage near the nose, a large American flag was painted on the tail, and the sides of the aircraft read "United States of America" in all capital letters. Loewy's work won immediate praise from the president and the press. The VC-137 markings were adapted for the larger VC-25 when it entered service in 1990.<sup>[21]</sup>

SAM 26000 was in service from 1962 to 1998, serving Presidents Kennedy to Clinton. On 22 November 1963, SAM 26000 carried President Kennedy to Dallas, Texas, where it served as the backdrop as the Kennedys greeted well-wishers at Dallas' Love Field. Later that afternoon, Kennedy was assassinated, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson assumed the office of president and took the oath of office aboard SAM 26000. At Johnson's request, the plane carried Kennedy's body back to Washington.<sup>[22]</sup> A decade later, SAM 26000 brought Johnson's own body home to Texas after his state funeral in Washington.<sup>[23][24]</sup>

President Lyndon B. Johnson used SAM 26000 to travel extensively domestically, and used it to visit troops in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. SAM 26000 served President Nixon on several groundbreaking overseas voyages, including his famous visit to the People's Republic of China in February 1972 and trip to the Soviet Union later that year, both firsts for an American president.<sup>[25]</sup> Nixon dubbed the plane the "Spirit of '76" in honor of the upcoming bicentennial of the United States, and that logo was painted on both sides of the plane's nose.<sup>[26]</sup>

### 1.1.2 SAM 27000

SAM 26000 was replaced in December 1972 by another VC-137, Special Air Mission 27000, although SAM 26000 was kept as a backup until it was finally retired in 1998.<sup>[27]</sup> SAM 26000 is now on display at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. Richard Nixon was the first president to use SAM 27000, and the newer aircraft served every president until it was replaced by two VC-25 aircraft (SAM 28000 and 29000) in 1990.

After announcing his intention to resign the presidency, Nixon boarded SAM 27000 to travel to California.





*Boeing 707 SAM 27000 served Presidents Nixon to George H. W. Bush, and was the primary transport for Nixon to Reagan.*

Colonel Ralph Albertazzie, then pilot of Air Force One, recounted that after **Gerald Ford** was sworn in as president, the plane had to be redesignated as SAM 27000, indicating no president was on board the aircraft. Over Jefferson City, Missouri, Albertazzie radioed: "'**Kansas City**, this was Air Force One. Will you change our call sign to SAM 27000?' Back came the reply: 'Roger, SAM 27000. Good luck to the President.'"<sup>[28]</sup>

SAM 27000's last flight as Air Force One was on 29 August 2001 when it flew President **George W. Bush** from San Antonio to Waco, Texas. Following the flight it was formally decommissioned, then flown to **San Bernardino International Airport** (former **Norton AFB**) in California. It was later dismantled and taken to the **Ronald Reagan Presidential Library** in **Simi Valley**, where it was re-assembled and is on permanent display.

## 1.2 Boeing 747s



*SAM 28000 sits on the tarmac as Air Force One (in the background) descends on final approach into Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, HI with President **George W. Bush** aboard.*

Main article: Boeing VC-25

Though **Ronald Reagan's** two terms as president saw no major changes to Air Force One, the manufacture of the presidential aircraft version of the 747 began during his presidency. The USAF issued a **Request For Proposal** in 1985 for two wide-body aircraft with a minimum of three engines and an unrefueled range of 6,000 miles. Boeing with the 747 and McDonnell Douglas with the DC-10 submitted proposals, and the **Reagan Administration** ordered two identical 747s to replace the aging 707s he used.<sup>[29]</sup> The interior designs were drawn up by First Lady **Nancy Reagan**, and were reminiscent of the **American Southwest**.<sup>[29]</sup> The first of two aircraft designated VC-25A was delivered in 1990, during the administration of **George H. W. Bush**. Delays were experienced to allow for additional work to protect the aircraft from **electromagnetic pulse (EMP)** effects.

The VC-25 is equipped with both secure and unsecure phone and computer communications systems, enabling the president to perform duties while in the air in the event of an attack on the United States.

The presidential air fleet is operated by the **89th Airlift Wing** based at **Andrews Field, Maryland**.



*President **George W. Bush** and First Lady **Laura Bush** walk on the tarmac as Air Force One sits at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, 1 March 2006.*

Air Force One usually does not have fighter aircraft to escort the presidential aircraft over the United States, but this has occurred. In June 1974, while President Nixon was on his way to a scheduled stop in Syria, Syrian fighter jets intercepted Air Force One to act as escorts. However, the Air Force One crew was not informed in advance and, as a result, took evasive action including a dive.<sup>[30]</sup>

### 1.2.1 9/11 to present

On 11 September 2001, President **George W. Bush** was interrupted as he attended an event at **Emma E. Booker Elementary School** in **Sarasota, Florida**, after the attack on the World Trade Center South Tower in New York City. He took off on a VC-25 from **Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport** with Colonel **Mark Tillman**, the se-

nior pilot of Air Force One that day, in charge. Air traffic controllers gave Air Force One an ominous warning that a passenger jet was close to Air Force One and was unresponsive to calls. “As we got over Gainesville, Fla., we got the word from Jacksonville Center. They said, ‘Air Force One you have traffic behind you and basically above you that is descending into you, we are not in contact with them – they have shut their responder off.’ And at that time it kind of led us to believe maybe someone was coming into us in Sarasota, they saw us take off, they just stayed high and are following us at this point. We had no idea what the capabilities of the terrorists were at that point.”<sup>[31]</sup>

In response to this reported threat, Col. Tillman said he flew Air Force One out into the Gulf of Mexico to test whether the other aircraft would follow. The other jet continued on its route, and Tillman said that it was later explained to him that an airliner had lost its transponder and that the pilots on-board neglected to switch to another radio frequency. The transponder of a plane broadcasts an electronic identification signal of itself.<sup>[31]</sup> A threat came again when Tillman received a message warning of an imminent attack on Air Force One. “We got word from the vice president and the staff that ‘Angel was next.’ Angel being the classified call sign for the Air Force One. Once we got into the Gulf [of Mexico] and they passed to us that ‘Angel was next,’ at that point I asked for fighter support. If an airliner was part of the attack, it would be good to have fighters on the wing to go ahead and take care of us.” At this point, Tillman said that the plan to fly the president back to Washington, DC was aborted and instead Tillman landed at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana and Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, where the president made a speech. Tillman explained that this was due to his concern that because of the reported threat, Air Force One would be attacked when he returned to Andrews Air Force Base.<sup>[31]</sup>



*President Barack Obama meets with staff mid-flight aboard Air Force One, in the conference room, 3 April 2009.*

After the preliminary stops, the president was returned to Washington. The next day, officials at the White House and the Justice Department explained that President Bush did this because there was “specific and credible informa-

tion that the White House and Air Force One were also intended targets.”<sup>[32]</sup> The White House later could not confirm evidence of a threat made against Air Force One, and subsequent investigation found the original claim to be a result of miscommunication.<sup>[33]</sup>

Presidents have invited other world leaders to travel with them on Air Force One at times, including Nixon inviting Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev to travel with him to California from Washington, D.C. in June 1973.<sup>[34]</sup> In 1983, President Reagan and Queen Elizabeth II toured the U.S. west coast aboard Air Force One.<sup>[35]</sup> In March 2012, President Obama took the British Prime Minister David Cameron to a basketball game in Ohio aboard Air Force One.<sup>[36]</sup>

When President Bush came to the end of his second term in 2009, a VC-25 was used to transport him to Texas. For this purpose the aircraft was called Special Air Mission 28000, as the aircraft did not carry the current President of the United States. Similar arrangements were made for former Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

On 27 April 2009, a low-flying VC-25 circled New York City for a photo-op and training exercise and caused a scare for many in New York.<sup>[37]</sup> Fallout from the photo op incident led to the resignation of the director of the White House Military Office.

### 1.3 Future replacement

The VC-25As are expected to be replaced, as they have become less cost-effective to operate. The USAF Air Mobility Command has been charged with looking into possible replacements, including the new Boeing 747-8 and the Airbus A380.<sup>[38]</sup> On 7 January 2009, the Air Force Materiel Command, as part of its Presidential Aircraft Recapitalization Program (PAR), posted a notice to survey and identify potential suppliers of the next generation of Presidential airplane to begin service in 2017.<sup>[39]</sup> By 28 January 2009, the deadline for responding to the survey notice, the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS) announced that it would not participate in the program leaving Boeing the sole possible provider with either its Boeing 747-8 or Boeing 787 Dreamliner being proposed.<sup>[40][41]</sup> On 28 January 2015, the Air Force announced that the Boeing 747-8 will serve as the next presidential aircraft.<sup>[42][43]</sup>

## 2 Other presidential aircraft

During the Johnson Administration, the United States Air Force acquired a Beechcraft King Air B90 which was designated VC-6A.<sup>[45]</sup> The aircraft was used to transport President Johnson between Bergstrom Air Force Base and his family ranch near Johnson City, Texas,<sup>[46]</sup> and was used at least once to transport the President to Princeton, New Jersey.<sup>[47]</sup> It was referred to as *Lady Bird's airplane*





*Air Force One, the presidential state car, and Secret Service Agents<sup>[44]</sup>*



*A Boeing C-32 (Boeing 757) serving as Air Force Two*

and later in its service life featured a basic color scheme similar to civilian aircraft.<sup>[48]</sup> When the President was aboard the aircraft used the callsign Air Force One.<sup>[47]</sup>

United Airlines is the only commercial airline to have operated *Executive One*, the designation given to a civilian flight on which the U.S. President is aboard. On 26 December 1973, President Richard Nixon and his family flew as commercial passengers from Washington Dulles to Los Angeles International Airport. His staff explained that this was done to conserve fuel by not having to fly the usual Boeing 707 Air Force aircraft.<sup>[49]</sup>

The President regularly flies in Marine One helicopters operated by the U.S. Marine Corps.

In November 1999, President Bill Clinton flew from Ankara, Turkey, to Cengiz Topel Naval Air Station outside Izmit, Turkey, aboard a marked C-20C (Gulfstream III) using the call sign “Air Force One”, escorted by three F-16s.

On 8 March 2000, President Clinton flew to Pakistan aboard an unmarked Gulfstream III while another aircraft with the call sign “Air Force One” flew on the same route a few minutes later. This diversion was reported by several U.S. press outlets.<sup>[50][51][52]</sup>

On 1 May 2003, President George W. Bush flew in the co-pilot seat of a Sea Control Squadron Thirty-Five (VS-35) S-3B Viking from Naval Air Station North Island, California to the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* off the California coast, where Bush delivered his “Mission Accomplished” speech. During the flight, the aircraft used the callsign of “Navy One” for the first time. This aircraft is now on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida.

In May 2009, President Barack Obama took the first lady on a date to New York City in a Gulfstream C-37B.<sup>[53]</sup> On 16 July 2010, the First Family flew to Maine for vacation in a USAF Gulfstream III.<sup>[54]</sup>

When required by circumstances the President makes domestic flights using a Boeing C-32, sometimes to allow access to smaller airports that cannot support the larger

VC-25.<sup>[55]</sup>

### 3 Air Force One aircraft on display



*In 2005, President George W. Bush, First Lady Laura Bush, and former First Lady Nancy Reagan toured SAM 27000, the aircraft that served seven presidents from 1972 to 2001; it is now housed at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.*

Several presidential aircraft that have formerly served as Air Force One (*Sacred Cow*, *Independence*, *Columbine III*, SAM 26000, and other smaller presidential aircraft) are on display in the presidential hangar of the National Museum of the United States Air Force (located at Wright-Patterson AFB near Dayton, Ohio) and at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, Washington (earlier VC-137B SAM 970). The Boeing 707 that served as Air Force One from the Nixon years through the George H. W. Bush administration (SAM 27000) is on display in Simi Valley, California at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. The library’s Air Force One Pavilion was opened to the public on 24 October 2005.

A VC-118A Liftmaster used by John F. Kennedy is on display at the Pima Air & Space Museum adjacent to Davis-Monthan AFB in Tucson, Arizona.

A Lockheed JetStar which was used by Lyndon Johnson during his presidency is on display at the LBJ Ranch (now the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park) in Stonewall, Texas. The ranch had a runway, but was too small to accommodate a large plane such as a Boeing 707.

President Johnson would take the larger Air Force One to Bergstrom AFB in Austin, where he would transfer to the smaller JetStar for the short flight to the ranch.<sup>[56]</sup>



*Lockheed JetStar used by President Johnson on display at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park.*

## 4 See also

- Air Force One photo op incident
- Air Force Two
- Air transports of heads of state and government
- Johnson Administration occasional Air Force One
- Boeing C-32
- List of official vehicles of the President of the United States

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## 6 External links

- [VC-25 – Air Force One Fact Sheet on US Air Force site](#)
- [SAM 26000 fact sheet on the National Museum of the United States Air Force site](#)
- [Presidential Gallery, featuring Boeing VC-137C known as SAM \(Special Air Mission\) 26000](#)
- [Air Force One page on WhiteHouse.gov](#)
- [Facts and History of 707 as Air Force One and “Where they are Now?” on 707sim.com](#)
- [Air Force One page on WhiteHouseMuseum.org](#)
- [Air Force One Pavilion on ReaganFoundation.org](#)
- [Truman Library & Museum](#)
- [US Air Force image gallery](#)
- [Boeing History of Air Force One](#)
- [Technical Order 00-105E-9, Segment 9, Chapter 7](#)
- [Air Force One page on air-force-one.fr](#)



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