Give 'em a break: Everyone needs time out of the office
Unfair criticism follows politicians who take a vacation
By Phil Rosenthal
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German Chancellor Angela Merkel, not wanting to appear panicked and inadvertently create even more turbulence amid already roiled global markets and an unsteady euro, thought it best to hold to her holiday plans for time out of the public eye.

Not since Chevy Chase and the Griswold family toppled Stonehenge has a European vacation come under such scrutiny and in for such uneven reviews.

Whether running a country or a company or just trying to keep up with daily demands of work, everybody needs an occasional break. Those with the greatest responsibilities have the greatest need to occasionally take time off, if only to be able to better maintain their focus when they're on. But there are ramifications, both real and perceived.

"People need to sit back a little bit and recharge their batteries," said Samuel Skinner, once White House chief of staff under President George H.W. Bush and now of counsel with law firm Greenberg Traurig in Chicago. "You can't go 24/7, 52 weeks a year and not have it take its toll, and it's amazing what a week or 10 days with your family can do when you come back to a really challenging environment.

"I remember we tried to talk President Bush out of taking a vacation because we were worried about the press scrutiny. He felt quite strongly he should take one. But he recognized that perception was important, and we had some things to do, so we made sure the press and the public knew we were doing some things up there as well as being on vacation. That helped a little bit."

President Barack Obama is set Thursday to begin a family vacation in Martha's Vineyard. Reliably as the summer solstice, critics will note he is taking a break despite the economic turmoil and everything else going on, just as critics did when President George W. Bush went to his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and so on. It isn't really fair.

"My God, those people need time away," said Al Gini, professor of business ethics at Loyola University Chicago Graduate School of Business and the author of "The Importance of Being Lazy." "They need to be with their families. But even so, they're totally connected. They have to be briefed every morning, so presidents aren't really on vacation — they've just changed locales and taken a couple hours off to play — so shame on us for being mad at them."

While on vacation a president might work only three or four hours a day, as opposed to nine or 10, Skinner said. "But you're still going to be working every day, you're going to be fully engaged," he said. "The problem is a lot of people aren't taking vacation. They don't have the luxury. They're not working. They can't afford vacations and when you talk about a major vacation, and they're not taking any, there can be some criticism and some resentment."
Merkel, whose vacation plans included hiking with her husband in the Italian Alps, reportedly has been conferring privately with other world leaders through the economic upheaval and was planning to return to a public schedule this weekend. She is supposed to meet in Paris on Tuesday with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who, by contrast, abruptly ended his Mediterranean holiday last week for an emergency meeting of his top advisers, which sent shock waves felt on this side of the Atlantic.

The German newspaper Bild signaled its disapproval of Merkel's low profile by publishing her silhouette with a headline that asked, "Why is the Chancellor silent?" But a French newspaper poll, according to Reuters, showed 46 percent of voters there trusted Merkel to handle the current financial situation compared with just 33 percent with confidence in Sarkozy.

Other European leaders have had their traditional time off curtailed by one crisis or another in recent days. For British Prime Minister David Cameron, it was rioting, not the economy, that cut short his trip in Tuscany. But that doesn't mean the time off wasn't important.

"This is the same argument that we have with surgeons," Gini said. "Do you really want the surgeon who's been up for 36 hours, or do you want the one who's just come on the shift, just had lunch and is feeling pretty good? Rest is really critical in order to keep clarity."

Those of us with lesser positions and lesser responsibilities also struggle with when and how to break free of work. We want to feel indispensable. I know I am not alone in knowing the sad look of children who must wait 30 minutes to go swimming after lunch — not because they need to digest their food, but because dad has to answer a few emails on his iPhone first.

While 2 in 5 Americans have taken or plan to take a summer vacation, according to a recent Adweek/Harris poll, 46 percent of those supposedly taking time off copped to the fact that they will take (or have taken) some work with them, with 35 percent checking emails, 22 percent checking voice mails, 22 percent occasionally taking phone calls.

Half of those vacationing said they travel with a laptop computer, 45 percent with a smartphone and 12 percent an electronic tablet. A third of those who take a tablet, such as an iPad, say it makes them more likely to do work on vacation.

Only 35 percent say they can completely disconnect from work, while 19 percent of those on vacation don't have jobs from which to take a break. And if people like us are unable to completely break free of that far-reaching electronic tether to the office, what hope is there for a guy who travels at all times with a satellite communications center and the nuclear launch codes nearby?

"August is the month you take off," Skinner said. "That, and a little bit around Christmas. Primarily those last two weeks in August are vacation times in Washington. Congress is in recess until Labor Day and there's not a lot going on. So that's a good time to do it."

Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty said at Thursday's Republican presidential candidate debate in Iowa that he thought Obama should cancel his planned vacation and call Congress back into session. Obama earlier in the day said it's better that members of Congress go home to hear the complaints of their constituents firsthand as a spur to action when they return to work next month.
"Look, the president's family is going on vacation," David Axelrod, Obama's Chicago-based political advisor, said Friday on ABC's "Good Morning America." "He's going to join them, if he can, but that's not a measure of working on the problem. … He's going to be with his family, but he's going to be working on these issues and I don't think people begrudge him that."