

The Unmaking of a President

During David Frost's television interviews with Richard Nixon, an interruption unexpectedly led the former President to admit at last that he had 'let the American people down.'

By James Reston Jr.

Watergate remains the greatest political drama of our time. Yet it comes often as a disappointment that life does not conform to the dictates of the stage. The Nixon resignation robbed the nation of a great epic trial in the Senate. The Ford pardon deprived us of the spectacle of a disgraced President, sitting composed in the dock, as he is charged with vast criminality.

The country is left with half-measures: biographies, which never quite get at the wellsprings of the Nixon character; the Nixon memoirs, which carefully skirt his guilt; the jeremiads, whose harsh passions no longer seem appropriate, and one Watergate interrogation — David Frost's, on television, for which Nixon was judged more for his performance than for his crime. Still, even if the million-dollar price was wrong, and the forum ill-suited, the country is better off for having had Frost's interrogation of Nixon than it would be without it. Its rebroadcast last night on PBS was a fitting commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex, the event that started it all.

The televised inquisition of Richard Nixon took 78 minutes but the original taping on Watergate lasted more than six hours and was conducted in two sessions on April 13 and 15, 1977.

In the first session, Frost displayed a superb grasp of Watergate facts and dates and showed himself a skilled and caustic inquisitor, riding the perilous line between disbelief and disrespect.

While the Nixon resignation and his acceptance of the Ford pardon was considered an admission of guilt, this was only by inference. Those of us who worked on the series placed on Nixon's case what we called the "adverse inference," a term taken from the minority report of the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment proceedings. We would draw an adverse inference from any plea of innocence by the former President and attack his case with the record. The goal for the second

Author James Reston Jr., who was David Frost's Watergate adviser for the Nixon interviews, is working on a stage adaptation of his latest book, "Our Father Who Art in Hell," about the Rev. Jim Jones.

taping session was to force a detailed admission of guilt and an apology to the nation.

Yet, because Nixon's posture was not so much a matter of illegal action as of improper tone and emphasis, it seemed virtually impossible in the two hours of Watergate discussion that remained contractually to us for Frost to demonstrate conclusively that Nixon had violated the Constitution. Moreover, Frost had used up most of his trump cards in the first Watergate taping day (although Nixon could not have known this), and little more than stern bluffing was all that remained.

From the dramatic standpoint as well, there was reason for concern. If this part came out in a muddle, the whole drama might go limp. For this act, I urged that Frost finish triumphantly with the litany of lies that Nixon told the country. I was overruled. Frost preferred to return to his facts and dates approach.

What I did not know was Nixon's state of mind after the first Watergate taping session.

On April 15, for the first time, Nixon arrived 20 minutes late, looking tired and drawn. An aide insisted that after our long session two days previous, there remained under the contract only an hour and 18 minutes to discuss Watergate. And this, he argued, included all the accusations of wrongdoing — the Nixon taxes, the Huston plan, the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. My heart sank. I could see more Nixon filibustering (of which there had already been more than enough), and an abrupt, weak end to what would turn out to be the only Watergate interrogation Nixon would ever receive. In the end, however, Nixon did not stay within his aide's proposed time limit.

In the first few minutes on camera, my concern seemed well-grounded. Nixon said he wanted to clear up a few points from the last session, and began to ramble. Frost



Newsday Illustration / Anthony D'Adamo

indulged him for awhile, but soon enough, returned to his withering facts-and-dates chronicle.

As I look back on it, the breaking of Richard Nixon started an hour into that session. It began with a line rehearsed the night before. What, Frost asked, would the perfect President have done after John Dean [the White House counsel] laid out his narrative of the cover-up on March 21? Our answer was simple: The perfect president would have called the cops. Frost continued: "I still don't know why you didn't pick up the phone and tell the cops. When you found out the things that [H.R.] Haldeman [White House chief of staff] and [John] Ehrlichman [chief

domestic-affairs adviser] had done, there is no evidence anywhere of a rebuke, only of scenarios and excuses."

Could he now take his time to address that question, Nixon asked. The melancholy in his tone was seductive and strangely different from his customary combativeness. For five minutes, he droned on about Richard the Isolated, Richard the Victimized. He took snatches of events which had already been covered to his great detriment and now fashioned them into something innocuous.

He had forgotten — or hoped his audience would forget — what had already been established. He was reaching for the role of the wise elder statesman, dropping the names of great men with whom he had dealt and great events in which he had been involved. It was fascinating and horrible.

He spoke of the decency of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and John Mitchell [U.S. attorney general], and tried to move us with tales of how their lives had been marred forever by all this. He protested his own ignorance of the law. He started sentimentally into the milk case.

That was enough. "Finish your thesis," Frost said with ostentatious boredom. "Let me have a pen, by the way, please. If there's anything that occurs to me, because it's a long speech, and I dropped my pen. Not that there's anything yet, because I've got a good memory — but just give me a pen."

The grotesqueness of it made superb television. Its contrast to the hostile factual interrogation was stunning, and more important, the wreckage of Nixon's rambling was marked by splinters of guilt and self-pity, of misjudgment and mistake.

"Why not go a little farther?" Frost said softly. "That word 'mistake' is a trigger word with people. Would you say to clear the air that for whatever motives . . . you were part of a cover-up?"

Nixon would not say that. He returned to his previously safe but now shattered position: that he was acting as attorney for the defense and would not have made a good prosecutor of his best friends. He simply could not bring himself to a confession.

"Take him back onto the coals," I found myself shouting at the monitor in the back room.

Just then, Col. Jack Brennan, Nixon's chamberlain, walked quietly onto the set. Behind the camera, as the tape continued to roll, he held up a note to Frost, scrawled on a legal pad: "Let's talk," it read. Frost quickly proposed a tape change.

A furious bustle followed. I started out of our room and suddenly, Brennan was pulling me into Nixon's room. He started to talk excitedly about a deal, and then caught a glimpse of Frost entering his room. I found myself being dragged over there.

What was Brennan offering? Would Nixon admit guilt in a criminal conspiracy? I asked. No. Well, what about an impeachable offense, I parried, ready to settle for three-quarters of the loaf. No. Brennan replied. Nixon, Brennan explained, saw the two as identical. It was unclear what Brennan was giving in return for Frost's retreat from the record. The discussion, heated for a while, ended without agreement. Frost and Nixon returned to their chairs, and the tape rolled. But somehow this break pushed Nixon as close to a confession as he would ever get.

Frost resumed his questioning. "Coming down to sheer substance, would you go further than 'mistake?'"

"Well," Nixon replied, gesturing to Frost with the blade of his hand, "what would you express?"

The problem was worthy of Socrates: Frost, as unlikely as the noble role seemed for him, must lead Nixon to truth and enlightenment.

The Nixon apology that followed will be the best historians will ever get. He did not come quickly or elegantly or voluntarily to it. There was no profound recognition in it. But when it came, it was satisfying.

"I let down my friends. I let down the country. I let down our system of government, and the dreams of all these 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. My political life is over. I will never yet and never again have an opportunity to serve in an official capacity."

In that one, hard statement lay the final success of the Nixon interviews.

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