



# 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.

**IN THE FOUR MONTHS** that the play *Frost/Nixon* dazzled Broadway, the reaction to one of Nixon's lines 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

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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

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

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 Oval Office and abusing the instruments of government. That's against the law. Bush, under the guise and cover of "national security", Bush authorised as command in chief to drag the country into war, no matter how wrong-headed.

Impeachment is not the remedy for such transgression; in fact, it is no formal remedy, other than waiting out the term of office. And of course, Bush's post-presidential grilling will never happen.

Nixon's motivation to submit to questioning was part-financial, part-reputational and part-delusional. He no doubt thought he could walk all over the lightweight, fawning confidante to the stars. (Nixon's knowledge 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, and he seems not to worry about his historical reputation. He seems to believe sincerely that history will prove him right. He associates himself with America's 33rd president Harry Truman, whose standing improved with time. Bush has agreed to extensive interviews only once, by a Texas journalist named Robert Draper, whose interview technique was, by his own admission, to put Bush in his comfort zone. Bush does not have much stomach for a discomfort zone.

What awaits him after leaves office is a unique American form of exile: Crawford, Texas, equivalent to Nixon's exile in San Clemente, California after the Frost interviews. He is not likely to be asked for advice in serious counsels of government in the future when the primary business of Washington will be to repair the damage of the past seven years. Perhaps he will be able to hold onto golf cart with the letter "Commander in Chief" Nixon did, to toodle around his Crawford spread and ponder alone what is, and what might have been, his presidential legacy. **George W. Bush's Conviction of Richard Nixon is out now. Frost/Nixon runs at the Fairfax Studio Melbourne until 10**