

Heli-whopper

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Now that President George W. Bush has become a born-again fiscal conservative, he should look out his office window for a clue on how to save the taxpayers several billion dollars: Chop the bloated program to develop a new fleet of presidential helicopters.

This is not to say the president doesn't need a safe, secure helicopter. It's just that he doesn't need a fleet of half-billion-dollar helicopters that grow more expensive by the day. In fact, if the VH-71 "Kestrel" weren't being designed as the high-profile replacement for Marine One - as choppers carrying the president are designated - it already might have been axed by Navy budget officers.

Three months ago, Navy Secretary Donald Winter recommended delaying the production of the VH-71, a modified Italian aircraft being developed by Lockheed Martin Co. The Navy criticized Lockheed for "consistent under-execution," which, in Pentagon budget-speak, is tantamount to "we want to kill this sucker."

The Pentagon rejected the Navy's recommendation, deciding to spend \$565 million more on the program in the next budget year. By the time all 23 helicopters in the program are built - assuming they are - they could cost as much as \$12 billion, roughly double the estimate in 2003 when the contract was let.

Currently the president flies aboard one of several "Marine One" choppers, either a modified Sikorsky S-70 (another variant is the familiar S-60 Black Hawk) or the larger SH-3 Sea King. Some of the aircraft in the fleet have been in service for 40 years and, despite the finest maintenance in the world, they are showing their age. There's no argument that new birds are needed.

But what kind of fiscal conservative vetoes children's health insurance bills and orders up a fleet of \$500 million helicopters? Bush will be long out of office by the time a new Marine One fleet is readied; he should order a new set of Black Hawks and save his successor and the taxpayers some money - and send a message to military contractors that "consistent under-execution" won't be tolerated.

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