

OPEN TO DISCUSSION:

Are We Treating Our Presidents Too Well?

by Jack Anderson



Ten American Presidents as shown on Parade's cover: (1) Washington, (2) Jefferson, (3) Jackson, (4) Grant, (5) Hoover, (6) Truman, (7) Eisenhower, (8) Johnson, (9) Nixon, and (10) Ford.

WASHINGTON, D.C. At the close of the Revolutionary War, George Washington's officers offered to make him king. He rejected the throne, but it has been inherited, nonetheless, by his successors. We have adorned our President with many of the trappings of a monarch—kingly estates, sleek limousines, luxurious jets, helicopters to lift him over the heads of the masses.

Trumpeters with banners draped from their elongated trumpets set to herald President Nixon's appearance at state banquets. He started to dress the White House guard in imperial costumes, but they looked so silly in their pointed hats that the people snickered and the President hastily put the new uniforms in mothballs.

The President has become our father figure, our commander in chief, our only royalty. Too many of us have misattributed the grandeur and mission of the United States to the politician who temporarily holds our nation's highest office. Treated like an exalted being, a President begins to think he is exalted. George Washington set an example by establishing that the President was the servant, not the master, of the people. He "prevented this Revolution," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish."

A famous boarder

Upon Jefferson's own election to the Presidency, he checked into a rooming house like an ordinary citizen and walked to his inauguration. Dinner was served before he got back to the room-

ing house, and there was no plate left for him at the table. History records that the new President went up to his room that evening without dinner.

In those days retired Presidents received neither a pension nor an expense allowance, with the result that some of our most revered chief executives were penniless and destitute after leaving office. Jefferson, whose landholdings were mortgaged to the hilt, considered for a time declaring himself bankrupt. Andrew Jackson was kept solvent by generous contributions from personal friends. James Monroe lost his Virginia estate to creditors after the death of his wife in 1830 moved to New York to

live with his daughter. Ulysses S. Grant had to support himself by writing his memoirs while he was suffering from cancer of the throat. Abraham Lincoln's widow had to plead with Congress to obtain a \$5000 annual pension.

Going into the 20th century, Woodrow Wilson in retirement lived on his wife's income; Calvin Coolidge wrote a newspaper column and got a retainer as a trustee for a life insurance company.

It wasn't until 1958 that a law was signed granting all former Presidents a \$25,000 annual pension, a \$50,000 yearly fund to pay for staff assistance, and free office space and mailing privileges.

In addition, widows of former Presidents would receive a \$10,000 yearly pension. In 1963 another modest and reasonable law, the Presidential Transition Act, authorized a \$900,000 appropriation, evenly divided between the outgoing and incoming executives, to pay necessary costs of passing from one Administration to another.

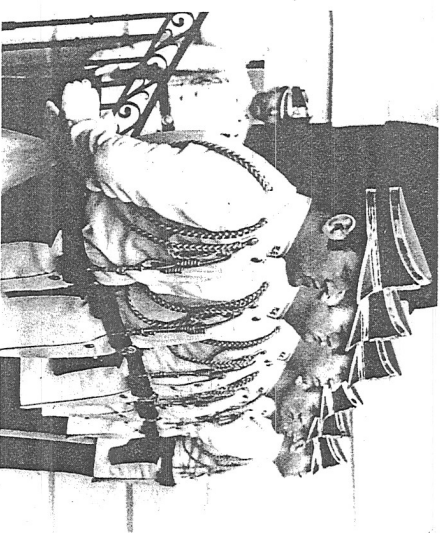
The first three former Presidents who received government pensions and expense allowances during their retirement—Herbert Hoover, Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower—did not get any benefits from the Presidential Transition Act because the law specifies that ex-Presidents are to receive money only during the first six months after they leave the White House, and each of those three men had been away from Washington for many years by the time the statute was enacted.

I recall Harry Truman driving his car home to Missouri in 1953, being photographed in his shirtsleeves at filling stations, carrying his suitcases up to the attic. That was his transition. But his successors have made of it a multimillion-dollar affair.

Texas-size plans

It was Lyndon B. Johnson, famed for doing virtually everything on a grandiose scale, who really raised the ante. Johnson probably had less need for government assistance during his retirement years than any other President of recent decades because at the time he entered the White House he had amassed a family fortune reliably estimated at between \$10 million and \$15 million.

The first ex-President to enjoy the benefits of the Presidential Transition



President Nixon started to dress the White House police in ceremonial uniforms in 1970 but was quickly laughed out of the idea by public reaction.

Act, Johnson took the outgoing Administration's share of \$450,000, allocated \$75,000 to his Vice President, Hubert H. Humphrey, and proceeded to spend almost all of the remaining \$375,000 by himself. Even Johnson couldn't spend all of the money in the six months specified in the law, so fellow Texans in Congress secured a one-year extension for him.

First, Johnson invested more than \$200,000 worth of taxpayer funds in fancy office equipment, including a \$10,155 special computer-electric typewriter, two smaller models at \$7120 apiece, \$5890 worth of dictating and transcribing equipment, a \$159 stapling machine, a \$245 envelope opener and a \$445 "Destoyif" wastebasket that electrically shreds used paper.

Johnson's staff

During the 18-month "transition" period the government also paid more than \$355,000 in salaries and fringe benefits to staff assistants working for Johnson in Texas and Washington. In later years, staff salaries and benefits averaged about \$60,000 to \$75,000.

During the four years between his departure from the White House and his death, Johnson drew more than \$1,116,000 under provisions of the two laws designed to assist former Presidents. That figure almost equals the total amount of benefits paid to Truman during a period of 16 years.

But Richard Nixon's original request for taxpayer support made Johnson look modest. Sen. Joseph M. Montoya, the New Mexico Democrat who is

chairman of the Senate subcommittee which had to pass upon Nixon's claim, discovered that no fewer than 71 government employees, whose annual salaries totaled more than \$883,000, had been assigned to Nixon's oceanfront estate in San Clemente, Calif., and the adjoining federal office complex. At Nixon's home in Key Biscayne, Fla., an additional five government employees were stationed—including a gardener and a Navy "mess steward"—and their salaries cost an additional \$60,000.

A well-furnished home

The office facilities at San Clemente cost the taxpayers almost \$526,000 to build and \$219,000 to furnish while Nixon was still President. Included in that total was a den in his home furnished at a cost to the government of more than \$4800. The full equipment inventory included 186 chairs, 21 day-nights, 44 desks and 42 tables, but Nixon asked for an additional \$105,000 to purchase still more office furniture and equipment. For example, he wanted 20 new typewriters, although 57 already were on hand in his working quarters.

Nixon's request for \$850,000, which would have called for spending at a rate of more than \$20,000 a week, was drastically slashed by both the House and Senate to \$200,000.

President Ford, on the other hand, has retained an accessible, humble, folksy demeanor. The Presidential plane is again prosaically called "Air Force One" instead of the magisterial "Spirit of '76." Ford appeared before Congress to

answer questions like any earthly being. He goes up to Capitol Hill to attend, with his old Congressional buddies, meetings of the Crowder and Marching Club, where he is treated as an equal. It would be too bad, however, if the rest of us, lulled by Ford's Trumanesque ways, failed to do our part to de-impersonalize the President, because our obsequious attitudes helped bring it on in the first place.

Suggested remedies:

1. Former Presidents should stop taking home public papers and treating them as personal property.
2. Let's also stop building modern pyramids in the form of libraries as shrines to ex-Presidents to enable them to go on playing President. To the extent that these shrines are supported by tax dollars, they ought to be stopped.
3. Let's put an end to tax-supported Presidential mansions across the land. The government already provides the White House, Camp David and access to Naval bases on the seashore. That should be enough.
4. Reduce the White House staff. Aides to past Presidents like Ted Sorensen and George Reedy see a direct relationship between the number of courtiers that insulate a President and his loss of touch with real events.
5. No more "Hail to the Chief." Let us do away with all musical heraldry for the President. He is the people's representative, not some medieval magnifico.
6. Limits should be placed on the ease with which a President can commandeer the television networks any time he pleases. This is an extra-Con-

stitutional power which has been used too often for outright deception. It could be dangerously abused by a demagogue.

7. A President's control of our law enforcement machinery should be limited by a permanent special prosecutor. This would serve as a constant reminder that the President, too, is under the law.

8. The whole multimillion-dollar business of transition costs should be overhauled. Transition used to refer to helping the incoming President get a grasp on his responsibilities. Now it refers to cushioning the outgoing President's shock of becoming an ordinary citizen.

Ultimately, it is a question of the prevailing spirit around the President. Is he to be regarded—does he regard himself—as servant or master?

When an Administration witness recently justified keeping Nixon's valet on the public payroll on the grounds that the time Nixon saved by not shining his shoes could be devoted to the transition, it reminded me of an old Lincoln story.

The English Ambassador, it seems, was appalled upon entering Lincoln's office to find him stooping over a stool, shining his shoes. "Mr. President," blurted the Ambassador, "in my country, we don't shine our own shoes!"

"Oh?" replied Lincoln. "Whose shoes do you shine?"

Maybe it would be too much to expect Nixon to shine his own shoes, but I felt a twinge of loss when I heard that Gerald Ford has stopped making his own breakfast.

THE RISE OF PRESIDENTIAL PAY

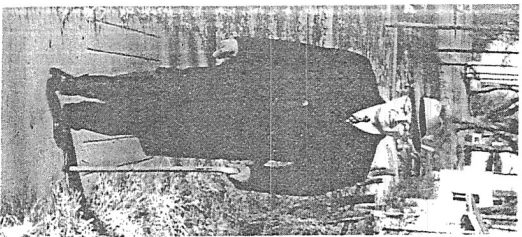
The growing grandeur of the Presidency has been accompanied, especially in the second 100 years, by salary increases.

George Washington, who took office in 1789, was paid \$25,000 a year, as were his successors until Ulysses S. Grant's second term, beginning in 1873, when the pay was doubled to \$50,000.

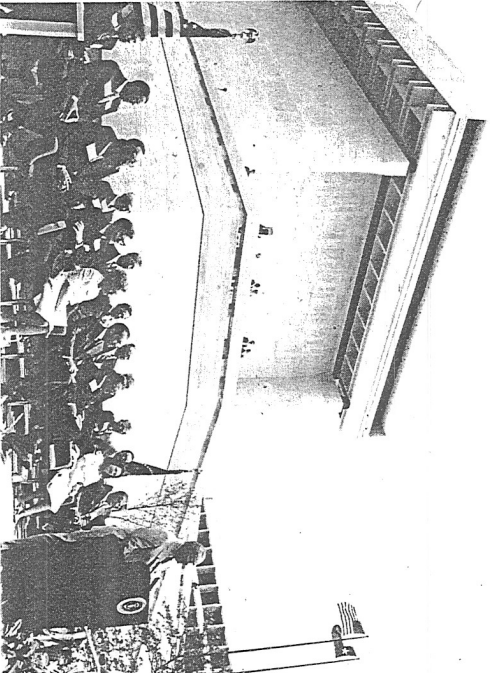
In 1906, during Theodore Roosevelt's term, the President began to receive an additional \$25,000 expense money. Three years later, with William Howard Taft in the White House, the pay scale rose to \$75,000 plus the \$25,000.

In Harry Truman's Administration the expense money was raised first to \$60,000, then to \$50,000 where it remains. His pay was increased to \$100,000, beginning with his elected term in 1949.

With Richard Nixon's term in 1968, the pay rate jumped to \$200,000, where it has stayed together with the \$50,000 in expenses.



1953: Citizen Harry Truman enjoys a stroll back in Missouri.



Lyndon B. Johnson speaks at the 1971 dedication of his library in Austin, Tex. Included on the platform are his wife, Lady Bird (behind rostrum), and President and Mrs. Nixon (center).