

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

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 Nielsen 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*

