

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

Land Move Near San Clemente Aired

By Jack Anderson

In late 1970, President Nixon attempted to open some choice federal beachfront property next to his San Clemente estate to residential development.

The timing suggests he may have sought to reward his millionaire benefactor, Robert Abplanalp, for picking up the heavy end of his San Clemente mortgage.

A small part of the story is known. The rest has been locked in the files of the White House and the General Services Administration.

In 1969, Abplanalp loaned the President \$450,000 to make the down payment on the San Clemente place. The following year, Abplanalp granted him another \$175,000 loan to make the first mortgage payment. Mr. Nixon put up only \$42,054 of his own money.

Even on his \$200,000 presidential salary, he couldn't keep up the steep mortgage payments and reduce the \$625,000 debt. So Abplanalp obligingly cancelled the whole debt and assumed most of the mortgage. In return, the President decided over to him the bulk of the San Clemente estate.

The aerosol-valve millionaire, in other words, put up 15 times more money for the President's Pacific paradise than did the President. Yet Mr. Nixon got rid of his total debt to Abplanalp and still wound up with the heart of the estate. The President also continued to occupy the entire estate, including Ab-

planalp's portion, without paying a penny rent.

Our investigation indicates that the millionaire's munificence may have been motivated by something more tangible than pure friendship. For at the precise time the President was negotiating to unload most of his San Clemente acreage upon Abplanalp, he also directed the government to declare certain parts of the adjacent Marine base at Camp Pendleton surplus.

More significantly, the President's people sought to sell the choicest parcel, including the excellent surfing beach known as the "Trestles," for residential development. This particular tract happens to lie up against the San Clemente property which Abplanalp brought from Mr. Nixon, separated only by a small Coast Guard intrusion.

With the aerosol king's inside connections, he would have been in excellent position to pick up this valuable beachfront. But no matter who got it, the residential development would have enhanced the value of Abplanalp's adjoining acreage.

As it happened, Congress prohibited the sale of Camp Pendleton land. But by this time, the President had already made his favorable deal with Abplanalp.

The negotiations with Abplanalp began in mid-September, 1970, according to the White House's account of the transaction. The President's other millionaire benefactor,

C.G. (Bebe) Rebozo, was also involved in the deal at first. But Abplanalp later bought out Rebozo's interest.

Suppressed documents in our possession show that on Sept. 14, 1970, at the same time the President was maneuvering to get out from under his huge San Clemente debt, John Ehrlichman sent a memo to the Federal Property Review Board. This was set up by the President in early 1970 and was dominated by his most trusted aides, including Ehrlichman.

"While at San Clemente," Ehrlichman wrote his fellow board members, "the president was again made aware of the desirability of moving Camp Pendleton from government ownership into the hands of local government and the private sector."

Under Ehrlichman's spur, the bureaucrats moved swiftly. Two government appraisers toured the Marine base during the first week in October, 1970. On Oct. 23 they filed a 28-page report. Despite a careful description of the history and economics of the region, not a single word was mentioned about Camp Pendleton's important next-door neighbor, Richard Nixon.

Nonetheless, the survey team recommended against building a proposed mobile home park on a section of the base near the Nixon property. "Such a development on what is a prime portion of the parcel," the survey team, objected "could have a . . . detrimental effect on the ad-

joining residential area of San Clemente."

Instead, the survey team recommended that the most desirable 3,400 acres, including the beachfront next to the presidential estate, "should be sold for residential development. The 3,400 acres is valued at approximately \$5 million."

In a slide-show presentation to the Federal Property Review Board, the executive secretary was quoted as urging "that the survey should be made as expeditiously as possible and a report made directly to the board without going through the normal and lengthy procedure of obtaining comments from the Defense Department on our specific recommendation."

Despite these comments, former board official Darrell Trent contended that the survey "was handled under normal procedures" and that he didn't believe "any special push was given to it."

Despite the documentation to the contrary, associates of the President insisted to us that he wanted to bequeath the beachfront area to the public as a park. An official spokesman said the surplus land "was leased to the state and can only be used for park purposes. There was no move toward residential development."

In any event, if the President's real intent was to provide Abplanalp with a lucrative land deal, the attempt to declare the tract surplus was dashed by Congress the following year.

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