THE BREAKING OF RICHARD NIXON

"you got us," said nixon to frost afterward; here is a behind-the-scenes account of how it was done, by one of frost's top guns

IN THE SUMMER OF 1976, DAVID FROST'S EDITORIAL TEAM IN WASHINGTON—BOB SELNICK, I AND, LATER, FOR A TIME, FREE-LANCER PHIL STANFORD—WAS HOPING TO COME UP WITH A SCOOP. THIS MEANT PLLOWING OVER GROUND THAT HAD BEEN WORKED NOT ONLY BY THE RODINO AND ERVIN COMMITTEES BUT ALSO BY SOME 200 JOURNALISTS IN WASHINGTON FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS. THE PROSPECT DID NOT SEEM ENCOURAGING TO ME, BUT I WAS WRONG.


SINCE THE CONVERSATIONS WERE IN THE PUBLIC RECORD, I DID NOT IMMEDIATELY PERCEIVE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT I HAD UNCOVERED. I ASSUMED THAT THESE CONVERSATIONS HAD BEEN RELEASED TO THE PRESS AND WERE SIMPLY LOOKED OVER IN THE MOUNDS OF OTHER RELEASED INFORMATION.


THE MOST SENSATIONAL WINDFALL FROM THESE SOURCES (WHOSE IDENTITY I NEVER REVEALED TO FROST) CONSISTED OF TWO DOCUMENTS FROM THE SPECIAL PROSECUTOR'S INVESTIGATION. TAKEN TOGETHER, THEY AMOUNTED TO THE GOVERNMENT'S PLAN FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF NIXON IN THE WATERGATE-NESS-COVER-UP TRIAL.

ONE DOCUMENT, TITLED "R.M.N. AND THE MONEY," CONCENTRATED ON THE MARCH 31ST CONVERSATION WITH DEAN AND THE DESPERATE SEARCH IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED FOR WAYS TO MEET PAYMENT OF HUNT'S BLACKMAIL DEMAND, WHICH WAS RELAYED TO NIXON ON THAT DAY. WITH DETAILED AND EXTENSIVE REFERENCES TO TAPE TRANSCRIPTS, MANY OF WHICH WERE STILL SECRET, AN OVERWHELMING CASE WAS LAID OUT AND NIXON'S DEFENSE AGAINST IT ANTICIPATED AND REFUTED.

IN ONE OF THE NEW TAPES, OF A CONVERSATION ON APRIL 20, 1974, DURING WHICH NIXON EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN TO Haldeman about the March 31st conversation, fearing what Dean was telling the prosecutors, Nixon's own recollection was that he had said to Dean: "Christ, turn over any cash we got." THE SECOND DOCUMENT WAS THE MORE SENSATIONAL, FOR THERE, IN cold PRINT, WERE SANITIZED EXCERPTS FROM THE JUNE 20, 1972, COLESON CONVERSATION. THE DOCUMENT BEGAN WITH THE PRESIDENT'S SCHEDULE ON HIS FIRST WORKING DAY BACK AT THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER THE BREAK-IN, LISTING THE MEETING WITH Haldeman, WHICH LATER WOULD BE ERASED, AND THEN THE MEETING WITH COLESON. HERE ARE SOME REFERENCES FROM THE CONVERSATION:

• referring tacitly to the break-in, the president said: "if we didn't know better, would have thought it was deliberately botched." ALREADY, HE KNEW SOME DETAILS.

• referring to the watergate suspects, Nixon said: "basically, they are all pretty hard-line guys." COLESON INTERRUPTED: "you mean Hunt?" NIXON REPLIED: "of course, we are just going to leave this where it is, with the Cubans...At times, oh, i just sorta wall." and, finally, Nixon prophesied: "oh, sure, you know who the hell is going to keep it alive. We're gonna have a court case and, indeed...the difficulty we'll have along. We got to have lawyers smart enough to have our people delay, avoiding depositions...That's one possibility." PERHAPS IT DID NOT MATTER TO HISTORY NOR TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE THREE YEARS LATER THAT FROST COULD ESTABLISH FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT NIXON HAD COME PART OF THE WATERGATE CONSPIRACY THREE DAYS EARLIER THAN WAS PREVIOUSLY KNOWN.

THE TIME, FROST STOOD ACCUSED IN SOME QUARTERS OF BEING A LIGHTWEIGHT AND A PUSHER; STARTLING NEW DISCOVERIES COULD ESTABLISH HIS CREDENTIALS AS A SERIOUS INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER. IF WE COULD KEEP OUR POSSESSION OF THE NEW MATERIAL SECRET UNTIL IT WAS SPRUNG ON NIXON ANONYMOUSLY, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET CLOSER TO THE TRUTH THAN EVER BEFORE—PERHAPS EVEN BREAK NIXON INTO A CONFESSION OF GUILT.

IN THE MEANWHILE, I HAD BEEN DEVELOPING A FRIENDLY WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH TWO FORMER PROSECUTORS IN THE SPECIAL
prosecutor's office, Richard Ben-Veniste and George Frampton. I knew the pro-
found disappointment these young law-
ers felt at not ever having got Nixon on
the stand, and their impulse to help me
transcend the limitations of the legal
interrogation was likely, they felt, to be
the only grilling Nixon would ever get.
When I showed the February 16th and
14th Coburn conversations to Frampton
and Ben-Veniste, they exchanged glances
and then broke into laughter.
"You've got something no one else has," Frampton said. "Those transcripts
must have been placed in the official exhibits by a clerical error."

By early April 1977, we had become
used to the trip up the coast to Monarch
Bay, where the shows were being taped.
I was discouraged. It seemed to me the
interviews thus far lacked the electricity
we had been hoping for. On April sixth,
the subject matter had at last come to
Watergate. But in those opening ses-
sions, Zelnick and I felt that Frost hadn't
pressed hard enough. After a party that
night, we barged him about it, with the
result that he buckled down to work the
next day and our April 16th trip to
Monarch Bay had a totally different
flavor from any of the previous trips.
Frost had peaked at the right moment.
During the drive, we discussed the law
on obstruction of justice and I showed
Frost its exact wording.

"Mr. President," Frost said crisply as
the session began, "to try to review your
court conduct over the whole Watergate
period is a daunting task. With the
perspective of three years now, do you feel
that you ever obstructed justice or were
part of a conspiracy to obstruct justice?"

What followed in the next two hours
that Wednesday, and two more hours on
Friday, has been called a television epic.
Tension started high and built toward
the rhetorical hooks Nixon dangled.
Frost continued recounting the evidence
until he came to the date that interested
me most: June 20, 1972. He men-
tioned the famous conversation between
Nixon and Haldeman containing the 18-
and-a-half-minute gap. Nixon, under
dread pressure from Frost, would not
hedge from his position that he had no
idea how the erasure occurred.
Frost then played his surprise card,
casually mentioning the Coburn conver-
sation. Here was Nixon suddenly coming
up with new and highly damaging ma-
terial. What else did he have?
I watched Nixon's face closely. I saw
the transformation in his manner of ques-
ting Frost's questions.

"You've read here excerpts out of
a conversation with Coburn ... ah ..."

Then he thought better of it. switched
his thrust. "Let me say what my motive
was, and that's the important thing. My
Motive was not to cover up a criminal
action but to be sure that as far as any
slip-over, or should I say slip-over,
was concerned, I was understood,
was understood."

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a conversation with Coburn ... ah ..."

"Now, somewhere, you were pretty
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