

Public Got Clipped At San Clemente



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MOWING the lawns and trimming the hedges at the San Clemente and Key Biscayne retreats became affairs of state for top presidential advisers who saw to it that the taxpayers got clipped, too.

In letters and memos now in our possession, Nixon aides, confident that their prose would never be seen outside the President's tight circle, juggled the work schedules and the payrolls of the gardeners to make sure the public paid.

The White House and the General Services Administration has insisted that most of this work was done to insure security. Our investigation suggests the main purpose, as it would be with any other home owner, was to keep the grass short and the flowers blooming.

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BEGINNING in September 1969, the White Landscaping Company was selected by GSA to manicure the presidential greens and grounds at San Clemente for \$3350 a month.

Early in 1970, Senator William Proxmire (Dem-Wis.), asked for an accounting of the public money that was being poured into President Nixon's vacation spas.

This touched off a sudden economy wave on the gardening staff. H. R. Haldeman, the top presidential assistant until he was fired in the great tremors of the Watergate scandal, held an urgent discussion with Herbert Kalmbach, the President's lawyer who was keeping an extralegal eye on the San Clemente estate for the White House.

To make sure Proxmire didn't find out what was going on, Haldeman sent stern instructions to GSA in a memo marked "confidential/eyes only."

"As far as the gardeners," directed Haldeman, "they will be reduced in number and the entire responsibility picked up by assigning one gardener to the Secret Service in place of (Brigido Damian) Garcia, who is now on their payroll, and moving Garcia to the owner's personal payroll."

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NO DETAIL was too small for Haldeman's attention. He added: "Kalmbach feels that we do not need a housekeeper on a continuing basis, and that we can leave this the way it is, with the daily check being made as it is now, and the dusting, etc., required for readying the house to be carried out by our own crew just prior to a visit."

The contract with White Landscaping was canceled a week later on orders from Kalmbach and a gardener was hired by the Secret Service from the landscaping company for \$1092 a month. Poor Garcia, who apparently was paid less, was employed directly by the President but took his orders from the Secret Service's gardener.

White Landscaping didn't suffer in the deal but simply wound up with a new Coast Guard contract, where Proxmire would be less likely to detect it. The company was hired by the Coast Guard to trim the lawns around the Nixon staff offices for \$2477 a month.