

WALSH: Taxpayers on the hook for Bush's Utah fundraising stop

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"We're here to see some helicopters," a mother with a toddler on her shoulders told ABC 4 television reporters this week after watching President Bush land at Treasure Mountain Middle School in Park City.

"But we're not here to support George Bush in any way, shape or form."

That's where she's wrong.

In addition to the traffic jams and delayed school hours and disrupted bus service and closed condo parking garages, taxpayers will be footing most of the bill for the president's 19-hour getaway in the reddest state in the nation.

The tab includes overtime for Highway Patrol troopers, Summit County Sheriff's deputies, Salt Lake City and Park City and even Kamas police officers. It includes flying four Marine helicopters up and down Parleys Canyon. It includes dozens of rooms at Stein Ericksen - \$185 to \$545 a night at summer "value" rates - for the president, his staff and Secret Service detail. And it includes the \$56,500/hour cost of flying Air Force One and the \$7,000/hour bill for the cargo plane full of black suburbans that tag along.

"It's a lot of work," Park City Police Chief Lloyd Evans told KSL-TV. "But you don't often have the chance to have a sitting president visit your community. It's exciting."

I'd have goosebumps too - if I wasn't thinking about how much I'm going to have to pay for the thrill of Utah's fourth Bush presidential visit.

The final cost wouldn't matter if the president had touched down on nominally official business - like his speech to the American Legion two years ago. But this trip was purely political, the president jet-hopping his way through five western states to raise money for GOP presidential candidate John McCain and Republican parties in swing states (not Utah).

While the grubby masses were kept at binocular's-length, Utah's conservative elite plunked down \$500 or \$10,000 for a daytime grip-and-grin with the leader of the free world in one of Salt Lake City's most Democratic neighborhoods. About 60 emptied their bank accounts for a \$70,000 dream date with the chief executive at Mitt Romney's Deer Valley log cabin.

"It was two hours unplugged with George Bush. It was awesome," said Don Peay, gun-rights advocate and GOP contributor.

All told, the president raised about \$2 million that McCain will split with the national party and Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico and Wisconsin Republicans.

Federal law requires that candidates and political parties reimburse the cost of travel to and from fundraising events. To get around those rules, the president multi-tasks. In 2006, Bush tacked on a fundraiser for Sen. Orrin Hatch; the Utah senator had to pay \$22,000 to defray the costs.

This trip, White House schedulers added a series of mostly contrived "official" events: a tour of a Mesa cable company, a commencement speech at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, a visit with LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson and a volunteer award on the tarmac. None alone would merit a presidential visit. Put together, they make a fundraising jaunt look like state business.

In a "back of the envelope" estimate, The Washington Post figured Bush's campaign travel in 2002 cost \$15.7 million. Taxpayers covered 97 percent of the cost of those partisan trips. Two years ago, a report for the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform estimated the cost of flying the president and Vice President Dick Cheney to campaign events in 2006 would total \$7.2 million - and just \$200,000 of that would be reimbursed.

The man who will benefit most from this taxpayer subsidy - McCain - didn't even show up. Worried about being dragged down by the president's dismal approval rating (and not necessarily the government waste he hates so much), he stayed home.

Nevertheless, Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics and a McCain supporter, says such trips are so regulated, the campaign will be held responsible. But separating the presidential business from the political will be difficult. "This will be a hellacious thing to figure out," Jowers says.

The White House has gotten very good at blending the line.

A spokeswoman for Oversight Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, a California Democrat, says there are no new estimates of presidential campaign travel costs for 2008. "It's very hard to pin down."

Jowers says that's the price of American politics. "Every president does [fundraising]. If presidents are going to continue to be political, it's just the way it has to be," he adds. "We've made a decision to protect our president."

OK. But couldn't we charge an extra \$15 a bag? walsh@sltrib.com

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