

By Betty Garrett

COLUMBUS, Ohio—This town has always been so Republican that a Democrat stands out like the pitchfork in Grant Wood's "American Gothic."

In 1972, when Richard Nixon received 56.5 per cent of the vote here, Columbus just figured the rest of the country had finally seen its private light. The \$64 question is, how well could Mr. Nixon do now?

If the election were restaged today, despite Watergate, chances are the President would still carry Columbus—by a much slimmer margin—but the polls would have to be far away from the supermarkets.

It is there, around the meat-and-egg counters, that the Bastille-rumblings of discontent and fury are growing daily, not around TV sets beaming the sorry saga of Watergate.

It distresses me to say that I find indignation about Watergate and its ramifications pretty much limited here to Democrats and a few conscientious Republicans.

The Nixon faithful, who are legion in Columbus, cling as stubbornly as he to the notion that he can do no wrong. The clichéd cry is, "All politicians are crooks, the Democrats have always done this stuff anyway, they're just out to get Nixon."

I heard a woman say the other day: "After all, it's his house [the White House], and if he wants to bug it, that's his business."

I said I considered "his house" our house.

She just shrugged. "Oh no, it hasn't been that for a long time."

I suspect the reason so few people in Columbus are disappointed in Mr. Nixon's lack of moral leadership is that they never wanted moral leadership anyway. They elected the man to protect their vested interests: to keep blacks out of their homes and schools and labor unions; to keep poor people off welfare; to conduct violence and call it peace with honor. They wanted a President who would elevate racism and selfishness to respectability and patriotism. Richard Nixon hasn't failed them there.

How are these folks supposed to know that such a nice guy would turn around and betray them at the gas stations and grocery stores?

Those are the "dirty tricks" that really concern them. And because of them, Mr. Nixon's popularity is diminishing even here day by day. The thing is, how long can a guy be expected to think like John Wayne when he can't buy a steak?

It has been suggested that President Nixon is currently "pulling up the wagons" around the White House. While he's at it, he had better round up one helluva lot of cows. Otherwise, when he peeks out here at Nixon Country, he may discover the United States cavalry is coming, not to save

his fort but to lynch him.

Betty Garrett is an Ohio writer and social critic.