

The High Cost of Presidential Living (Cont.)

Along with the justifiable outrage about the money that taxpayers have contributed to the improvement and refurbishing of the President's private homes in San Clemente and Key Biscayne, an extraordinary amount of nonsense has been spoken on the subject in the week or two since the White House and the General Services Administration finally decided to tell the truth about how much money actually was involved. At first, you will recall, we were given a figure of \$39,525 covering only improvements at the President's private San Clemente retreat. Diligent newspaper reporting finally forced out an accounting that listed outlays totaling \$1.3 million for fixing up both presidential homes with items that



Mr. Nixon's homes in San Clemente . . .

ranged from pillows to flagpoles, and included landscaping, new roofing, a new heating system, a desk, a sofa, chairs, carpeting, blinds, a swimming pool cleaner, fertilizer, tree pruning, beach cleaning, paving and other things that almost any homeowner would dearly love to be provided by the federal government.

Understandably, a lot of people (ourselves included) were more than a little indignant, not only about the palpable fakery of writing such items off to "security" and to the safeguarding of the President, but also about the hypocrisy of it all. Here was the President accepting this largesse from the government while he was preaching about self-reliance and frugality and the swell sense of self-respect that comes from hard work and making do without welfare or other assistance from the government.

Even assuming that the President—what with Leonid Brezhnev, and the dollar and Watergate—wasn't aware of who was paying for all the nice, new things that were happening to his homes, you would have hoped that he and the GSA and the Secret Service and the spokesmen at the White House could have summoned up just a little show of embarrassment or even some slight concession that a mistake was made. A presidential offer of restitution to the taxpayers would not have been out of place, at least with respect to some of the more obvious non-security-related embellishments of his private property.

But, no. The name of the game is still Counterattack. So we have had a lot of talk about what the government must have done at the LBJ ranch or at Hyannisport, although no evidence has been presented of anything other than the usual installation of Signal Corps equipment, lighting, fencing and other items strictly related to essential communication, transportation or security at the private homes of Presidents Johnson and Kennedy. And we have had a lot of insinuations that anybody who doesn't accept the provision by the federal government of "decorative" pillows for the President's San Clemente den is indifferent to the "safety" of the President. A House subcommittee, in an example of Congress-as-usual which stands in marked contrast to

the performance of the Senate's select Watergate committee, brushed off the \$1.3 million sum as "not excessive." Rep. Tom Steed (D-Okla.) defended congressional approval of the budget which provided the money on the grounds that decisions concerning the President's security "should always be made on the side of too much rather than to little." Rep. Jack Edwards (R-Ala.) noted, rather pointedly, that GSA does, after all, provide furnishings for the offices of congressmen in their home districts. He said he was actually "appalled" that more was not spent on the President.

Now comes Arthur F. Sampson, the administrator of GSA, with a letter to this newspaper (printed on the opposite page today) in which the "security" argument is carried to new depths. "If The Washington Post can determine the security requirements of our President, perhaps they should take on the job of protecting him," Mr. Sampson suggests, adding:

I, for one, don't think you should. Anyone who can ignore murder, forget assassination, is hardly qualified for the responsibility. I hope you agree. I hope you do some remembering. I hope you stop writing about "Fringe Benefits" and consider, instead presidential safety.

Well, just to begin with, we don't remember writing about "Fringe Benefits." Perhaps Mr. Sampson, in his over-wrought state, has confused us with the New York Times, which published a column by James Reston entitled "Nixon's Fringe Benefits"—a column which said, in connection with the GSA outlays, that while one could have hoped that the Watergate experience might have encouraged a little more "candor" by the administration, "the lying, chiseling and deceiving still go on." We couldn't have put it better ourselves. As for the rest of Mr. Sampson's remarks and complaints—the quibbling over minor items and the accusation of indifference to murder and assassination—we would merely observe that, quite apart from their cheapness, they entirely miss the central point.

The point is that "security" and "safety" in this connection have been rather carefully defined. The appropriation bill which provided GSA the money for



. . . and in Key Biscayne.

these home improvements says quite plainly that it "shall be available to provide such fencing, lighting, guard booths and other facilities on private or other property not in government ownership or control as may be appropriate to enable the United States Secret Service to perform its protective functions . . ." for the President. It doesn't say anything about rugs or pillows or heating systems or flagpoles or tree-pruning or swimming pool accessories. It speaks of protection for the President of the United States which is something every decent, responsible citizen is all too conscious of these days and more than willing to provide.