



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 6, 2012

## Sitting on a Mountain of Debt

The U.S. government is sitting on a mountain of debt — literally. According to [The Daily](#), since 2005 federal agencies have spent nearly \$500,000 on trendy office chairs; and while government spokesmen claim the ergonomic chairs have been purchased solely for medical reasons, evidence indicates that they are, in fact, bought routinely for perfectly healthy employees.



The pricey chairs, called Aerons, are “the sleek, adjustable seats that first gained popularity during the 1990s dot-com boom,” in the words of *The Daily*, which noted that the chairs became so ubiquitous at “dot-coms, Fortune 500 companies, and A-list Hollywood production sets” that the Museum of Modern Art added one to its permanent collection. Manufactured by Michigan-based Herman Miller, Inc., Aerons retail for \$750 to \$1,150.

The federal government pays considerably less than that but still isn’t exactly pinching pennies. It bought 1,002 ergonomic chairs between 2005 and 2011, of which 81 percent were Aerons. “Uncle Sam spent at least \$497,494 on the chairs during that period,” writes the iPad newspaper, “at an average cost of more than \$500 each,” including 235 Aerons at \$545 apiece for the Department of State in 2009 and 30 Aerons at \$588 apiece for the Department of Health and Human Services in 2011.

If you think \$588 is a bit steep for an office chair — even a quality ergonomic one — you aren’t alone.

“I don’t know why they’re paying that amount. You can find [ergonomic chairs] for \$350,” Paul Light, a professor of public service at New York University’s Wagner School, told *The Daily*. (In an interview with the [Holland Sentinel](#), Herman Miller spokesman Mark Schurman countered that the Aeron is priced similarly to comparable competitors’ chairs.)

There is, of course, a perfectly good reason why the feds are probably spending vastly more than necessary on office chairs: The money isn’t coming out of their pockets but out of taxpayers’.

Federal spokespeople argue that their agencies aren’t buying Aerons simply because they can but because the chairs are needed. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) property management specialist Bruce Ridgely told *The Daily* that his agency’s Aeron purchases — 272 chairs between 2005 and 2011 — were strictly for “medical purposes.” State Department press officer Beth Gosselin told the paper that “the agency buys Aerons for their orthopedic value and availability.”

Critics, however, suggest two more plausible explanations for widespread federal Aeron purchases.

First, having an Aeron establishes a bureaucrat as someone important.

“What happens is, things like this become status symbols. Someone gets a chair and another person of similar rank immediately wants one,” Charlie Peters, founding editor of the *Washington Monthly*, told *The Daily*.

As a result, the chairs are everywhere in federal offices. Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanek told the paper that “everyone in my office [of 20 or 30 people] has one. This is not an unusual purchase.” That



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branch of the armed forces bought 29 of the chairs at \$556 a pop in June 2008. (The NRC got a bargain that year, paying just \$518 per Aeron.)

The second cause of Uncle Sam's Aeron binges is the annual rush to spend everything in an agency's budget.

"You have to unload money at the end of the year," Peters, the Peace Corps' director of evaluation from 1962 to 1968, told *The Daily*. "If you don't spend what you've got, Congress is going to say, 'Why should we give you more money when you didn't even spend what we gave you last year?'"

Thus, it comes as little surprise that "of the 11 large-scale Aeron purchases *The Daily* confirmed with federal officials or private contractors, seven were awarded in August or September, the last two months of the fiscal year."

Politicians seeking to rein in excessive federal spending might start with extravagant office-chair purchases. Taxpayers would be well served by forcing government employees to sit on cheaper, less luxurious chairs — and not just because doing so would reduce the federal budget. After all, the more time the bureaucrats spend away from their desks, the less time they can spend guiding the rest of us down the road to serfdom.



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