

APR 4 1973

Auction NYTimes

The United States, as most foreigners know, is an extraordinary country with picturesque customs. Every four years, for example, it auctions off its embassies in Western Europe and in a few other agreeable areas to the highest bidders. The cash goes not to the United States Treasury but to the Republicans or Democrats, whichever party is in power. No other country follows this curious custom. But then no other country is as rich as the U.S.A.—and it is well known that the very rich usually practice odd little economies.

As of now, it looks as if Mrs. Ruth L. Farkas of the New York department store family is the top successful spender in the 1972-73 auction. She and her husband contributed \$300,000 to President Nixon's campaign. In return, she gets the embassy in Luxembourg. There was a mild ruckus in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee because Mrs. Farkas seemed to be buying her embassy on an easy-payment plan, that is, two-thirds of the money was given after Mr. Nixon was safely re-elected, and the Republican treasury already showed a \$4-million surplus.

But this problem has been cleared up. Mrs. Farkas explained she intended to give the money *before* the election but it took time to sell the necessary stock. Rivals agree that it would have been a shame if she had lost out on her bid because she had already lost once. In the 1968-69 auction season, she thought she had acquired the embassy in Costa Rica. But that fell through because of a court case involving a political contribution to a Democrat in the 1965 New York mayoral primary.

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Money alone is not always enough, however. W. Clement Stone, the Chicago insurance man, made a big contribution to Mr. Nixon in 1968 and more than \$1 million in 1972. Mr. Stone has delicately told the press that he would be "honored" to get the embassy in London. So far, Mr. Nixon—or whoever is conducting this year's auction for him—seems to be looking at the other side of the room and not to have caught Mr. Stone's bid. Perhaps \$1 million is not enough. If Luxembourg is going for \$300,000, should not London be worth a cool \$5 million? Or it may be that Walter H. Annenberg, the current Ambassador in London, has been able to renew his lease by giving \$254,000 last year.

Like most other items under Phase 3, the cost of embassies seems to be soaring. It may only be that the new campaign finance law has disclosed spending that until last year had been largely concealed. In any event, consider these prices:

- Arthur K. Watson was appointed to France in 1970 and resigned last fall. He donated \$49,000 to the G.O.P. in 1968, \$22,000 in 1970, and \$300,000 in 1972. The new Ambassador to France is his brother-in-law, John N. Irwin 2d who gave only \$14,000 in 1968, \$16,500 in 1970; but \$52,500 in 1972. As a former Under Secretary of State, Mr. Irwin is one bidder who might have made it by merit alone.

- John Krehbiel just obtained the embassy in Finland. He gave \$5,500 in 1968, \$1,000 in 1970, and \$12,500 in 1972. Alas, not much for Finland.

- Anthony D. Marshall bid in Trinidad and Tobago for \$25,000 in 1968, a mere \$1,000 at midterm, and \$49,505 last year.

- John P. Humes has Austria for \$43,000 in 1968, \$13,000 in midterm, and \$103,500 last year. (If that seems a little high for Vienna minus the Habsburgs, he may have been bidding discreetly for Rome or even Paris.)

- Henry E. Catto Jr. has El Salvador for \$10,750 in 1968, \$2,000 in midterm, but \$26,000 last year.

- Vincent de Roulet obtained Jamaica in the 1968-69 auction for \$44,500 then and \$32,000 last year. But relatives can also bid. Mr. de Roulet's father-in-law is Charles S. Payson who gave \$28,000 in 1968, \$32,000 in 1970, and \$88,000 last year. At first glance, that seems like an awful lot; but then Jamaica really is a gem of an isle.

It is never too late to enter this auction. President Nixon has been re-elected but the Committee to Re-Elect the President is still in business, and still accepting bids—or "campaign contributions" as they are sometimes called.