

The High Cost of Presidential Living

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In our own lives, let each of us ask—not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself.

—President Nixon, in his Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1973.

Certain laws and conventions have, over the years, pretty well spelled out some limits to the perquisites and comforts which public officials should ask or expect the public to provide. To take a common example, if a mayor has to be on call around the clock, it may make sense for the city government to provide a telephone at his house. But it is something else to have the local public works department come around and pave his driveway. The distinction is quite simple, but it seems to have eluded President Nixon and those in the Secret Service, or elsewhere in the White House, responsible for having the General Services Administration pay at least \$1.3 million for improvements to Mr. Nixon's homes at San Clemente and Key Biscayne.

In past administrations, as far as anyone recalls, federal outlays at the private homes of presidents, as opposed to the White House and Camp David, were restricted to what was deemed essential for his "security" — protection, communications and related official needs. The military did some work along these lines for President Kennedy at Hyannisport and for President Johnson at the LBJ Ranch. But until 1969, GSA had not been given the job of refurbishing any chief executive's personal retreat. And that is what is new and different about the records finally released by GSA last week; they show that the present administration has enlarged enormously the notion of presidential "security" to take in all manner of things more usually associated with personal comfort, convenience, and the quality of life.

When the press started asking who had paid for what at the Nixon homes, the White House responded in what has become its characteristic way: with denials and gross understatements of the amounts involved. As recently as May 26, the White House was acknowledging only \$39,525 in federal outlays at San Clemente. As the figures dug up by reporters began to rise, official

spokesmen invoked the familiar claim of "security" to justify everything from \$6,260 for a six-inch water line to \$76,000 for landscaping of the San Clemente grounds.

Now GSA has detailed outlays of \$1.3 million for services and improvements which any homeowner would deeply appreciate. At Key Biscayne, the total of \$579,907 includes—besides golf carts (\$3,030), a command post (\$122,714) and an ice-maker (\$621) for the Secret Service—such things as beach erosion control (\$2,000), a sea wall ladder (\$314) and a swimming pool cleaner (\$475). The \$709,367 total at San Clemente includes, besides all the landscaping, the renovation of a gazebo (\$6,642), new gas furnaces (\$13,500), interior electrical work (\$53,644), an exhaust fan (\$388), a heater for the swimming pool (\$2,800), and assorted expenditures for beach cleaning, tree pruning, roof tiling, and furnishings (desk, chairs, sofa, pillows, blinds, carpeting) for the President's den.

Everyone who has ever dreamed of owning a cottage by the sea can understand Mr. Nixon's desire to fix up his private retreats. But the public already supports the chief executive in style: besides a \$200,000 salary, he is provided with two sumptuous official residences (the White House and Camp David). He can ring for butlers, cooks, cars, planes, helicopters and yachts at any time. There is almost nothing apart from the most personal needs that the government does not provide. So there is no excuse for presidential violation of the rule which applies to other public officials: private property should not be improved at public cost. At Mr. Nixon's personal estates, the treasury should foot the bills for those exceptional expenses mandated by the nature of the office. It should not have to pay for upkeep and repairs, and still less for improvements, which any homeowner might want or need. Those costs ought to be paid by any president—and in particular by a President who has made so much of the virtues of self-reliance for everybody else. An even more obvious point to be made about this matter has to do with the continuing inability of Mr. Nixon's White House spokesmen to come clean with the facts the first time around. Has Watergate taught them nothing about the futility, quite apart from the morality, of this initial compulsion to obfuscate and to conceal?