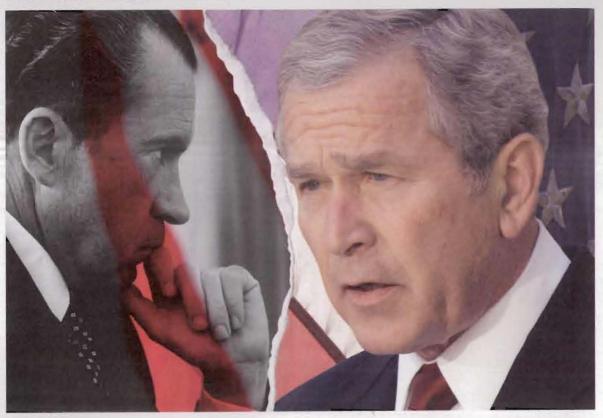
POHLICS



In Memoriam, Mr. President.

How will history compare George W Bush to US politics' ultimate anti-hero, Richard Nixon, wonders *James Reston Jr*—advisor in the interrogation that led to Nixon's downfall.

that the play Frost/Nixon dazzled Broadway, the reaction to one of Nixon's ines in particular always evoked the same response: uproarious, derisive laughter. The line? "When the President does it, it's not illegal."

Nixon himself had uttered that appalling statement in the famous Interviews with British broadcaster David Frost in 1977. The derision on Broadway, of course, was not about Richard Nixon, the defrocked 37th president, but about the current occupant of the White House, George W. Bush. As the Iraq catastrophe has gotten steadily worse, there has been a spirited debate in America over which of the two, Nixon or Bush, is the worst leader in US history.

The magic of Frost/Nixon lies in its metaphor. It raises the relevant and profound issue about how the United States brings a disgraced leader to account after his disastrous tenure in office is over. How can a reviled political figure be

brought to acknowledge corrupt misdeeds and political crimes and forced to apologise to the people for the transgressions?

In 1977, Nixon was three years out of office after his resignation over the Watergate scandal, and never before had he been grilled about his role in it. For a very handsome sum, he agreed to subject himself to Frost's extensive interrogation about the Watergate scandal over a two day span. That interrogation was to be the only time in history that Nixon would answer Watergate questions in an unedited form. Had he not resigned and been pardoned by his successor for all crimes committed, he might have had to answer the same questions in a court of law.

The stakes could not have been higher. Either the decision of the American people to throw Nixon out of office would be certified as valid, or Nixon would bowl over Frost with lofty presidential spin, collect his million bucks

and rehabilitate his shattered reputation into the bargain. But Nixon lost.

Through a withering prosecution, for which I provided the ammunition and the strategy, Nixon was broken. He acknowledged his high crimes and misdemeanours — the standard for impeachment in American jurisprudence — and he apologised to the American people. "I have impeached myself," he said, "by resigning." That

London, New York and now Melbourne, I have often been asked, "Who will be the David Frost for George Bush?" How can we get Bush to address honestly and fully the disaster he has visited on America in the last seven years?

Of course, I have often fantasised about how it might happen. There would be Bush, sweating under the klieg lights as Nixon had done, facing a tough, witty, cunning, and

"BUSH IS NOT LIKELY TO BE ASKED FOR HIS ADVICE IN SERIOUS COUNSELS OF GOVERNMENT."

was unprecedented. The mere spectacle of the confession became part of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate catharsis for the nation, closing the books on a sorry era of American history.

Since the publication of my book, *The Conviction of Richard Nixon*, and the success of the play in extremely well-prepared interviewer, who could penetrate platitude and obfuscation, and force a disconnected ex-president to deal squarely with the 30,000 Iraq casualties, the undermining of basic civil rights and America's fall from grace in the world.

Richard Nixon was driven from office for running a criminal conspiracy out of the Ov Office and abusing the instruments of governm That's against the law. Bunder the guise and cood "national security", Busl authorised as command in chief to drag the coun into war, no matter how wrong-headed.

Impeachment is not the remedy for such transgression; in fact, th is no formal remedy, oth than waiting out the terof office. And of course, Bush's post-presidentia grilling will never happy

Nixon's motivation to submit to questioning water-financial, part-reputational and part-delusional. He no doubt thought he could walk all over the lightweight, fawning confidante to it stars. (Nixon's knowledg of Frost came from a White House event in 1970 when Frost hosted an entertainment revue, replete with lame, off-colour jokes.)

Bush has no such financial motivation, an he seems not to worry about his historical reputation. He seems to believe sincerely that history will prove him right. He associates him with America's 33rd president Harry Truman whose standing improve with time. Bush has agree to extensive interviewing only once, by a Texas journalist named Rober Draper, whose interview technique was, by his o admission, to put Bush comfort zone. Bush doe not have much stomach

a discomfort zone. What awaits him after leaves office is a unique American form of exile Crawford, Texas, equive to Nixon's exile in San Clemente, California af the Frost interviews. He not likely to be asked fo advice in serious couns of government in the fu when the primary busin of Washington will be t repair the damage of th past seven years. Perha will be able to hold onto golf cart with the letter Commander in Chief Nixon did, to toodle are his Crawford spread at ponder alone what is, a what might have been, presidential legacy. G The Conviction of Richard Nixon is out now. Frost/Nixon ru at the Fairfax Studio Melbourne until 10 l