

Returning the Jewels: Questioning Governmental Gift-Giving

By Maxine Cheshire

Uneasy State Department officials have returned an estimated \$5,000 worth of jewelry which had been selected by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's wife as gifts for other wives she would be meeting on her travels.

The jewelry was packed up and mailed back last week in the wake of an inquiry by Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) into the types and costs of gifts acquired by the government for distribution by Mrs. Kissinger.

Proxmire had written the State Department's Office of Budget and Finance on Oct. 31, questioning the legal authorization and funding for such gifts.

In a letter to Richard W. Murray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Proxmire pointed out that "there is a growing concern in the Congress and among the American people that gift-giving is wasteful and not in the best interest of the American taxpayer who foots the bill."

Proxmire reminded Murray that the senator has been conducting a "continuing investigation (into) the magnitude of gifts given by the federal government to foreign heads of state."

He asked for details of Mrs. Kissinger's gift selection, including "the specific types of gifts that were purchased, their cost, the source of funds, where they were purchased, to whom they are to go and who authorized their purchase."

Proxmire's first letter to Murray apparently went astray in the mails. A copy, picked up by a State Department messenger, on Nov. 8, was answered on Nov. 12 by Acting Chief of Protocol Stuart W. Rockwell.

That answer, released by Proxmire's office, disclosed that three categories of gifts had been "assembled for possible use" by Mrs. Kissinger. These were:

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Hand-crafted silver jewelry by Celia Sebiri of New York, costume jewelry by Kenneth Jay Lane of New York and hand-crafted reproductions of early American silver by Old Newbury Crafters of Massachusetts.

"The Lane and Sebiri pieces," Rockwell wrote, "were taken on consignment, were not used, and will be returned."

Only one piece of the silver from Old Newbury Crafters, a small pitcher, was used, he said. This was given to the Empress of Iran and cost \$117 wholesale.

According to Rockwell, the gifts had been authorized by the Office of the Chief of Protocol and the funds used were taken from an appropriation for "Emergencies in the Diplomatic and Consular Services."

Although Rockwell claimed in his letter that the Protocol Office had only taken the jewelry in question on "consignment" for use on "a contingency basis," neither designer involved in the transaction was aware that the State Department was preparing to send anything back until it arrived in the mail last week.

Both Sebiri and Lane say they had already sent their bills, expecting payment.

Sebiri, a Coty Award-winner who makes sculptured modern silver jewelry in combination with such "natural" materials as ivory and tortoise shell, lost the biggest sale.

She said in an interview last week that Nancy Kissinger had come personally into her Greenwich Village studio to select some "18 to 20" of the designer's "more expensive" items in the \$200 to \$300 price range.

Protocol Officer Patrick Daly went to New York to arrange to have the pieces delivered to Washington in time for the Kissinger's recent trip to Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Daly also arranged to have another 20 pieces of jewelry from Lane's showrooms delivered for that trip. The bill for that jewelry, purchased at wholesale prices, came to "about \$500," Lane told The Washington Post last week.

Lane is famous for making costume jewelry worn by women who can afford the real thing.

Daly denies that Proxmire's inquiry had anything to do with the decision not to use the jewelry.

But other State Department sources indicate that officials anticipated criticism from the senator and decided to head it off.

Proxmire already had General Accounting Office investigators looking into gift-giving practices by top United States officials, focusing on the presidency. Now he has asked the GAO for a separate report on the Kissingers.

The Kissingers substituted other gifts for the jewelry in question.

Protocol Officer Daly said last week that these include Steuben crystal, Tiffany silver and Lennox china.

Daly, who supervises the selection of gifts given to foreign officials by the President as well as the Secretary of State, said that jewelry is seldom on his shopping list.

Early in the Nixon administration, he recalls, he ordered five custom-designed jeweled pins from Harry Winston Inc. in New York for Pat Nixon to give to other wives she met.

Not all of these were used, according to his records. The State Department still has at least one in the storeroom it maintains for gifts.

Proxmire's office said that the existence of a jeweled brooch, lying around unused, after it was purchased with taxpayer's money, does not please Proxmire, who has already introduced one amendment in the Senate to prohibit United States officials from either giving or receiving gifts that cost more than \$50.