New Bush Plane Creates Dubious Image

■ Politics: Pushing austerity as he rides in a $330-million Air Force One may create a problem for the President. Actually, the craft wasn't his idea.

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WASHINGTON—How do you hide a $330-million airplane? One that weighs 836,000 pounds, features an operating room, 85 telephones and a main deck that rivals the size of a nice Pasadena home?

You don't. And that's a potential problem for the White House and President Bush's political advisers.

The new Air Force One, a giant Boeing 747-200B with all those features and many more, was quietly delivered to Andrews Air Force Base just outside Washington late Thursday afternoon.

And now, the question facing the White House is: How does the President start to travel about the country in this gleaming new flying White House without causing a political ruckus—especially in the wake of all the criticism about his vacationing in Kennebunkport?

Never mind that the new plane is replacing an 18-year-old model. Never mind that it was ordered by the Air Force, approved by the previous President and funded by Congress in the 1986 budget.

When Bush starts to use the shiny new aircraft, which seems to glisten even in the fog, the plane is likely to draw as much attention as the political message he is delivering. And this autumn during the congressional election campaign, that message is almost certain to focus on a Republican program of fiscal austerity.

"I'd stash it in a hangar" until after the election, said a senior White House adviser during the Ronald Reagan Administration.

Then, he said, he would start a major campaign to minimize the political fallout. "I'd take every living President on a trip around the United States to show it off," he said.

For now, White House aides are warily eyeing the plane, defending it as a necessary element in the modern presidency while volunteering that they never asked for it in the first place.

The plane was originally scheduled for delivery in late 1988, after the presidential elections. That way, Reagan could have used it for his flight home to California—leaving him to shoulder the plane's political baggage.

But design changes and the difficulty involved in providing a degree of protection against the electronic interference of a thermonuclear blast created delay after delay.

Here's what the President will get:

An airplane capable of flying 70 passengers and 23 crew members 7,140 statute miles—even farther if the aerial refueling capability is exercised. It has a six-channel stereo system, two kitchens and a cargo belly that can carry 6,000 pounds of luggage.

The presidential suite includes an office and stateroom with two beds, a lavatory and a shower. There are a dining and conference room and separate cabins for Secret Service agents, presidential guests, staff members and a small press contingent.

Emergency surgery can be performed in the plane's operating room. That was high on the list of the White House medical unit when various White House offices made suggestions for the interior design.

The reported cost for the plane and a similarly equipped spare to be delivered in 1991 is $660 million. However, the government will pay $140 million each—about $15 million more than a civilian 747 might cost—because Boeing agreed to absorb nearly all unforeseen expenses under its fixed-price contract.

BERNIE BOSTON / Los Angeles Times

The new Air Force One Boeing 747 arrives at its home base, Andrews Air Force Base, near Washington.

The primary Air Force One, a Boeing 707, has been in service since 1973. The backup plane dates to 1962. Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as President on that plane, which also carried the body of the slain John F. Kennedy from Dallas to Washington on Nov. 22, 1963.

Indeed, the difficulty that military pallbearers encountered in removing Kennedy's coffin from the airplane influenced the design of the new Air Force One, which will have a doorway large enough to allow a similar ceremony to be performed with dignity.

The current Air Force One no longer meets strict Federal Aviation Administration noise standards adopted in 1985—it was given an exemption. And it requires runways at least 10,500-feet long—or 30% more than needed for the new, larger presidential plane.

On the other hand, the current plane has been in the air only about 5,000 hours.

"It's your grandmother's Buick that she only drives to church," said Lt. Col. Darryl Hayes, an Air Force spokesman.

But, when the President trades in his low-mileage model, which will be used by lesser dignitaries, won't he be inviting stormy skies?

No problem, said B. Jay Cooper, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee. "It's such a visible piece of equipment that all presidents have had. If anyone tries to make an issue of it, I don't think the public will buy it."

After all, he said, "it's not like a mayor buying a $50,000 limousine."