



Marine One *Past &* FUTURE

*A Turning Point in
Presidential Transportation*

CHARLES DENYER

U.S. PRESIDENTS HAVE relied on helicopter transport for more than half a century. Helicopters, for presidents, have gone from being experimental in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's day, to being essential in the twenty-first century. The hefty, highly sophisticated helicopters are commonly referred to as "White Tops" because, above the unique dark green body, a prominent white stripe covers the top and spreads part-way down the sides. The White Tops in the skies over the nation's capital are routine, but their thunderous noise still commands onlookers' attention.

Marine One is the call sign of whatever U.S. Marine Corps aircraft is transporting the president, traditionally one of a suite of helicopters operated exclusively by Marine Helicopter Squadron One, known as the HMX-1 Nighthawks. The men and women in this squadron are a select group of highly trained Marine pilots, considered the very best. For decades they have managed takeoffs and landings on the South Lawn with precision.



The helicopters of choice for the past six decades have been the Sikorsky Sea King models, along with the VH-60N, a smaller, newer executive transport helicopter. But these aging *Marine One* helicopters will soon be replaced by the all-new Sikorsky VH-92s, slated to enter service in 2020. The VH-92 represents a quantum leap in presidential helicopter travel in terms of safety, security, technology, and overall amenities. Plush carpeting, seating for twelve passengers, ballistic armor, secure communications lines, and a whisper-quiet interior will be standard features on all VH-92 helicopters dubbed *Marine One*.¹ According to the VH-92 Sikorsky program director Spencer Elani, "It's also very quiet, so much so that you can have a conversation," with the VH-92 providing "a smooth and comfortable ride."²

For security reasons, *Marine One* always flies in a group of identical helicopters, up to as many as five. While one is transporting the president, the others serve as decoys. After takeoff, the decoys begin to shift in formation to obscure

the location of the real *Marine One* carrying the president. The current lineup of *Marine One* helicopters are equipped with a battery of security technologies, including flares to counter heat-seeking missiles, infrared countermeasures, and more. While *Air Force One* is often referred to as the president's flying Oval Office, *Marine One* also keeps the president in constant communication with highly secure data transmission protocols that allow the commander in chief to conduct business as usual. Whenever the president travels domestically or overseas via *Air Force One*, *Marine One* always goes along, together with the president's limousine (known as "the beast") because the U.S. Secret Service's security protocol strictly prohibits the president from being transported on any other helicopter, airplane, or automobile.

Just as presidential motorcades are supported by numerous other vehicles, flying the president on *Marine One* requires supporting staff and materials, and that job is given to the MV-22 Ospreys, tilt-rotor military aircraft capable of vertical takeoff and landing, commonly known as "Green Tops." The White Tops and Green Tops together form what is known as the Executive Flight Detachment.³

LEFT

Marine One carries President Donald Trump to Andrews Air Force Base, where the he will board Air Force One, 2019.

WHITE HOUSE PHOTO



PREVIOUS SPREAD, ABOVE, AND RIGHT
Views of the all-new Sikorsky VH-92s, slated to begin service as Marine One in 2020. The new models will feature enhanced security, comfort, and technology.





LEFT
President Dwight D. Eisenhower stands beside the first presidential helicopter, a Bell H-13J Sioux, on the South Lawn of the White House, July 12, 1957.

OPPOSITE
President Eisenhower and his guest, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, board a U.S. Marine Corps Sikorsky HUS-1 helicopter on the White House lawn for a sightseeing tour over the nation's capital, September 15, 1959. As the first president to regularly use a helicopter, Eisenhower had two Executive Flight Detachments for his transport. These were provided by flight crews of the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps. To demonstrate his impartiality, the president alternated between these helicopters and their respective military personnel.

THE BEGINNING

The first president to use a helicopter while in office was Dwight D. Eisenhower. When he opted for a brief flight to Camp David on July 12, 1957, the nature of presidential travel was immediately diversified. He flew on a Bell H-13J, a crude form of transportation compared with the modern-day fleet of *Marine One* helicopters. It had a top speed of 105 miles per hour and a range of approximately 200 miles. A heavily tinted Plexiglas nose bubble reduced glare, and inside, on seats with simple arm- and footrests, there was just enough room for the president, the pilot, and a single Secret Service agent. But the president was not alone in the skies. An identical Bell H-13J would usually be close behind, carrying the president's

physician and another Secret Service agent.⁴

For years, the Secret Service—the agency responsible for the protection of the president—had held firm against helicopter use due to both safety and security concerns, but with growing nuclear threats from the Soviet Union, a much more efficient means of evacuating the nation's commander in chief was necessary, and helicopter transport was the answer. In 1958, both the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps took command of presidential helicopter responsibilities, while the U.S. Air Force retained sole responsibility for transporting the president in fixed wing aircraft. Since 1976, the Marine Corps has been given complete responsibility for all presidential helicopter missions.⁵



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AP IMAGES



MEMORIES

“The helicopter was very smooth, very impressive,” according to former President Barack Obama after his first ride in the Sikorsky helicopter in 2009. “You go right over the Washington Monument and then you know—kind of curve in by the Capitol. It was spectacular.”⁶ With presidential motorcades causing massive traffic jams almost anywhere the commander in chief travels, the White Tops have become a great alternative for fast, efficient, and secure transport. “On multiple occasions, he [President Obama] and his staff would use *Marine One* in order to eliminate motorcade-induced traffic jams around the country and the world,” according to Joe Mahshie, a White House Trip coordinator.⁷ Former President George W. Bush explained, “I don’t view it [*Marine One*] as a perk. . . . I really view it as a part of the presidency because it enables me to get from point A to point B without inconveniencing a lot of my fellow Americans.”⁸ Bush’s predecessor, President Bill Clinton, concurred. “I don’t know how I would function without *Marine One* when I was president,” he stated. He jokingly remembered how “I had trouble getting Buddy [Clinton’s Chocolate Labrador Retriever] on board. But in the end, he got to where he loved it. He would practically run off the leash to get on *Marine One*.”⁹

The cabin of the Sikorsky Sea Kings is so quiet that the president and others inside can speak in a normal tone of voice. Once, aboard *Marine One*, President George H. W. Bush and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev engaged in a brief discussion of the fundamentals of American capitalism. David Valdez, President Bush’s White House photographer, vividly remembered that, following takeoff, as *Marine One* flew over the affluent Maryland suburbs of Bethesda and Chevy Chase, Gorbachev asked what one of those large homes would



OPPOSITE

Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush exit Marine One, at Camp David, Maryland, June 2, 1990.

ABOVE

President Bill Clinton shares Marine One with his family. His dog, Buddy, seated next to Chelsea, was once a reluctant flier but grew to love the helicopter.

cost. Bush replied that a person might pay \$1 million or \$2 million for a home in that area. Gorbachev then asked how long it would take for someone to save up that much money to buy such an expensive property. Bush explained that people did not pay in full but got a mortgage to buy the home, prompting Gorbachev to ask, “What’s a mortgage?” Valdez recalled, “We all looked at each other sitting there in the close quarters of *Marine One* and realized he had never heard of it before.”¹⁰

Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Rob Bridgers, who flew *Marine One* during President Reagan’s last three years, remembered traveling the world with the president. “Any time there was any kind of a world meeting . . . *Air Force One* would fly him to the site and we [*Marine One*] would pick him up and deliver him a little closer to the actual

site.” According to Bridgers, President Reagan was lighthearted, always smiling, and full of jokes: “We’re [*Marine One*] pointing directly at the White House. So, he comes out with Mrs. Reagan, and we’re ready to take off and somebody taps me on the shoulder. And I look behind me and it’s President Reagan and he says, ‘Rob, don’t hit my house when you take off.’”¹¹

MARINE ONE AND NATIONAL TURNING POINTS

“Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.”¹² These twenty-five words forever changed the history of the American presidency. Fifteen hours after the speech, on August 9, 1974, Richard

President Richard Nixon gestures his famous “V” for victory sign to bid farewell as he boards Marine One for his final departure from the White House following his resignation, August 9, 1974.

Nixon became the first president ever to resign from office. His final goodbye is still a famous image. Turning to flash his signature “V” victory sign, he boarded *Marine One*, a 6-ton dark green Sikorsky Sea King. Soon the thunderous blades lifted the mighty helicopter into the air, transporting Nixon to Andrews Air Force base for his final departure back to California.

The White Tops are also used for transporting the vice president of the United States, using the call sign *Marine Two*, to indicate that the nation’s second in command is on board. During national emergencies, *Marine Two* has sometimes been at the center of the tension.

On March 30, 1981, President



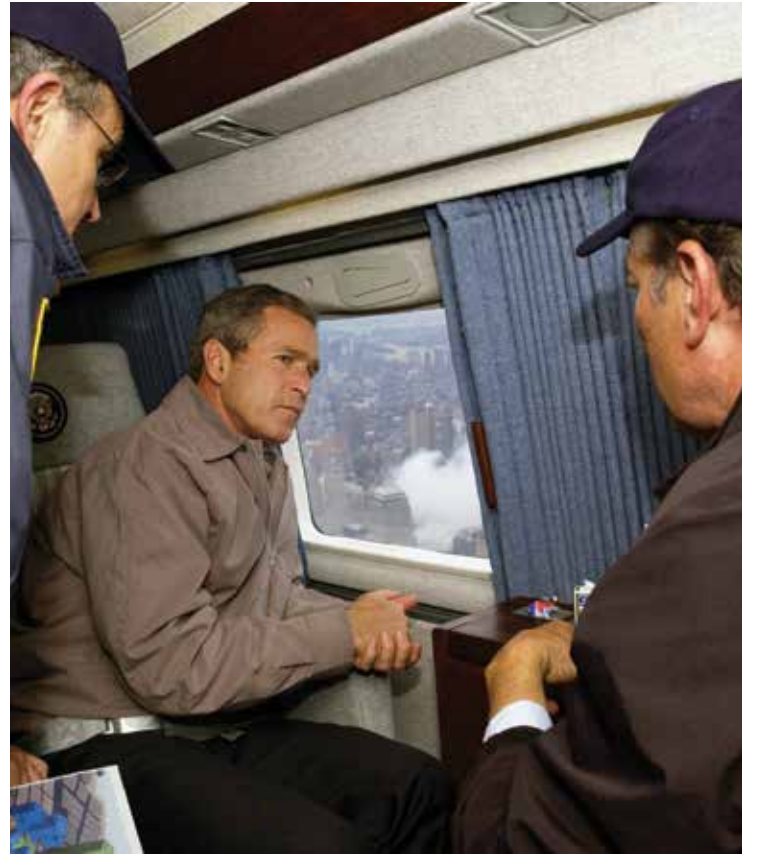
Ronald Reagan was shot and wounded while leaving a speaking engagement at the Washington Hilton Hotel. Vice President George H. W. Bush, in Texas for a series of political events, promptly changed plans to return immediately to the nation’s capital. The arrival plans, approved by the Secret Service, were to have Bush land at Andrews Air Force Base, board *Marine Two*, and land on the South Lawn. Vice President Bush overruled his security detail, telling his military aide, “Only the president lands on the South Lawn.” Bush, clearly remembering these dark hours of presidential peril, remarked that “Something about landing on the South Lawn didn’t sit well with me. . . . It might well have made for great TV, but I thought it would have sent the wrong message to the country and to the world.”¹³

Almost two decades later, on the evening of September 11, 2001, *Marine Two* embarked on its first-ever liftoff from the South Lawn with the sitting vice president on board. The United States had been attacked that day, and Vice President Dick Cheney, after spending most of the day in the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, remembered that he “walked out of the diplomatic entrance of the White House onto the South Lawn, where a white-top helicopter was waiting to take us to an undisclosed location. . . . As *Marine Two* gained altitude, we could see the Pentagon. The building was lit up for the rescue teams still at work, and smoke was rising from it.”¹⁴

Just three days later, President George W. Bush visited the southern tip of Manhattan to see with his own eyes the still smoldering steel and rubble carnage from the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers. While memories of *Marine One* flights are often told by the president, family members, and senior staff, on this day the HMX-1 pilots spoke. Colonel Steve Taylor, who piloted *Marine One* on the flight to



President George W. Bush steps off Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House September 11, 2001, following the terrorist attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon (above, left). Three days later, he viewed the World Trade Center disaster site from Marine One with New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, left, and New York Governor George Pataki, September 14, 2001 (above, right).



Ground Zero, remembered leaving Manhattan after the president’s visit: “On that day I think we all felt like we were a part of our nation’s history. We empathized with our fellow citizens; we supported the president on what was a difficult day for all Americans; we were angry at what had happened to our country. . . . Most satisfying to me was that throughout the response to 9/11, the men and women of HMX-1 responded with the calm professionalism they have been known for throughout the history of the squadron.”¹⁵

NOTES

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2. Quoted in *ibid*.
3. David Cenciotti, “*Marine One* and HMX-1 MV 22 Osprey Tilt-Rotor Aircraft Land on USS Gerald Ford Aircraft Carrier for President Trump’s Visit,” posted March 5, 2017, *Aviationist*: David Cenciotti’s Weblog, <https://theaviationist.com>.

4. “Bell H-13J,” Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum website, <https://airandspace.si.edu>.
5. “Bell UH-13J Sioux,” National Museum of the U.S. Air Force website, www.nationalmuseum.af.mil.
6. Quoted in Amanda Macias, “There Is No Other Helicopter in the World Like *Marine One*,” posted December 19, 2016, *Business Insider* website, www.businessinsider.com.
7. Joe Mahshie, “An Insider’s Guide to *Marine One*: The President’s Helicopter,” posted June 25, 2017, *The Points Guy* blog, <https://thepointsguy.com>.
8. Quoted in Mary-Jayne McKay, “*Marine One* Flying High,” posted December 12, 2002, CBS News website, www.cbsnews.com.
9. Quoted in *ibid*.
10. David Valdez, interview with author, January 27, 2019.
11. Quoted in Jaime Dailey, “Former *Marine One* Pilot Remembers Reagan,” posted June 11, 2004, WTOP website, www.wtop.com.
12. Quoted in John Herbers, “Nixon Resigns,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1974, 1.
13. Quoted in Alan Peppard, “Command and Control: Tested Under Fire,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 13, 2015.
14. Dick Cheney, with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 10.
15. Quoted in Sara Bock, “The Flight to Ground Zero,” Marine Corps Association and Foundation website, <https://mca-marines.org>.