

July 1, 2008

E-mail from Obama campaign spokesman Robert Gibbs to reporters about the senator's arrival in Afghanistan and his earlier departure from the USA.

Note from Robert Gibbs:

At approximately 3:15 AM Eastern/2:15 AM Central, I received a phone call telling me that Senator Obama had landed at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Since leaving Washington on Thursday, Senator Obama had stopped and visited troops in Kuwait.

What follows is a pool report by the Chicago Tribune's John McCormick.

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Background:

This is a pool report for July 17 for flight from Chicago's Midway Airport to Washington's Reagan National Airport, followed by motorcade to Andrews Air Force Base. All times are local for the geography mentioned. Please note that the campaign said it would be holding this for distribution until it confirmed Sen. Obama was on the ground in Afghanistan.

Report:

The motorcade left Sen. Obama's home in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood at 11:11 a.m. There was one Chicago Police Department patrol car, followed by two SUVs, a sedan and a press van. Riding in the press van were agent Jill, Sam, John McCormick of the Chicago Tribune and Glen Johnson of The Associated Press.

The motorcade headed north on Lake Shore Drive to I-55 (Stevenson Expressway) and toward MDW. The CPD blocked traffic for our turn onto the western perimeter of the airfield, where we arrived at 11:31 a.m.

Waiting on the tarmac was a Gulfstream III (G3) executive jet (tail number N366JA). We exited our respective vehicles at 11:34 a.m.

The crew was waiting outside for the senator's arrival and a few photos with him near a wing. He was wearing tan slacks and a short black jacket. After fishing around in the back of one of the SUVs for his luggage (he seemed especially to be checking his suits inside a garment bag), he was on the bird by 11:36 a.m.

Also getting on the plane were eight Secret Service agents and the two reporters. The senator briefly greeted us as we walked past his seat in the forward section. Seated near him was senior spokeswoman Linda Douglass, the only staff member on the flight.

After everyone found a seat on the crowded plane, the pilot announced that the flying time would be between 80 and 85 minutes. All seemed eager for him to start the engines, since the plane had been sitting under a hot sun and the cabin temperature was likely somewhere in the 90s. Sweat had begun to roll down the faces of some of the agents.

"We're just easing you into it," Obama told his bodyguards, referring to the heat and the desert weather they would all be traveling to in the coming days.

As the plane taxied, the senator, wearing a short-sleeve black shirt, chatted with Douglass. The plane was wheels up at 11:55 a.m.

Your pool asked Douglass if we could chat with the senator about his upcoming trip. She said she would check, but later told us that we would only get a brief chance to ask him a couple questions once at Reagan National Airport.

Janis, our stewardess, first served the senator his lunch (chicken and rice and broccoli). Everyone else had sandwiches, wraps, chips and candy (yes, just like on the bus), although we were served on china and given green place settings and cloth napkins.

As the plane peaked around 41,000 feet and 500 knots, according to the computer screen tracking our location at the front of the cabin, the senator read a copy of the Wall Street Journal. Johnson had claimed an aisle seat and reported that he first read a story about off-shore oil drilling and then one about Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae.

By the time we were descending, at 17,000 feet, he had switched to the New York Times, spending most of his time in the Sports and Arts sections.

We were wheels down at 2:17 p.m. local and parked with the engines off by 2:24 p.m.

After getting off the plane, Douglass said there was time for "one question," adding, "Then, we're making him leave. He's behind [schedule]."

Your pool, with the noise of the jet's engines in the background, quickly asked what two or three things Obama was hoping to learn on this mission.

"Well, I'm looking forward to seeing what the situation on the ground is," he said. "I want to, obviously, talk to the commanders and get a sense, both in Afghanistan and in Baghdad of, you know, what the most, ah, their biggest concerns are. And I want to thank our troops for the heroic work that they've been doing."

Then, the senator was asked whether he plans to deliver some tough talk to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki about doing more to stand up the instruments of self-governance in their own nations.

"Well, you know, I'm more interested in listening than doing a lot of talking," he said. "And I think it is very important to recognize that I'm going over there as a U.S. senator. We have one president at a time, so it's the president's job to deliver those messages."

By 2:32 p.m., the motorcade was rolling. This one included two local police cars, three SUVs, a Honda Accord, a minivan equipped with lights

and sirens and another local patrol car. We were off the DCA property by 2:36 p.m.

Your pool was in the Honda with Douglass. It was driven by Molly Buford, who works in Obama's senator office and also for the campaign.

The motorcade traveled I-395 to I-295 and then on to the Suitland Parkway, entering a northern entrance of Andrews Air Force Base at 2:57 p.m.

We passed several military helicopters and planes before arriving at 3:01 p.m. near an aircraft that had no markings, with the exception of an American flag on the tail. This was the plane that would transport the congressional delegation to their destination. A ground crew member told us it was a Boeing C-40C.

The senator greeted several military personnel waiting for him near the plane. He was carrying a laptop bag and had changed into some brown leather boots upon arrival in Washington.

The senator was also greeted by Mark Lippert, foreign policy advisor in his senate office. Douglass said he was the only member of Obama's staff traveling with him on the congressional delegation trip. Douglass later told your pool that Lippert had returned in the late spring from a tour of duty in Iraq as a naval reservist.

By 3:03 p.m., the senator was on the aircraft, having been saluted by a member of the military on his way aboard. At 3:09 p.m., the plane's door was closed. Four minutes later it was in motion and wheels up at 3:17 p.m., taking off to the south.

Later, Douglass confirmed that Sens. Jack Reed and Chuck Hagel were on the plane before our arrival. Your pool had not seen them at Andrews.

-- John McCormick, Chicago Tribune.