

GAO Rules Transition Fund Improperly Paid for Nixon

By Michael Putzel
Associated Press

Government auditors have ruled that the General Services Administration had no authority to spend money for former President Nixon's transition to private life without first getting an appropriation from Congress.

As a result, the GSA obtained approval yesterday to use money from a special fund appropriated by Congress for President Ford.

Government documents show that the new administration authorized spending up to \$450,000 for Mr. Nixon a week before it asked Congress to appropriate funds for the transition.

The GSA already has committed about \$6,000 of that money, but Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats said it wasn't authorized to do so.

President Ford's request for \$850,000 to help Mr. Nixon's transition to former-President status ran into stiff congressional opposition when GSA tried to defend the amount in Senate and House hearings this week.

Advance expenditures were approved by Roy L. Ash, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, in a letter to General Services Administrator Arthur F. Sampson dated Aug. 21.

Ash told Sampson he was granting the authority "in anticipation of reimbursement from a supplemental appropriation under the Presidential Transition Act."

The next day, GSA headquarters in Washington sent a priority message to its regional director in San Francisco.

"This message constitutes your authority to proceed to obligate and disburse" up to \$450,000 to cover obligations related to the Nixon transition, the message said.

Seven days later, Mr. Ford asked Congress for \$450,000 under the Presidential Transition Act and \$400,000 under

the Former Presidents Act to assist Mr. Nixon. The amount, more than twice what former President Lyndon B. Johnson received in a comparable period, sparked protests from members of House and Senate appropriations subcommittees considering the proposal.

Sampson said Thursday the GSA already has ordered \$6,000 worth of stationery for Mr. Nixon to permit the former President's office to begin answering more than 350,000 General Staats wrote Ash:

"After careful examination of existing statutes, we find no pieces of mail he has received since his resignation Aug. 9.

On Tuesday, Comptroller authority to utilize current appropriations to the General Services Administration to provide services to former President Nixon."

Staats said, however, that funds from a special \$500,000 appropriation for "unanticipated personnel needs" of the new President could be made available to Mr. Nixon if Mr. Ford chose to do so.

A GSA spokesman said Friday afternoon the GSA had received permission to use funds from the special appropriation. Asked for documentation, the spokesman said:

"The OMB has told us over the phone today to go ahead and use this fund and that the paperwork will be sent over to us."

There are indications that those funds already are being spent at the White House and for salaries of White House personnel detailed to Mr. Nixon's San Clemente, Calif., offices and estate.