



## **Junkets or not, taxpayers pick up the tab for trips**

**By: Ana Radelat  
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**Washington** – Connecticut’s senators are fairly new to office, but they've quickly picked up a congressional tradition, joining their elders in logging thousands of miles in taxpayer-funded trips to destinations as diverse as Belgium and Egypt.

Just months after assuming office in 2011, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. took his first CODEL, or "congressional delegation" trip, to Pakistan.

The following year he visited Egypt, Afghanistan, Israel and Tunisia. Blumenthal traveled to Egypt and Afghanistan again, and added Jordan to the itinerary, last year.

Blumenthal is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a panel that organizes many CODELs as part of its official business to learn about global hot spots.

“As a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Senator Blumenthal took these trips to see military operations and meet the troops,” said Blumenthal press secretary Josh Zembik.

Murphy also belongs to a panel, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that has good reasons to send members to far corners of the world.

Since he was sworn in to the Senate last year, Murphy has traveled to Ukraine and Germany twice, Belgium, Pakistan, Turkey and Afghanistan. Two, three or four countries were visited on each trip.

With transportation, per diem, housing and food costs, each trip cost thousands of dollars; and on a couple of the trips, Murphy invited a staffer to come with him, adding to the cost.

“As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Chairman of the European Subcommittee, it’s part of Senator Murphy’s job to go on official travel to represent the United States' interests abroad,” said Murphy press secretary Kaylie Hanson. “These CODELs also allow him to connect with Connecticut’s troops fighting

overseas, and make connections with our allies on issues where there's a shared interest, such as bringing Connecticut products to customers abroad."

Even critics of the trips like Dan Mitchell, a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, said quick trips to war zones like Afghanistan have their merit.

"It they are taking CODELs to Afghanistan, they are not gaming the system," Mitchell said.

But he is deeply suspicious of other trips he considers wasteful junkets.

"If they are going to France to see the Paris Air Show, then my antennae starts to quiver," Mitchell said. "These are taxpayer funded vacations, especially if spouses or significant others come along."

There is another way lawmakers travel free, and that's to accept trips from special interests. Connecticut lawmakers have also taken these types of trips.

While CODELs may in many cases be more ethical, Mitchell said there's a downside to both types of trips.

"If it's at taxpayer expense, I'm not happy that taxpayers are paying," he said. "But if a lobbyist is paying, there's a *quid-pro-quo*."

The State Department and the Pentagon are also wary of CODELs because they must spend time and money helping to arrange the trips. The State Department said it was involved in coordinating about 2,000 CODELs last year, and the military must often arrange for expensive military transport into war zones and other places.

The Senate committee chairman approves senators' CODELs, and House committee chairmen, and/or House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, must sign off on any House member's official travel.

After across-the-board budget cuts cancelled White House tours and placed hundreds of civil servants on furloughs last year, Boehner forbade House members from taking military aircraft for official overseas travel. His rule included even trips to Afghanistan and Iraq, where military aircraft is often the only way to get around.

"This decision is a prudent and responsible course of action, reflecting the current strain on military readiness and operations," Boehner's office said in an e-mail.

Depending on the aircraft, military transport planes can cost from \$32,000 to more than \$70,000 an hour to fly. The trips Blumenthal and Murphy took to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East involved both commercial travel and military transport.

Despite Boehner's ban on the use of military airplanes, House CODEL's jumped from a total cost of \$1.2 million in 2011 and \$1.5 million in 2012 to \$1.7 million last year.

Boehner dropped the ban at the beginning of this year. Since then, there have been 90 House CODELs valued at about \$622,000.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3<sup>rd</sup> District, was among a dozen House members who traveled to the Vatican last year for Pope Francis' inaugural mass. It cost more than \$62,000 to pay for the group's trip.

She was also among 34 lawmakers who traveled to Normandy at the beginning of June for the anniversary of the D-Day invasion. An evening in Paris was included in the trip.

"Officially representing the United States House of Representatives at events like the Papal installation or the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Normandy is an honor Congresswoman DeLauro takes seriously," said Sara Lonardo, DeLauro's press secretary.

But Mitchell questioned the official value of these trips.

"In these cases, practically speaking, what was really achieved?" he asked.