In Memioriam, Mr. President.


In the four months that the play Frost/Nixon ran on 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 dismissive statement in the White House, when confronted by the Watergate scandal, and never before had he been grilled about his role in it. For a very handsome sum, he agreed to submit himself to Frost's extensive interrogation about the Watergate scandal over two days, and the President did it, it's not illegal.

Through a withering prosecution, for which I provided the ammunition and the strategy, Nixon was broken. He admitted his high crimes and misdemeanors—the standard for impeachment in American jurisprudence—and he acknowledged to the American people, "I have impugned myself," he said, "by resigning." That's against the law. Because Nixon had resigned and been pardoned, there was no resurrection of basic civil liberties. His Crawford spread a discomfiting account of how he had thought he could walk out of office and be able to hold together a golf cart with the letter "C" on it. Nixon did not like that the primary Bush of Washington will not repair the damage he did to national security, and force a connected ex-president to deal squarely with the books on a sorry era in American history.

"Bush is not likely to be asked for his advice in serious counsels of government," wrote Richard Nixon. 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 fantasized about how it might happen. There would be Bush, sweating under the klieg lights as Nixon had done, facing a tough, wry, cynical, and running a criminal conspiracy out of the Oval Office and abusing the instruments of government. There's against the law. Under the guise and cover of "national security," Bush authorised as commander in chief to drag the country into war, no matter how wrong-headed.

Impediment 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, forcing confidants to the stars (Nixon's knowledge of Frost come from a White House event in 1970 when Frost hosted an entertainment revue, replete with lens, off-colour jokes.)

Bush has no such financial motivation, or he seems to not worry about his historical reputation. He seems to believe sincerely that history will prove him right. He associates himself with America's 35th president Harry Truman whose standing improved with time. Bush has an extensive interview only once, by a Texas journalist named Bob Draper, whose interview technique was, by his admission, to put Bush comfort zone. Bush did not give much stomach to a discomfort zone. What aways him after he leaves office is a unique American form of ex-presidential Crawford, Texas, exile to Nixon's exile in San Clemente, California at the Frost interviews. He is not likely to be asked to advise in serious counsels of government in the future when the primary Bush of Washington will not assemble the estimated 50,000 Iraq casualties, the undermining of basic civil rights and America's fall from grace in the world. Richard Nixon was driven from office for a lengthy period. The Conviction of Richard Nixon is no more. Frost/Nixon opens at the Fairfield Studio Melbourne until 10 October.