

Higher and Higher and Higher

by SYDNEY MAYERS

IN 1803, by way of the Louisiana Purchase, the United States bought from France for \$15 million a parcel of land so vast that from it thirteen states were carved. Fifty years later, through the Gadsden Purchase, at a cost of \$10 million, 45,535 square miles were acquired from Mexico — enough to provide almost half the area of New Mexico and Arizona. In 1867, in a transaction widely condemned as “Seward’s Folly,” Russia sold us the 600,000 square miles comprising Alaska for \$7.2 million—which works out to about two cents an acre.

Today, despite its tremendous development, enormous resources, great taxing power, and gigantic income, the United States is hard-pressed to buy a few acres of ground here and there for recreation purposes. The land is available, mind you! There are countless thousands of acres of undeveloped park-land to be had. But even Uncle Sam is stymied by the huge prices that must be paid for it. As a result, the Interior Department’s long-range plan to expand public parks and other outdoor preserves has slowed down almost to a halt. Faced with steadily rising land prices, the Department is frantically seeking new sources of revenue for purchase of the necessary acreage.

In a recent message to Congress, relating to land and water conservation, the President pointed out that average land prices are increasing at the rate of ten per cent a year, but “the cost of land for recreation is spiraling at a considerably higher rate. This diminishes our program of state grants and federal purchases of land for parks and recreational areas.” He then recommended an appropriation of \$142 million for land and water conservation for the year ending June 30, 1968,

strongly urging that an *advance* authorization of \$32 million be made to “speed up” land purchases. This extraordinary request for an advance is revealing, as it clearly evidences a confident expectation that land not acquired now will be even more exorbitantly priced a year hence.

It is interesting to note that the “advance” asked for by the President, to cover the present cost of a comparatively few acres of unimproved land, is almost exactly the aggregate amount paid for all the land involved in the Louisiana, Gadsden, and Alaska Purchases. And this amount is but a small percentage of the total proposed appropriation, which in turn is to be added to the \$248 million *already* appropriated, making a grand total of \$390 million—and making my head swim! Yet they called it “folly” when Mr. Seward bought the biggest state in the Union for two cents an acre.

The New York Times, reporting the government’s plight in its quest for land preserves, casually observes that “In some areas where park and other recreation projects have been announced or proposed, speculators have caused prices to rise sharply.” This obviously is the crux of the whole matter. If land was not privately owned, and if rent was not privately collected, land prices would be minimal, and there would be no occasion for speculative holding.

Of course it is very serious, but it does seem droll to see the United States of America, the richest country in the world, priced out of the market when it tries to buy a bit of grass and a few trees—backed against the wall by a handful of landowners, whose power rests solely in the privileged monopoly they so unjustly possess.