

A Palace Guard?

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Feb. 17—When a squad of Secret Service agents accompanies Spiro T. Agnew on a vacation trip to Palm Springs, Calif., can we wonder that Americans are cynical about their political system? It is revolting that a penny of public funds should be spent on this impenitent felon as he lives the high life.

But the assignment of the Secret Service to Mr. Agnew is worse than nauseating. It is lawless. As the General Accounting Office has ruled, there is no authority for it in any statute. President Nixon has simply ignored the law and assumed a power to spend public money as he wishes.

Spiro Agnew may need protection. But if so, the only constitutional way to provide it at the expense of the taxpayers is to convince Congress. That is what President Johnson did under more exigent circumstances, after the shooting of Robert Kennedy in 1968. He ordered protection for Presidential candidates—and that very day sought the necessary law from Congress, which quickly acted.

The Agnew affair has a significance deeper even than its brazen lawlessness. It is an example of one of the less-noted but potentially most dangerous abuses of the Nixon Presidency. That is the manipulation—the perversion—of the Secret Service.

In recent years the members of the Service's White House detail have been used increasingly as personal servants and agents of the President. And there are troubling signs that the agency has come to put service to his person ahead of loyalty to the Constitution or to any tradition of public service. In a democracy, that is bad news.

One familiar example of Secret Service fawning on Richard Nixon was its role in the tax-paid refurbishment of the San Clemente mansion. It accepted the most ridiculous demands from Nixon aides—for an ice machine, say, or a new furnace—and certified them as necessary for "security."

Another worrying development has been the use of Secret Service men as political bully-boys, to suppress dissent in the great man's presence. There were flagrant examples on at least two public occasions, at rallies in North Carolina and Illinois, when Secret Service agents tore up anti-Nixon signs and physically removed peaceful citizens from the scene because they were thought to be politically opposed to the President.

The most disturbing case that has come to light so far is that of Donald Nixon. At Disney World last November, the President confirmed that "the Secret Service did maintain a surveillance" on his brother. Both wiretapping and physical surveillance were apparently used, requiring a large number of agents.

Why did they bug and shadow Donald Nixon? "They did so for security reasons," the President said, "and I will not go beyond that."

The known facts suggest that the President was trying to avoid being embarrassed once again by his brother, who has a history of unsavory financial entanglements. In 1969 he was involved in a deal with a Howard Hughes lieutenant, and the President sent Bebe Rebozo to the Hughes peo-

ABROAD AT HOME

ple to tell them to keep away from Donald. It was around this time that the surveillance was undertaken. Jonathan Kwitny of The Wall Street Journal, in a study of the affair, concluded:

"Unless there is a totally different explanation not hinted at in public, the President appears to have turned a personal problem into a national security crisis so he could employ Government force to solve it."

In any event, what did it have to do with the Secret Service? It is the F.B.I. that is supposed to handle Federal wiretaps. But the F.B.I., as we have learned during Watergate, resisted some of the extreme Nixon attempts to misuse the powers of law enforcement. That probably explains why the Secret Service was brought in.

It was not unusual for the Nixon White House to ask a Federal agency to do some dirty work. But it is surprising, and worrisome, that the Secret Service evidently caved in so easily. Its resistance was notably lower than that of the F.B.I., the C.I.A. or the Internal Revenue Service.

Worse yet, there has been no accountability—democracy's basic protection against abuse of power. When the Senate Watergate committee asked for the facts of the Donald Nixon affair and any others like it, the White House instructed the Secret Service not to answer. When Archibald Cox inquired, White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig told Elliot Richardson the President was "very uptight" and wanted the line drawn or "we will get rid of Cox."

"They behaved as if they were a palace guard," one person has said of the Secret Service. The dangers of an elite police force acting that way hardly need to be spelled out. Congress should wake up to those dangers. So should the Service's nominal boss, Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, if he is a true conservative as advertised. It is urgently important to develop in the Secret Service a tradition of professionalism, of independence from politics and persons.

