

FORTUNE

Why Trump Should Start Paying for the Secret Service

Daniel J. Mitchell

August 24, 2017

The news that the Secret Service is way over budget because of President Donald Trump's frequent vacations is a rich source of material for political satirists. It's easy to zing Trump for being a hypocrite, as he previously complained about the cost and duration of President Barack Obama's vacations. Trump is way ahead of his predecessor's pace.

But let's look at this issue from the perspective of taxpayers. Every time the president hops on Air Force One for a weekend getaway at one of his resorts, that involves a major shift of manpower by the Secret Service, along with major outlays for travel, lodging, and other costs. Now there's talk of making the budget even bigger to accommodate all of Trump's trips.

With the prospect of even higher Secret Service costs, it's time to consider some sensible reforms that could limit the agency's burden on taxpayers.

First, Congress should put an annual limit on expenditures for unofficial White House travel. Restricting the president's ability to take taxpayer-funded vacations could be politically advantageous. According to a 2013 Center for Economic and Policy Research report, the average American gets 10 paid vacation days a year. Congress would likely get credit for bringing the president's funded vacation time closer to that of the people he's supposed to serve.

Presidents are not average, of course, so they should get taxpayer-financed protection for around four weeks of vacation. Any more than that would still have a Secret Service detail, but the president would have to pick up the incremental expenses, either personally or (more likely) by having their political party or campaign committee cover the cost.

There should also be similar restrictions for the presidential family, especially with regard to overseas business trips. If Trump's children feel it is necessary to go overseas to sign a deal, then the company at the very least should pay half the cost for Secret Service protection. Congress could stipulate this when it writes its annual allocation of funds for the White House and the Department of Homeland Security, which runs the Secret Service.

Another reasonable reform would be to permanently expand the Secret Service's travel budget, but protect taxpayers by limiting the number of other administration staffers that go on junkets. He should be forced to cut in half the number of political advisors, speechwriters, and flunkies that have turned White House trips into costly boondoggles. It's not ideal to have congressional spending bills micromanage White House operations, but that might become necessary if presidents don't exercise good judgment on personal and business trips.

None of these suggestions should be interpreted as attacks on Trump. They would be permanent reforms to address the systemic problem of wasteful spending and administrative bloat in Washington. This problem existed before the current president. And in the absence of reform, it will be an issue with future administrations.

Daniel J. Mitchell is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.