

By JOHN GRUBER

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How Many New iPhones Can Fit on a Freight Plane?

Wednesday, 9 April 2025

This sounds like one of those puzzles job interviewers often ask, but there's a practical relevance at the moment: What's a ballpark estimate for how many iPhones Apple might have hustled to ship into the US on those five freight planes ahead of the new tariffs? Ryan Jones tackled it in a post on X:

A whopping 12 days of sales. At most.

Math:

- B747 Freighter carries 300,000 lbs
- boxed iPhone is 0.9 lbs
- = 350K iPhones per plane

I like Jones's ballpark math here. Let's not worry about volume, just weight. If we're wrong about the volume, it can only mean *fewer* new-in-box iPhones can fit per plane. There's no way to (safely) exceed the weight limit of a plane.

Jones also estimates that Apple sells about 150,000 new iPhones in the US per day, at least in the typical April–June quarter — which I concur is a good ballpark figure.¹ So each plane can carry a little over two days' worth of US domestic iPhones. That means if the Times of India is correct that Apple "transported five planes full of iPhones and other products from India to the US in just three days during the final week of March", those five planes combined carried, at the most, about 12 days' worth of new US iPhones.

Now that's just from India. And those are just the five planes the Times of India heard about. It seems safe to presume Apple might have hustled even more planes out of China and Vietnam. But again, at most, each plane full of Apple products carries about two days' worth of products. We did our napkin math using iPhones, but "1 full plane = 2 days of inventory" can't be far off the mark, no matter what the mix of product is in each plane's cargo hold.

350,000 iPhones packed onto a single plane is a lot of iPhones. Sending a few million units across a dozen (or more!) planes is, quite literally, tons of iPhones. But Apple sells about *50 tons* of new iPhones in the US alone every day. We all know that Apple's iPhone business is huge. But when you start to consider it in practical terms like this it's just staggering.

There's no way Apple can "beat" these Trump tariffs by having shipped products ahead of their taking effect. Could they hedge against two or three weeks of tumult? Maybe a month, tops? Yes, and it seems like maybe that's what they did. But no matter how many planes they filled — or how many container ships they might have had the foresight to send a month or two ago — there are very practical limits to inventory, too. Apple's warehouses are likely designed with one or two weeks of inventory in mind. You can't just rent random warehouse space to hold billions of dollars worth of iPhones.

From Adam Lashinsky's 2008 profile of Tim Cook for Fortune:

Almost from the time he showed up at Apple, Cook knew he had to pull the company out of manufacturing. He closed factories and warehouses around the world and instead established relationships with contract manufacturers. As a result, Apple's inventory, measured by the amount of time it sat on the company's balance sheet, quickly fell from months to days. Inventory, Cook has said, is "fundamentally evil," and he has been known to observe that it declines in value by 1% to 2% a week in normal times, faster in tough times like the present.

"You kind of want to manage it like you're in the dairy business," he has said. "If it gets past its freshness date, you have a problem."

Apple's entire supply chain is rightly heralded as genius, a triumph of everything from component sourcing to assembly to transport. But the entire operation is premised on the continuous free flow of packaged products out of China. Apple never holds much inventory, of anything, anywhere in the world.

1. If anything, Apple's sales might be higher than usual right now. With consumers worried that Apple (and everyone else) might raise prices in response to Trump's tariffs at any moment, demand is surely up to some extent. I know two friends who've already purchased new MacBooks, now, for kids who aren't going off to college until September. ↪

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