

Strange doings with Air Force One

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For the second time in six weeks an unexplained incident involving Bill Clinton's plane has been reported. The Federal Aviation Administration reported March 11 that Air Force One disappeared briefly from an air traffic controller's radar screen the previous day while the plane was carrying the president over the New York metropolitan area.

The plane was on a flight from Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington to Hartford, Connecticut, in constant radio contact and well separated from any other aircraft. The apparent disappearance was recorded by the radar at Gibbsboro, New Jersey, which was taken out of service to investigate the malfunction.

Controllers said the disappearance of the plane's radar image was two or three times as long as the 12 seconds estimated by the FAA. At the plane's cruising speed this would involve a gap of one-and-a-half to four-and-a-half miles.

In the earlier incident involving Air Force One, the Associated Press carried an erroneous report January 28 that the plane was involved in a midair collision over National Airport in Washington DC. Clinton was leaving the capital that day for a campaign-style rally in Champaign, Illinois, after his State of the Union speech.

Air Force One had actually passed within 2.88 miles of a Delta MD-88 taking off from National, violating the three-mile separation required by flight safety rules. The FAA blamed controller error and began an investigation. The incident was reported by a local television station as a "near midair collision," which it was, as defined by FAA regulations.

The local AP bureau picked up this story, dropped the word "near," and sent out a report over the wires that Clinton's plane had collided with another in midair. Twelve minutes later-as the AP was also carrying a report on Clinton's speech in Champaign-the wire service killed the story.



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