

IN DAYS GONE BY, the Post Office Department was the traditional center of federal patronage and political plums. Now that role has been assumed by the General Services Administration, which seems all too willing to be of service to Presidents and their friends, even if that means bending or breaking laws and squandering public funds.

One of the largest and least defensible GSA deals to be revealed so far is the arrangement under which the agency gave Rockwell International Corporation \$27 million in useful Air Force property in California and got in return a huge, pyramid-shaped office building at Laguna Niguel, Calif., 10 miles from San Clemente. As described by staff writer Ronald Kessler last week, the trade was arranged in 1971 at the urging of aides to then-President Nixon, who wanted a site near Mr. Nixon's home for future offices and temporary storage of his administration's records. Then-GSA administrator Robert L. Kunzig and his successor, Arthur F. Sampson, tried to justify the deal by claiming that federal agencies in that area needed space. But the site is so inconvenient for most governmental purposes that at least 33 agencies declined to move in. With Mr. Nixon's records still untransferred, the enormous pyramid remains largely vacant today.

The main beneficiary of this dubious deal was Rockwell International. The company got rid of a massive building which it did not need and apparently could not sell privately. In exchange, Rockwell gained title to property which the company was already using to perform defense contract work. That contract requires the government to reimburse Rockwell for costs, including property acquisition expenses. So the government will be buying the Laguna Niguel complex twice:

once by giving up \$27 million in not-exactly-surplus property, and again by paying Rockwell perhaps \$18 million or more over the years for having given up its empty pyramid.

The first obvious question is why top officials at GSA and the Office of Management and Budget were so willing to make such a dubious deal. The answer is not just that Rockwell executives were among the many corporate barons who contributed to the 1972 Nixon re-election drive. Beyond that, a larger process of bureaucratic accommodation to the White House's wishes seems to have been at work.

The second question is why Congress did not blow the whistle on the project at the time. A few questions were asked and some reservations about the deal's legality and rationale were expressed on Capitol Hill, but no committee raised enough of a fuss to stop the swap. A General Accounting Office probe has since been launched, and hearings may be held now that the case has become front-page news. Such curiosity after the fact does not, however, make up for the breakdown in congressional oversight when it was needed most.

The Laguna Niguel transaction would be bad enough as an isolated case. It is even worse as part of the pattern of recent excesses and abuses which have been uncovered at GSA. The public record now includes, in addition to the pyramid deal, a large patronage racket; a \$30-million sale of Air Force property to Lockheed Aircraft, which is now being challenged in court; and profligate spending at San Clemente and Key Biscayne. When all of this is added up, the bottom line is clear. The government's housekeeping agency is badly in need of a good housekeeper—and a good housecleaning—*itself*.

