

Rent-a-President

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By BETTY GARRETT

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Nobody has ever asked me anything I've ever wanted to say about this 1972 Presidential election. Nobody. Not ABC-TV, which is doing a weekly vivisection of vox populi in this all-American city, prompting scores of people who formerly considered themselves superior to try to out-average each other. Not even The Columbus Dispatch ("Ohio's Greatest Home Newspaper"), which carries a portable straw-voting booth to county fairs and shopping centers, asking people if they prefer Richard Nixon or abortions on demand. And certainly not the pollsters, who are allegedly feeling pulses somewhere out there in the darkness of the great Gromboolian plains.

I was glad to hear Senator McGovern is mad at Mr. Gallup, because that would indicate there really is a Mr. Gallup. Personally, I'm suffering from an incredibility gap. Who are they and where are they, these politicians and pollsters of our time? I believe in Gallup and Harris and Nixon and Agnew just about as much as I believe in Colonel Sanders and Howard Johnson and Sandy MacDonald. They are all ubiquitous folk-figure myths, the names and electronic images flashed before us constantly, imbedded into the consciousness until you figure they must exist someplace, though they never show up. What it's really come to is this: I strongly suspect the country is about to re-elect David Frye for another four-year term.

About that campaign: since nobody's asked, I'm going to say it anyway. It's the most dismal, depressing spectacle I've witnessed in my 36 troubled years. At least one-half of the pageant is strictly showbiz, which has long been apparent and is now apparently accepted. The mechanical

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half of the show, which is supposed to be political science, is reminiscent of the General Motors assembly line at Lordstown, Ohio, the American Dream reproduced every few seconds: overpriced and lacking in class; the only thing going for it is volume.

Senator McGovern has had to do some unfortunate recalls on his stances, at that production line; and public acknowledgement of an error is one thing American people don't forgive easily. He also seems to be, as it is said, a decent man. That's really the kiss of death. If you don't think people prefer slick operators over nice guys, check the collections in the churches of any given city against the gross at a theater showing "The Godfather."

When it comes to the candidates, I concede to committing the ultimate feminist sin. I vote emotionally. It's not that I don't think about things occasionally, because I do; but the decision-making area of my head must resemble the Biz Bag. Machismo strikes me as nonsense, but I'm sure sex does influence my judgment, and that doesn't even strike me as terribly wrong. After all, I wouldn't go to bed with someone I didn't like and respect, and the same holds true when voting for a man.

What I can't visualize is Mr. Nixon in an intimate situation of any sort. I confess that I bought "The Making of the President" in the frail hope that someone had. He'd seem infinitely more human. As it is, I fear he says things to Mrs. Nixon like, "Now let me make this perfectly clear" and "on

the other hand," offering her a choice of alternatives A, B and C.

I read recently that his advisers worry about Mr. Nixon's "robotlike" quality. That's putting it mildly. When he appears on TV, I find myself muttering—as I always have at Kentucky funerals—"My, he looks real natural, don't he?"

I realize it's verboten to verbalize things on this sacred ground called the Dignity of the Presidency, which is indeed a legitimate consideration. But "on the other hand," isn't it unrealistic to think these freaky subconscious things don't influence and even decide a lot of votes? And they're certainly not discussed by Gallup and Harris et al.

Listen, since it's all pretense and showbiz anyway, why don't we get on with the ultimate in what-you-see-is-what-you-get politics: Rent-a-President.

In short, We the People could hire an actor every four years (it might be cheaper than electing one) to portray a President we already know would work out. A Known Quantity. Like Henry Fonda doing Lincoln every four years.

Real power, of course, would have to be returned to the Congress and the Senate, where it belongs—unless those bodies are being fully animated by the Walt Disney Studios.

With any luck, the legislators will turn the power over to their secretaries, and the country will finally get run like a good business.

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