

James J. Kilpatrick: *Star 6/27/77* Too Much Is Too Much

When it comes to protecting a president of the United States and providing for his reasonable needs, how much is enough? And how much is too much?

After six months of grappling with these difficult questions, a House subcommittee last month came up with a generally temperate and constructive report. As you might expect, the report was bitingly critical as to Mr. Nixon, and tenderly inchoicivous as to his Democratic predecessors, but the committee did a good job on the whole.

Some of the startling expenditures on Mr. Nixon's properties in Florida and California cannot be rationally explained, and they cannot be condoned. After every reasonable expense has been deducted for communications, personnel and the legitimate upkeep of Secret Service activities, it appears that the taxpayers were soaked about \$75,000 in Florida and \$701,000 in California for outlays on Mr. Nixon's personal property.

EVENTUALLY, one supposes, most of the California ex-

pense will be recouped: the President's home at San Clemente is to become public property. It would be reassuring to hear some statement from Mr. Nixon to the effect that he will settle up with the taxpayers at some point on Key Biscayne as well.

Most of the questionable outlays at the two presidential homes already have been well publicized, but for those who came in late, the matter of the shuffleboard court may serve for purposes of illustration. In the course of installing security devices at Key Biscayne, it became necessary to demolish a concrete-slab court. It would have been reasonable to replace this court at public expense; or it would have been reasonable for the President himself to have paid the difference on something better. Instead, a new black, white and green terrazzo court was installed at an added cost of \$2,000. The taxpayers paid for this. To paraphrase a well-known moralist, that was wrong, that's for sure.

HOW DID this situation get out of hand? The subcommittee's answer, in effect, is that

nobody was in charge of the store. The Secret Service felt that it had a free hand to spend whatever might be necessary for the President's protection. The General Accounting Office exerted no effective restraints. The President's people in charge of remodeling, chiefly his architect, proceeded as architects so often do with a regal disdain for where the money is coming from.

The consequences of this casual lavishness could have been predicted. At Key Biscayne, the taxpayers bought Mr. Nixon a \$66,000 ornamental aluminum fence. A Secret Service command post that should have cost \$53,000 wound up at \$730,000. Seven brass lanterns for the San Clemente driveway came in at \$3,700. When someone at GAO finally rang a bell, it was too late for economy.

IN FAIRNESS to Mr. Nixon, it should be said that he didn't invent these abuses. The late Lyndon B. Johnson benefited in precisely the same fashion, right down to ice machines and refinished furniture. More than \$100,000 was spent at the

LBJ Ranch that cannot be accounted for at all.

Substantial sums also were spent on private properties of John Kennedy, but "the cost of these is not known." According to testimony before the committee, after President Kennedy's death, "the naval aide who handled most of the expenditures on his property took the records to sea with him and they were dropped overboard accidentally."

As the committee emphasizes, no reasonable person will oppose reasonable expenditures for the protection of a president. If future presidents are not to be kept captive at the White House or Camp David, they must be expected to maintain a personal residence somewhere. It would be patently unfair to impose the staggering costs of security, transportation, personnel and communications upon the president himself. But a line has to be drawn somewhere. Some better oversight must be provided, not only to protect the taxpayers but also to protect a president from the beneficence of his own spendthrift protectors.