

Like the Televised Frost Interviews, His Memoirs Are an Exercise in Hopeless Self-Justification

Nixon Drama: Pathetic, Not Tragic

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

Apart from what one feels about Richard Nixon now, much in his current situation as the most humiliated figure in our political history is poignant and dramatic.

Indeed, in these years of his exile, dramatic standards are more relevant than are any new facts his memoirs might or might not add. The only facts that matter any more are what Virginia Woolf calls "the fertile fact," the fact that reveals character rather than event. The Nixon character is the last mystery of Watergate, infinitely more interesting and more important than whether he destroyed 18½ minutes of taped evidence.

In the years since his resignation, and in the years he has left, Nixon's life would appear to have elements of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy; for in both modes, a figure of great prominence often fell from power and prosperity to disgrace. If Nixon were able to hire himself a captive tragedian, the playwright would know that the real drama, the real climax, lies in the fall, the humiliation, the exile, and beyond these, the enlightenment. He would know that Shakespeare in "Richard II" emphasized how poor and weak a king Richard was only in the first two

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acts. His abuses were accepted without complaint. The action rises in the last three acts, as the king's authority is challenged, as the issue of the divine right of kings is pitted against the excesses of intolerable rule. King Richard is pathetically reduced to the lot of a commoner and eventually murdered.

During the six weeks I spent last year watching Nixon during the taping of the David Frost interviews, Nixon appeared to preside over a tiny micro-Presidency: He was President to a dozen people. At every taping session with Frost, Nixon's valet, Manolo Sanchez, would arrive at the set, 10 miles north of San Clemente, with the presidential china, so the boss could have his morning coffee from a cup fit for a President. The complement of Secret Servicemen was always present, but they often complained about how boring it was to be assigned to protect Nixon's seclusion.

And so much in this unique drama depends on the perception of the viewer. I remember the director of the Frost interviews, John Winther, relating the tale of his visit to Nixon's office several months before the tapings began. Then it was thought that the tapings would be in Nixon's office, and John joked with Nixon about how he might brighten up the bland office for the interviews by hanging a Danish flag on the wall. Nixon had laughed and then had walked over to a globe of the world. He spun it vigorously, and when it stopped, he placed his finger on Denmark as if, as the geography teacher, he felt Winther might need a refresher. His lesson did not end there.

"This is China," Nixon continued. "There are 700 million people living there, as opposed to 100 million in the Middle East." He spun the globe to the Middle East. "And 250 million in Russia. Where do you suppose most of the troubles in our world come from?"

John felt as if he should raise his hand. "Not Denmark," he said. Winther and the other technicians present would never forget that scene, somehow deeply frightening in retrospect, of Nixon hovering over his globe and spinning it with both hands.

When I visited the San Clemente compound toward the end of the tapings last April, my perception merged with fantasies of Napoleon Bonaparte's island of exile, St. Helena: volcanic ash underfoot, gloomy steep black cliffs that ran down from the heights into the waves. Perhaps I should not have read Emil Ludwig's classic biography of Napoleon beforehand. I arrived at the now unmanned wooden gates to the Coast Guard station and picked up the phone. To the voice on the other end I stated my business, and the doors opened mechanically. An expanse of grass with the ocean behind spread before me. Down a road bordered on the right by a wall that separated the Coast Guard station from Casa Pacifica, I turned into a parking lot. At the far end, the sign read "President Nixon's Office."

The two buildings behind, which made up the office complex, were little more than oversized mobile homes, well-landscaped. Parked at the door was a golf cart with a fringed canopy, and on the front of it, in cheery orange and yellow script, were the words, "President Nixon." In an office I was asked to wait, and I spent the time looking at the vivid, framed color pictures on the wall: Nixon and Mao, Nixon and Brezhnev, Nixon and Sadat amid the splendor of a Mideast palace. Why couldn't an American President have better accommodations, Nixon once asked an aide after a Middle East visit.

At length, Ken Khachigian, who was handling the arrangements for the interview, appeared. He gave me a brief, dutiful tour of the premises. He showed me the patio that once "teemed with press" (now the silence was deafening), the doors that once led to Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's offices, the empty offices where occasionally volunteers come to help out with the mail. Around on the back lawn, Khachigian expressed some hope the University of Southern California might now set up a Nixon library, but, of course, it was still very fuzzy what, if any, papers Nixon could deposit there. The case was still in court. It was all quite embarrassing, and I hastened to leave.

On the way back I stopped briefly at the San Clemente Inn to see the pathetic little "Nixon Museum." A small en-

closure in the lobby of the hygienic motel, it consists primarily of campaign buttons from all his races, laid on velvet in glass cases. A bronze bust, not very reminiscent of the real man, conveying none of the strength or the weakness of his remarkable visage—dead, lifeless bronze—presided over the small space. The time had come for better sculptors and painters who were intent on capturing the essence of this personality, just as the time had come for the biographers and the memoirists. In the future there would be a need for special Nixon commemoratives.

I asked the lady at the front desk if there were any Nixon souvenirs about. She went into the bar and was gone for quite a while. When she returned, she handed me a white, finger-smudged matchbook. Its simple gold letters read: THE WESTERN WHITE HOUSE.

This is sad and poignant, but is Richard Nixon really a tragic figure?

All such inquiries must begin with Aristotle. The finest form of tragedy, Aristotle writes in his "Poetics," has a complex plot in which the hero, enjoying great reputation and prosperity, passes from happiness into misery. The spectacle of the fall must evoke in the observer both fear and pity, and provide for him a catharsis or purgation which is pleasurable and illuminating about the estate of man.

Clearly, Nixon maintains his power to evoke fear in many Americans. His appearance with David Frost on television created the air of a duel, from which a winner and a loser would emerge. Would Frost break Nixon? Or would the Englishman be a patsy?

Millions of Americans desperately wanted to see Nixon lose. Indeed, he had to lose in order to make us content with our recent history. As he was doing so in the first Watergate program, the television audience started large, and grew in the course of the 90 minutes to an unbelievable 50 million viewers, competitive that week in the Nielson ratings with "Happy Days."

But with Nixon's recently published memoirs, there will be no loser. Nixon is the total victor already, for his control is complete. There is no one to answer back, no one to prod him to greater confession, or broader apology. The memoirs are like the resignation speech on the night of Aug. 8: a carefully drafted, over-rehearsed, impeccably delivered product for consumption, from which any drop of spontaneity is squeezed.

That speech has been quickly forgotten. What every American remembers is the farewell speech to the staff the following morning, displaying the wreckage of a human being groping for sympathy by remembering his failed father and saintly mother. For biographers and tragedians alike, the farewell speech is the most important Nixon ever gave.

In Shakespeare's "Richard II," when the king is pathetically reduced to the lot of a commoner, he speaks words that might apply to a graceful idealization of Richard Nixon.

*Oh that I were as great as my grief
Or lesser than my name
Or that I could forget
What I have been
Or not remember
What I must be now.*

And in his humiliation, Richard II seems to learn in his contrition: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me." But can it be said that Nixon has learned anything in exile?

In the Frost Watergate program, it appeared that he had. As the interrogation was aired, the viewer saw 60 minutes of intense facts-and-dates exchanges on the details of the scandal, 10 minutes of Nixonian mawkishness about the tulips at Camp David on the day he fired Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and then the climactic apology to the nation.

He had, he said, made horrendous mistakes. He had gone to the "very edge of the law." These sentiments are startlingly missing from his memoirs.

"I let down my friends," he said to Frost. "I let down the country. I let down our system of government, and the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government, but now think it's too corrupt. . . . Yes, I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me the rest of my life."

That was how the program was aired, ending with the apology, and editing the program that way made great sense in television and in dramatic terms. As aired, the performance evoked a high degree of sympathy and even pity in many.

But, as taped, the inquisition did not happen that way.

The 90-minute Watergate program was a composite of five hours of debate over two days. Four of the five hours consisted of hot exchanges over the facts. Nixon had clearly decided upon the old stonewall. Misreading Frost's earlier ineptness in foreign policy segments (earlier in the taping sequence), he had miscalculated Frost's determination and knowledge on Watergate.

Nixon exhibited no spontaneous comprehension of the need of the American people to hear a genuine expression of remorse, and he has repeated that mistake in his memoirs. He seemed to have no grasp of the psychic release and favorable response that a sincere confession might have. But that, per se, would not disqualify his apology, even if it was extracted reluctantly from him, as a piece of pure tragedy. Tragic figures often need to be brought to enlightenment by others.

But as the taping actually happened, the discussion did not end cleanly and stirringly with the apology. In fact, Nixon's penitence was short-lived, as if it were a momentary lapse, a strategic unavoidable retreat, in need of speedy reverse.

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The moment of revelation was a moment only, brief and transitory. Seconds after he had accepted responsibility for his own actions, he was back on the attack. Instead of leaving the conversation on a high note, there he was once again, talking about the young "hot rods" whom Leon Jaworski inherited from Archibald Cox in the special prosecutor's office, who were pushing too far, and Jaworski had confided to Alexander Haig, "I just can't control 'em." He was quoting his son-in-law, Ed Cox, about those same hot rods. Cox had known them as classmates in Harvard law school.

"They're tough. They're smart, but most of all, they hate you with a passion, mostly because of the war," Cox had told his father-in-law. "And as we conclude this," Nixon continued, "you can say they have (hounded me) and they will, and I will take it, I hope, like a man."

So these hot rods are Nixon's Furies, his instruments of vengeance and symbols of conscience, who will pursue him to his dying day. Perhaps he believes that, like Orestes, he, too, will be absolved of guilt in the end, simply by this hounding.

This blaming robbed the apology of any nobility. And it was to get worse, for immediately after his talk about hot rods, he blamed the whole Watergate affair on the late Martha Mitchell. So the performance was not tragic. It was not a Nixon scenario, but neither did it demonstrate a sincere and enduring awareness.

True, it had power, for here was a man suffering (although the money he was making for the performance took the edge off the agony). In his memoirs, even more profitable for him, there seems to be no agony of realistic self-evaluation.

In tragedy, suffering must have a point, and the result

must be understanding. By the standards of Greek and Elizabethan and even modern tragedy, Nixon's performance with both Frost and his memoirs fails to qualify. He is mired in a hopeless exercise of self-justification.

"When humanity is seen as devoid of dignity and significance," Edith Hamilton wrote in "The Greek Way," "then the spirit of tragedy departs."

Already in our universities, there is a post-Watergate, post-Nixon generation, young men and women who were 12 and 13 years old when Nixon's fall began. I've been teaching such a group in a seminar on Nixon at the University of North Carolina this semester. Ask them how many articles of impeachment the Judiciary Committee reported out, and the guesses come back: 7 . . . 8 . . . 17? Ask them what the 18½-minute gap was, and the response is, "an important conversation that Nixon erased." Ask them what the difference was between the Ervin Committee hearings and the Judiciary Committee hearings, and they cannot tell you. Ask them if they hate Nixon, and they say no, and, without knowing why, say they do not have hate but disgust.

They see him not as tragic but as pathetic, a "paranoid" man caught up in a destructive web of his own making, but they can still enjoy completely the satires like the movie "Millhouse." For them, there can be no Nixon catharsis, for there are no emotions to purge, no anger over the war to purify.

In his farewell speech, Richard Nixon seemed to be concerned that his example would give this young generation the impression that public servants were in government only "to feather their own nests," but if it is any consolation now, to this college generation Nixon is already distant, confusing and irrelevant.