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There Are 'Plastic Gnomes' in Washington

By Rebecca West

LONDON—Conscious though I am that the American political structure is as different from the British political structure as chalk from cheese, the Watergate inquiry terrifies me when I watch it on my TV here in London. It confirms all my suspicions that there are too many men in the world, and that this is not a good thing.

I think I know what the scandal is about. Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Halde-man and Mr. Dean all look the handsome, grown-up grandchildren of the plastic gnomes that ornament certain gardens, bright young fellows who go to the city and make good, but who never forget that plastic is thicker than water and come home at Thanksgiving and Christmas with masses of plastic Goodies for the plastic old folks. There is something ghastly about their neatness and their abstinences and their small-scale successes, and ghastlier still that we need such men.

For we do. Who but such men are going to enjoy handling the dreary routine of the modern administrative organization. The top jobs need intelligent men, but such are obstinate in their eccentricities, unpunctual and apt to seek God in their own ways. But there are jobs without number to be filled to perfection by the men who do not lose their files, do not send

their chiefs to Chicago when they ought to be at Detroit, and get the crank from Cairo, Ill., back home without the interviews he seeks.

Plastic gnomes do this magnificently. But they are not very good at working out systems of morality for themselves. They are apt to regard authority as the master they must serve joyally, but as the master who is the final voice, the be-all and the end-all. But they are human. They conceive ambitions. And at that point they learn to read the mind of their master and see what service he wants them to perform for him and jump the gun by performing it, thus relieving him from the responsibility of ordering them to do it.

By this time the problem of who is guilty and to what degree becomes a trifle too complicated for human understanding. Someone ought to revive that film, "Becket," in which Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole starred. It concerned the murder of Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, and at first friend and then enemy of King Henry II. The murder was done by some plastic gnomes of the day who believed (no, not quite right) that the King wanted Becket murdered. That film and the play it was based on were timeless and without limitation to one place. What they said is true of Washington today.

So when we British sit down in front of our TV sets and watch the Watergate investigation we know you are dealing with a real problem, and

maybe we feel some envy at the nature of the problem. Not only is our own Lambton scandal humiliatingly silly, P. G. Wodehouse gone wrong, but if we employed miscreants to eavesdrop on the equivalent meetings at which either our Tory, Labor or Liberal party planned its strategy and tactics, the miscreants would never stay awake.

But all the same your scandal leaves me feeling that there are too many men in the world, and they have got out of hand. God help them, many of them are enjoying it. They sit back and laugh aloud when they are amused, and they are that quite often. But they should not laugh at all, for the prestige of the United States is involved. Not its prestige as a great power, for that has gone down the drain. The conception was based on the idea that a nation can make itself so strong that it can stretch its arm across the world and make the distinct peoples do as it wants; and we all know the day for that is over.

What is at stake in the Watergate

investigation is the other kind of prestige, appropriate to our time, belonging to those nations which make it possible for their people to live civilized lives, dealing honestly with each other and the Government, and being dealt with honestly by the Government—and together exploiting the resources of their land for the purpose of happiness. This is the kind of prestige that America is losing through the Watergate scandal. What makes it damaging is your mock air of desperation.

It is conveyed on the screen and in the press that it is vital for the United States to find out if President Nixon had knowledge of the Watergate buggings, and as if it were also vital, were it discovered that he had, to get rid of him by the drastic step of impeachment. But it may be impossible to find out the degree of President Nixon's knowledge of Watergate; and even if he were proved stark innocent it would be just as necessary to get rid of him because of those plastic gnomes. He should not have

had them around, but it is not necessary to impeach him.

At the end of three years, thanks to your Constitution, Richard Nixon will be out. And surely during those three years he will be sitting very still. And surely you need never think of him again after the three years are up. You will in fact never think of him again, just as I do not think of Neville Chamberlain, a British Prime Minister who was more objectionable than Mr. Nixon in quite a different way. Surely, you had better resign yourself to the end of the Presidential term as your way out, because it will take you all that time to have got out of the investigation committees and into the law courts all the suspected persons, on whose guilt or innocence your view of President Nixon must depend; and you will need the pre-cision of the law courts to establish that guilt or innocence beyond all doubt.

Dame Rebecca West, the novelist, is author of "The Meaning of Treason."