

Tom Price resignation highlights corruption in Trump's cabinet

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Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary Tom Price resigned on Friday, amid mounting criticism of his use of chartered jets and the apparent use of these government-funded trips as personal outings with his wife.

Between May and September, Price's travels aboard private jets had cost the Treasury about \$400,000, according to Politico. Moreover, many of Price's trips had been of a personal nature: in June, for example, the HHS chartered a jet to Nashville, where Price owns a condominium. He spent the day touring a medicine dispensary, giving an extemporaneous speech at a health care summit, and having lunch with his son. On another occasion, he and his wife flew to St. Simons Island, Georgia to visit a resort where they own property, making an appearance at a medical conference.

Price stated on Thursday that he would reimburse the government for his travel fees. Significantly, he only offered to pay for his seat, which, according to an HHS spokesperson, cost \$51,887.31. That Price could write a personal check for a sum that exceeds an average worker's annual wage is no surprise, since he is a multi-millionaire. But the amount falls well under Politico's \$400,000 figure. It does not include the seats for Price's staff, who traveled with him on his many jaunts to physicians' conferences and pharmaceutical company gatherings.

Price issued a four-paragraph resignation letter on Friday in which he expressed "regret" for having "created a distraction" from the administration's mission—which, it should be pointed out, is to strip healthcare from millions of Americans in the service of insurance and pharmaceutical executives. He made no apology for his actions.

Several other members of Trump's cabinet have

incurred scrutiny over their travel expenses. Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, Environmental Protection Agency chief Scott Pruitt, and Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin are all being investigated for their use of privately chartered jets or government planes, or for combining official travel and plush holiday trips.

Treasury Secretary Mnuchin requested the use of a military jet—at a cost of \$25,000 an hour—to transport him and his new wife, Louise Linton, to their European honeymoon. After questioning by Treasury officials, he rescinded the request. A few weeks later, he and Linton traveled by military jet to Kentucky, taking advantage of the trip to view the solar eclipse in the path of totality. Linton posted a photo of the couple deplaning, tagging the expensive, designer brands she was wearing to Instagram.

In July, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin issued a memo demanding that Veterans Affairs staffers curb their travel expenses. Less than two weeks later he took his wife to Europe at the public's expense. The pair attended a championship tennis match at Wimbledon, took a cruise down the Thames, shopped, and toured historical sites. They were accompanied by Shulkin's acting undersecretary, Poonam Alaigh, and her husband, as well as Shulkin's chief of staff and an aide. A security retinue of six also accompanied the delegation.

Ostensibly, the trip was official government business. However, at least half of their time was spent on recreation, and Shulkin's wife, who is not a government employee, had her flight paid for and was given a per diem reimbursement for expenses by the Department of Treasury.

As Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke is responsible for public lands coveted by oil and gas

industries and their shareholders. Zinke took multiple flights aboard a privately chartered jet owned by Nielson and Associates, an oil and gas exploration company based in Wyoming. One such trip cost \$12,375. For most of these flights, there were commercial options available for a few hundred dollars. Jay Nielson, executive vice president of Nielson and Associates, feigned ignorance about Zinke's travels on his company's jets, saying, "Part of why people charter planes is they like to remain somewhat private."

Scott Pruitt, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, is widely known for his extravagant use of federal funds. Congressional inquiries have focused on his 18-person, 24-hour security detail, the \$25,000 "secure" phone booth he had built for himself, and his frequent flights from Washington, DC to his home state of Oklahoma. Pruitt has also cost the federal purse an estimated \$58,000 for private jets he has used to travel the country in support of the sweeping cuts he plans to make to the EPA.

Tom Price is thus far the only cabinet member to have drawn Trump's ire over travel expenses. For Trump, the primary concern was the "optics" of Price's use of public resources. Furthermore, Price had already found himself in Trump's crosshairs when the administration met resistance for its efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Trump had jibed at Price in July, during a speech at a Boy Scout Jamboree. In reference to the healthcare plan Price had presented to congress, Trump threatened; "He better get the votes. Otherwise I will say, 'Tom, you're fired.'"

The Trump cabinet's eye-popping travel expenses have highlighted the gulf between his demagogic campaign promises to "drain the swamp" and end government waste, and the reality of the open oligarchic rule in the capital.

Aristocratic arrogance and contempt also finds expression in the various responses of administration officials to criticism. Zinke has referred to the investigation into his travels as "a little BS." Louise Linton, upon receiving a critical comment on her preposterous Instagram photo, unleashed a snide tirade against the commenter, demeaning the woman's income and lifestyle. Linton's response inspired comparisons to Marie Antoinette, whom she once portrayed on television.

Speaking to the Washington Post, Poonam Alaigh dismissed concerns that the VA delegation's trip to Europe represented wasteful spending. "Were there some breaks we got? Sure. But they were reasonable," she said.

The Trump administration has ruthlessly worked to dismantle programs to provide working Americans clean air, unpolluted drinking water, healthcare and education. It has portrayed American workers as lazy and irresponsible, and therefore undeserving of assistance. At the same time, Trump appointees have plundered the Treasury to maintain their positions among the financial aristocracy, traveling with unwarranted security details aboard luxury flights to protect themselves from the public they so clearly abhor.

Of course all the tone-deaf assertions and actions of the Trump cabinet pale by comparison to the privileged existence of Trump himself, who has spent more than a quarter of his presidency at his own hotels, golf clubs and other resorts, including the "winter White House" at his Mar-e-Lago estate, at a total cost to the Treasury that dwarfs all the boondoggles enjoyed by all other administration officials combined. It is likely that Trump's sensitivity to the exposure of Price's high-cost travel was sparked, not only by the administration's failure to repeal Obamacare, for which he held Price partly responsible, but by concern that Price's lifestyle would draw unflattering attention to the far more lavish perks enjoyed by the "commander-in-chief."



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