

OPINION RENÉE GRAHAM

Gilded with taxpayer gold

WELL, AT LEAST we finally know what Ben Carson has been up to since he became the Trump administration's little-seen or -heard Housing and Urban Development secretary.

Shopping! And why not? Most presidents would at least express public dismay if a Cabinet member spent \$31,000 on an office dining room set, which is what Carson reportedly did. Yet no one expects to hear any presidential scolding. President Trump's own financial excesses serve as tacit permission for his staff to turn us into his administration's personal ATM — Always Taxpayers' Money.

Carson's lavish spending was revealed when a HUD official claimed she was demoted after refusing an order to "find money" for his office renovation. When Helen Foster told interim HUD-Secretary Craig Clemmenssen that she could spend no more than \$5,000 on a redo, he reportedly told her, "\$5,000 will not even buy a decent chair."

That is the new "Let them eat cake."

According to HUD spokesman Raffi Williams, Carson "didn't know the table had been purchased." The order was cancelled after the outcry. Now Trey Gowdy, chairman of the Housing Oversight and Government Reform Committee, is launching an investigation into Carson's spending that also now includes \$165,000 for "lounge furniture."

If Gowdy is going to investigate every stuff-loving Trump Cabinet member accused of excessive spending, he'll have little time to do much else for the remainder of his time in Congress.

In just a few weeks last June, Environmental Protection Agency Secretary Scott Pruitt and his staff spent more than \$90,000 on first-class air travel. After claiming he did so for security reasons — peo-

ple in coach, he claimed, were too mean to him — Pruitt recently said he'll start flying coach.

A disgusted Representative Joe Kennedy III tweeted, "If Scott Pruitt & Ben Carson believe flying first class and sitting in luxury chairs is a better taxpayer investment than environmental protections & affordable housing, it is time for them to follow in Tom Price's footsteps and resign."

Last year, Price stepped down as Trump's Health and Human Services



HUD Secretary Ben Carson

"These grotesque excesses only occur when you're spending someone else's dime"

ets secretary over mounting criticism of his extensive use of taxpayer-funded charter flights. One might have thought that controversy would chastened this administration, but Trump's people were only getting started.

Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin is under fire after his chief of staff lied and falsified an email to mask expenses for Shulkin's wife on a 10-day European trip. Documents released last year showed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's use

of government helicopters cost taxpayers more than \$14,000. Another \$3,100 was dropped on private planes for Zinke's trip to the US Virgin Islands.

Meanwhile, as his Cabinet lives large on taxpayers, Trump's 2019 budget proposes a 14 percent cut for HUD; a 25 percent EPA reduction; and a 15 percent cut in the Interior Department. Don't expect this to put a crimp in any cabinet member's spending.

Not to be outdone, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin racked up \$800,000 last year in a few months for trips on military aircraft, including one to get a good look at the solar eclipse. It hasn't helped that Mnuchin is married to Louise Linton, who's like Marie Antoinette with an Instagram account filled with photos of their taxpayer-funded adventures. Yet, nothing to see here, folks — the Inspector General claimed Mnuchin's expenses were all fine and legal.

These grotesque excesses only occur when you're spending someone else's dime. It reminds me of the scene in the gangster classic "Goodfellas," where Ray Liotta's Henry Hill talks about the billions in cargo moving through their local airport and how, "believe me, we tried to steal every bit of it."

Often compared to a criminal enterprise, the Trump administration seems fixated on their taking as much as possible, for their own gain and comfort, from taxpayers. Of course, this starts with Trump himself. He was elected president but acts as if he was anointed a king, one who has no compunction about robbing the people he is supposed to serve. Last year, Trump's many trips to Mar-a-Lago, his South Florida resort, costs \$6.6 million in airfare alone.

Certainly, there are marvelous perks to being president or a Cabinet member. Yet this administration abuses them to project a kind of imperial presidency, decked out all the gaudy trappings of wealth and stature. That's what Trump has done his entire gold-bedecked life. Except now we're the ones being used like a company credit card.

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Inbox

Acrimony at the Athenaeum

New director has created a noticeable air of negativity

I was shocked and saddened to learn the details of upheaval at the Boston Athenaeum under the new director ("The storm after the quiet," Page A1, Feb. 25). My husband and I are longtime members of this venerable institution, and for quite some time I have felt that something was a bit off in the atmosphere of the Athenaeum. Now I know what that something is: the negativity brought about by the despicable manner in which longtime employees and recognized experts in their respective fields have been treated. Shame on the director and the board for allowing this to happen.

Aside from their expertise, the individuals who recently departed were valued for their institutional memory and for how their presence made the Athenaeum welcoming to visitors and members alike.

It seems that the board should reexamine its wisdom in the hiring of the current director. She does not seem to be a good fit. It should be up to the board to remedy this grievous mistake before the Athenaeum becomes just another library, rather than the cherished jewel that it is and deserves to remain.

LYNNE BYALL BENSON
Charlestown

One sad change stands out: the treatment of the security guards

As a longtime Boston Athenaeum member, I have witnessed the more visible recent institutional changes without knowing of the turmoil behind the scenes. However, the "mismanagement of the institution's most valuable resource — its human one," as one former curator put it, is very much felt by patrons like me.

The most obvious — daily — example: For years the security guards commanded a front desk in the building's lobby, where they signed in members and guests and ensured that visitors checked oversized bags. For regulars like me, this daily exchange was a personal one, acknowledging that both the guard and the patron were human beings who recognized each other and even got to know one another.

In the building's new incarnation, the guard's desk and chair have been removed; members check in at another station while the guard is made to stand beside the exit door, holding a wand or stick to poke inside people's bags as they leave.

While this bag check may be necessary, seeing a well-liked and respected employee made to stand for hours, waiting to perform this dehumanizing duty, is a small daily sadness that seems to epitomize the tonal shift at the Athenaeum. I'm not the only member who feels this change in attitude and respect for the staff.

I researched and wrote much of my first novel at the Athenaeum; I'm grateful for the excellent staff, beautiful building, books and artwork, and fellow regulars working away at their projects. I hope the current problems will be remedied. But when my membership lapsed in January, I did not renew.

DAPHNE KALOTAY
Somerville

OPINION A.J.B. LANE



A.J.B. Lane is an author and illustrator in Arlington.

Region needs to look to Boston's pace in housing growth

Thank you for your excellent editorial on tackling Massachusetts' middle-class housing crisis ("Aim higher on housing for middle class," Feb. 25). Not only are most cities and towns in Greater Boston not building enough multifamily housing, they're not building enough housing, period.

A recent Northeastern University report for the Boston Foundation found that between 2012 and 2016, the City of Boston has issued more than double, sometimes almost quadruple, the number of building permits it would if permitting were proportional to population. Despite making up less than 10 percent of Greater Boston's population and less than 1 percent of its landmass, the city is estimated to develop almost 60 percent of the region's multifamily housing.

All municipalities have a stake in the state's economic future. High housing costs make Massachusetts less attractive. Excluding immigration, more people already tend to move out of the state than in. High housing costs also crowd out other personal spending. All of this is bad for business and state tax revenue. The latter funds local aid and services for the growing senior population, who will find it hard to downsize in their community, assuming they can even afford to stay.

ALEXANDER SCARLIS
Brighton

In housing matters, planning is not 'expensive' — it's valuable

The editorial "Aim higher on housing for middle class" was on target in calling for Governor Baker to be bold and include more in his bill to address the housing crisis. A key point of the editorial is that the go-slow, incremental, "one bite of the apple at a time" approach would not give Massachusetts the suite of initiatives needed to generate housing units.

The need for planning is integral to the Globe's proposals. Master planning, open-space planning, transportation planning, and other planning are all keys to creating a road map that earns the support of educated and engaged stakeholders and planning board members. It seems we need to educate the Globe editorial board that planning is not "expensive," as claimed. Planning does the hard work of analyzing, creating alternative solutions, evaluating, and reaching agreement on action. The value of planning is high, and the payback is visible and quantifiable.

Someone can give you a cheap steak dinner that you don't enjoy, or you can pay for a good steak dinner and really enjoy it. The better value is the one that gives you a good result.

DAPHNE POLITIS
Lexington
ANNE MCKINNON
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