

The President's Fringe Benefits

by James Reston

Washington

ONE OPTIMISTIC theory about the Watergate scandals was that it would lead to a little more candor in the conduct of the public business, but the lying, chiseling and deceiving still goes on.

The latest outrage is the concealed cost of fixing up President Nixon's houses at San Clemente, Calif., and Key Biscayne, Fla.

When questions were raised about this a month ago, the White House said the government had put \$39,525 into the San Clemente spread for security purposes. Now the General Services Administration, which maintains government buildings and purchases government supplies, says it spent \$703,367 at the San Clemente house, and \$579,907 for "improvements" on the Key Biscayne place.

Obviously much of this was justifiable expense, for presidents need more security than other people, but the final audit by the GSA includes \$76,000 for landscaping and a sprinkler system on the San Clemente grounds, \$3200 for tiling a roof, \$13,500 for new heaters, \$2800 for a pool heater, \$2400 for a septic tank, \$6400 for a beach cabana, and \$184,174 for electrical work.

The stories* about how Mr. Nixon acquired these houses in the first place are a little odd, but however they were financed, with the help of his friends, this is his own business. Fixing them up at a cost of \$1.3 million of public funds, however, is another matter.

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YOU WOULD imagine that the President noticed all the new landscaping and sprinkler systems and the new furniture and beach cabana and all that and that he would provide some answers to the charges of payola. But the White House merely refers all questions to the Secret Service, which takes responsibilities for many expenditures but not for many more.

Many of the costs are easy to justify, such as \$42,293 for a "security lighting system" at Key Biscayne, \$340,000 for a helicopter landing pad built by the Army Corps of Engineers, \$128,708 for bullet proof windows at Key Biscayne. The prices seem a little steep, but again this is government business. The trouble is that nobody even tries to justify many costs that are obviously personal.

It is surprising that the President has not dealt promptly and sharply with this affair, particularly after the Watergate disasters. The one thing that has never been charged against him is personal greed or impropriety.

Now, as if he didn't have enough trouble, the President is slipping into more controversy over public payment for private gain. For the President to tolerate this cheap nonsense — and not to clear it up — is almost as silly and clumsy as the Watergate affair itself.

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EVEN MR. NIXON has conceded publicly that maybe he created an "atmosphere" in the White House that contributed to the Watergate mistakes, but now he is allowing his staff to do things at public expense which he can obviously afford to do for himself and thus creating again an atmosphere that this sort of thing is permissible.

The chances are that all this was done again by a zealous staff trying to please the Chief, but the main point, as in the Watergate affair, is that the White House is going through the same old routine, pretending there is no problem, referring all questions to somebody else, and thus inviting more and more doubts and investigations.

Aside from the moral ambiguities of this squalid period, the troubling thing is the lack of judgment in handling these political crises, and the irony of it is that this was supposed to be Mr. Nixon's strongest asset, about which he wrote his book, "Six Crises."

Now, even in the middle of Watergate, the President is tolerating another avoidable problem. Nobody has charged him with ordering all these "improvements" at his private houses, but they are not the sort of thing a man wouldn't notice, and the whole controversy can be removed merely by asking for the bill and paying it.

New York Times