

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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September 22, 2017

The Honorable Thomas E. Price
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to request information regarding dozens of non-commercial flights you have reportedly taken at taxpayer expense.

On September 19, 2017, *Politico* reported that you “took private jets on five separate flights” just between September 13 and 15 to travel to Maine, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania at a cost of more than \$60,000. In one instance, you reportedly traveled from Washington, D.C. to Philadelphia on a private jet that cost more than \$25,000 when commercial flights “ranged from \$447 to \$725 per person,” an Amtrak train cost “\$72 when booked in advance,” and driving “was estimated by travel planners to be about \$30 in gasoline per SUV plus no more than \$16 in tolls.” The report stated that your action “breaks with the practices of Obama-era secretaries Sylvia Mathews Burwell and Kathleen Sebelius, who flew commercially while in the continental United States.” According to this report, “Current and former staffers, speaking on the condition of anonymity, say Price has been taking private jets to travel domestically for months.”¹

Two days later, on September 21, 2017, *Politico* followed-up on its first story by reporting that you have taken “at least 24 flights on private charter planes at taxpayers’ expense since early May” and that the “frequency of the trips underscores how private travel has become the norm—rather than the exception.” Although a spokesperson claimed your travel was necessary for recovery efforts after Hurricanes Irma and Harvey, *Politico* reported that it identified “at least 17 charter flights that took place before the first storm—Hurricane Harvey—hit in late August, and included flights that did not appear to be for urgent HHS public health priorities.”²

¹ *Price’s Private-Jet Travel Breaks Precedent*, *Politico* (Sept. 19, 2017) (online at www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/tom-price-chartered-planes-flights-242908).

² *Price Traveled By Private Plan At Least 24 Times*, *Politico* (Sept. 21, 2017) (online at www.politico.com/story/2017/09/21/tom-price-private-charter-plane-flights-242989).

For example:

Price took a Learjet-60 from San Diego to the Aspen Ideas Festival—a glamorous conference at the Colorado resort town—that arrived at 3:33 p.m. on Saturday afternoon, June 24, nearly 19 hours before his scheduled panel. That flight likely cost more than \$7,100, according to one charter jet agency estimate.³

Our Committee investigated similar reports during the George W. Bush Administration on a bipartisan basis. On June 29, 2006, then-Chairman Tom Davis and then-Ranking Member Henry Waxman wrote to federal agencies seeking information about their use of private aircraft by senior officials. On October 25, 2006, Ranking Member Waxman summarized the results of that investigation in a letter to Rob Portman, who was then serving as the Administrator of the Office of Management and Budget:

Since January 2001, cabinet officials and agency heads at ten departments and agencies traveled aboard leased or chartered private aircraft on at least 125 trips to more than 300 locations, at a cost to the taxpayer of over \$1.5 million.⁴

Our previous investigation also found:

According to records provided to the Committee, there were no charter flights taken by the secretaries of Health and Human Services from 1999 to 2005. Yet in the first six months of 2006, Michael Leavitt, who moved to HHS in January 2005, made 19 trips aboard a private jet leased by CDC at a cost of \$726,048 in order to promote Administration policies.⁵

If these recent reports are accurate, this would be a stunning and hypocritical breach of trust given that the Trump Administration at the same time is trying to take away healthcare from millions of Americans and is proposing to slash funding at HHS—negatively affecting critical programs to provide early-childhood education, fund Medicare for seniors, and conduct medical research and development.⁶ The amount of taxpayer funds you reportedly spent on just one single flight earlier this month is more than some of my constituents make in an entire year.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Letter from Ranking Member Henry A. Waxman, House Committee on Government Reform, to Administrator Rob Portman, Office of Management and Budget (Oct. 25, 2006) (online at <https://wayback.archive-it.org/4949/20141031185609/http://oversight-archive.waxman.house.gov/story.asp?ID=1132>). *See also Is Bush's Cabinet Flying Too-Friendly Skies?*, Time (Oct. 26, 2006) (online at content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1551179,00.html).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2018*, at 42 (online at www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/budget/fy2018/budget.pdf).

It is imperative that Congress and the American people understand the extent to which you have been utilizing chartered flights at taxpayer expense. For these reasons, I request that you provide the following documents for all non-commercial flights taken by you or any other agency officials from January 20, 2017, to the present:

- (1) the number of flights, the locations of their departures and arrivals, and complete lists of all passengers, guests, and crew;
- (2) the full costs for each flight, including all associated or related transportation costs; and
- (3) all documents referring or relating to the flight's purpose; the person, organization, or agency that paid for the flight; and the justification of the need for the flight compared to flying commercial or other forms of transportation.

Please provide these documents by October 10, 2017. In addition, I request that appropriate agency officials brief my staff on these matters within the next two weeks. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Todd Phillips at (202) 225-5051.

Thank you for your cooperation with this matter.

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman