

More on Mr. Nixon's Living Costs

Would you believe \$10 million? That is the rough total of federal outlays on Nixon family dwellings and "compounds" revealed by government spokesmen on Monday. Inflation has really gripped these amounts, at least so far as their disclosure is concerned: in May we knew only of an expenditure of \$39,525 at the presidential home in San Clemente; by June we were talking about a \$1.3 million GSA bill for services rendered at San Clemente and Key Biscayne; now we have the approximate sum of \$10 million paid out by various agencies of government for expenses incurred in connection with those dwellings as well as with the Grand Cay (Bahamas) retreat and for some relatively minor expenses connected with the private homes of the President's two daughters.

Mr. Arthur F. Sampson, administrator of the GSA, asserted Monday that this rate of inflation had something to do with confusing press coverage of government disclosures, and we are prepared to concede that confusing—not to say, reluctant—government disclosures may well have been made more confusing by the press. We have even less quarrel (in fact, none at all) with Mr. Sampson's assertion of the importance of affording security to the President of the United States and his family and of maintaining communications equipment that will keep the President effectively in touch with all he needs to know. But to say as much is to say the obvious—and it is also to say the irrelevant. The quarrel is about something else.

How many "White Houses" does the President need? Essentially that is the issue that has been raised. If you were to ask the average American whether he would approve the expenditure of an extra \$10 million from the public purse to protect a President's life and well-being and his ability to discharge his duties effectively, he would doubtless answer yes — who wouldn't? But what we are talking about here is the casual multiplication of presidential dwellings, the conversion of private residences into government complexes and the investment of great sums in them to suit the presidential wanderlust and whim.

We will leave aside for the time being one aspect of the ongoing controversy to which we have addressed

ourselves before, namely, the expenditure of government funds for certain house-and-garden items that, in our opinion, Mr. Nixon should clearly have paid for himself. They came to a pretty penny, but—as Mr. Sampson seemed most eager to point out—amounted to only a fraction of the total costs incurred, costs that had much more to do with the installation of government offices, communications equipment and the rest. The GSA administrator appeared to believe that by emphasizing the relative magnitude of costs directly and indisputably connected with the functioning of government in Mr. Nixon's far-flung retreats, he was making those costs acceptable.

But he was not. On the contrary, emphasis on how expensive it is to set up suitable presidential living and working quarters around the country only suggests to us that it is not a particularly advisable thing to do. Surely President Nixon, who has been so staunch a public foe of profligacy, indulgence and waste and who has asked so many Americans to make so many sacrifices of their own in terms of comfort, convenience and even health, should not feel cramped by the official quarters to which he is entitled—the White House and Camp David. In this connection we would add that there is one confusion which the press (ourselves included) has helped perpetuate and which Mr. Sampson did not mention—no doubt because he shares it himself. "GSA," he said, "has endeavored to develop, maintain and operate the Western White House complex as a facility appropriate in quality for the President . . ."

The "Western White House?" Surely there is no "Western White House" any more than there is (another sloven phrase we all indulge) a "Florida White House" or than there ever was a "Texas White House." What there is is a White House—and a very satisfactory retreat at Camp David. If these are not sufficient to the purposes of a sitting President, he should openly inform the Congress and the public of that fact and inquire as to whether they wish to approve the expenditure of public funds for the creation of new public facilities. That is not the same thing as converting private residences into mini-White Houses with the help of taxpayers' money.