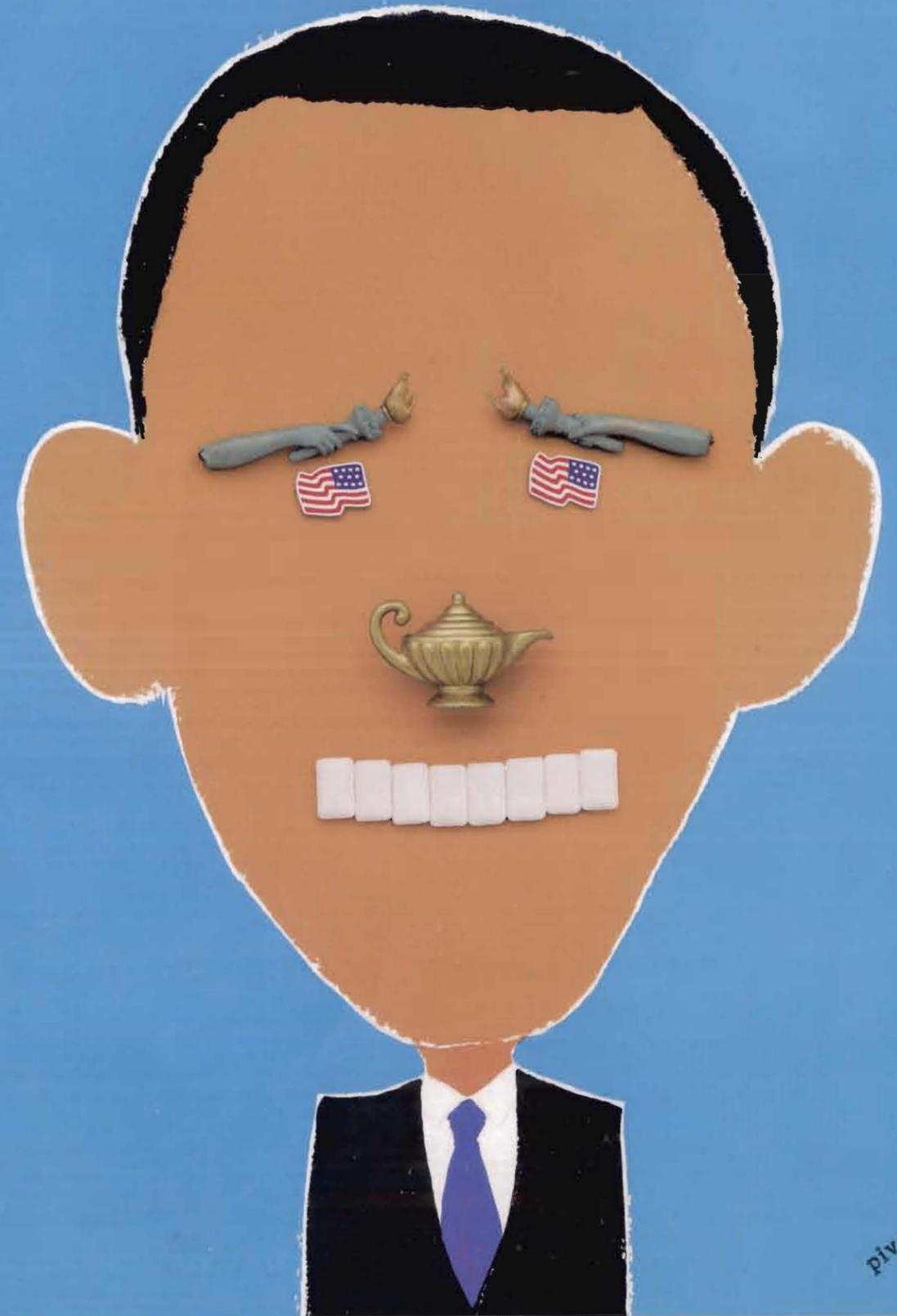


BARACK OBAMA BY PIVEN

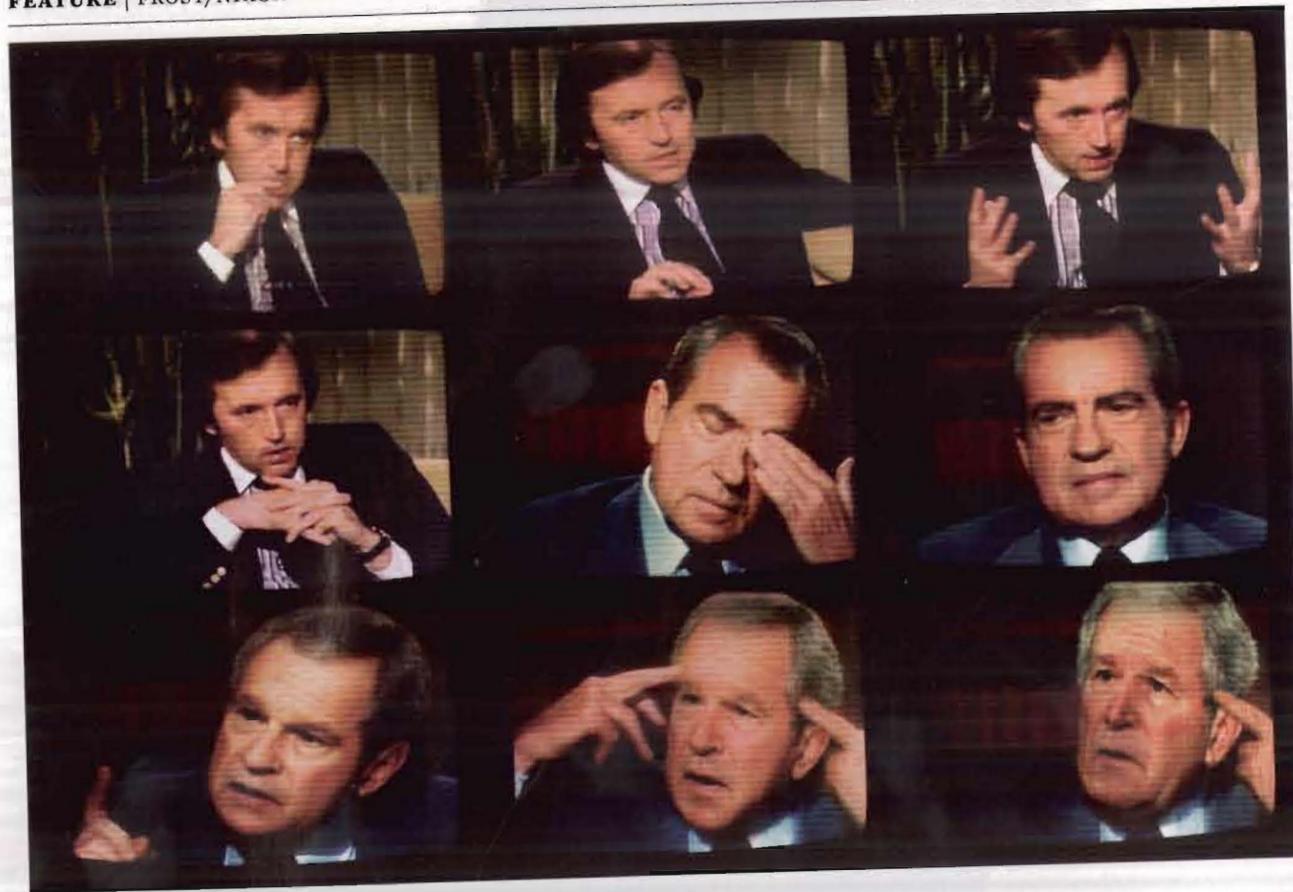
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# WHO WILL GET BUSH TO CONFESS?

James Reston Jr dug up the dirt for David Frost's infamous interviews with Richard Nixon, now the subject of a major movie. Here, he asks who will manage to put George W Bush on the rack and force him to disclose all?

IN THE MONTHS THAT the play, *Frost/Nixon*, dazzled London and Broadway, the reaction to one bizarre Nixon line always met the same reaction: uproarious, derisive laughter. The line? "When the president does it, it's not illegal." Nixon himself had uttered that appalling and prophetic statement in his famous interview with David Frost in 1977, for which I served as Frost's Watergate adviser. The derision in the West End and the Great White Way, of course, was not directed towards Richard Nixon at all, but at America's disgraced outgoing president, George W Bush.

The magic of the *Frost/Nixon* play, and now the movie, lies in its metaphor. It raises a profound issue about how the United States (or indeed any country on Earth for that matter) brings a dishonoured leader to account after a disastrous tenure in office is over. In 1977, three years after Nixon was drummed from office, David Frost performed a public service on television before a jury of 57m viewers. Several years from now, a similar public service is needed to drag Bush into an acknowledgement of how he personally, and his administration generally, undermined the basic ideals of America.

Nixon's post-presidential interrogation was historic and unique. The nation had been at war for 13 years in Vietnam, and Nixon had presided over five of those years, involving an additional 20,000 American deaths. ("I was the last casualty of the Vietnam War," Nixon told Frost in another appalling and narcissistic remark.) And the country had endured two years of the Watergate scandal. To watch Nixon be grilled by a clever, well-informed, and courageous interviewer, to watch the president's credibility crumble as his defences were shattered one by one, amounted to a catharsis for America. It closed the books on a sorry period of history. It was the last piece of unfinished business in the Nixon nightmare and a kind of public exorcism. If there really was an army of "Nixon haters" in America, as the commentators insisted, that hatred evaporated with the ex-president's defeat. His lapse into apology and self-pity dissipated the fear and loathing he had instilled, and he became thereafter merely an eccentric, mystifying and fascinating figure of a past age.

Is the contempt for Bush any less? Can we hope that the same fate awaits W soon? Probably not.

Nixon had agreed to Frost's interrogation largely out of greed and fantasy. He was paid more than \$1m for this exclusive interview. Money probably does not motivate Bush in the same way. From his humble roots, Nixon was never spoon-fed in a silvery, dynastic upbringing. The longing to be Texas rich never left him. From daddy and granddaddy, Bush has always had all the lucre he could use. More importantly, Frost had a reputation as a soft interviewer and Nixon no doubt imagined that he could walk all over the English patsy, rehabilitating his reputation in the bargain. In a telling line from Peter Morgan's marvellous play, Nixon's aide, Jack Brennan, says to his boss, "If this went well, sir, if enough people saw it and revised their opinions, you could move back East way, way earlier than we'd expected." No doubt three years from now, Bush too will be offered the same deal. Crawford, Texas, will be his San Clemente. He too will tire of the jeers that always torment a pariah. He too will pine for respect as an elder statesman. "I like San Clemente, make no mistake," Nixon tells Brennan in the play. "But let's be honest. It'd be good to go back to where the action is. The hunger in my belly is still there."

Bush, of course, has had his fair share of soft-soap interviewers over the years.

Indeed, he has sought them out. With his media favourites, Bush fancies the "comfort zone" and has no stomach, even with the pipe-dream of rehabilitation, for the discomfort zone. At his rare press conferences, he calls on only those he knows he can control. "Wolf! Wolf!" he shouts, looking for the bland talking head of CNN's political shows. "Where are you Wolf? Ask a question!" Bush is not likely to fall into the same trap as Nixon.



JAMES RESTON JR (RIGHT) WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN THE SUCCESS OF FROST'S NIXON INTERVIEW. HERE THEY'RE SEEN PREPARING FOR THE INTERROGATION

**Bush is no Nixon. He is a less complex villain. He possesses none of Nixon's authority**

In the confrontation of 1977, the stakes were higher than they might be in nailing Bush. Nixon had been thrown out of office before his appointed time. He had resigned and then he had been pardoned by his successor, and so the system had only partially worked. Either the decision of the nation to throw him out of office would be validated in his conversation with Frost, or if Nixon triumphed, he would ride back into the sunshine as a misunderstood, unfairly maligned victim of a tragic miscarriage of justice. Vindication was Nixon's dream. So too will it be Bush's. He asserts that "history" will exonerate and even elevate him, as if history is some sort of providential, forgiving, forgetful benefactor. "History" will say that he was

tough and feisty, that he possessed only noble motives in trying to safeguard his country, that it was only low-level miscreants who engaged in overzealous misdeeds, in the way that Henry II was misunderstood in his rage against Becket.

Close to Bush's bantam strut was Nixon's farewell victory salute at the doors of his helicopter. In 1977, his confidence was evident. Like Captain Queeg at the beginning of the Caine Mutiny court-martial, Nixon arrived tanned and self-assured, almost debonair. Patronising Frost with presidential command, he instructed the Englishman about how the interview would be conducted. In his blue serge and care-worn face, he projected the image of a battle-hardened world leader while Frost, in his Savile Row pastels and blow-dried hair, looked like the lightweight entertainer of his reputation. But then, over a period of two days, Nixon was blind-sided and trapped by damaging new information that I had put in Frost's hands. Gradually, Nixon's defences were ground down under the weight of the evidence and by Frost's relentless prosecutorial fire. As the well-established facts about his complicity in an obstruction of justice were hurled at him, Nixon was thrown back on the lame excuse that in all his conspiratorial actions, he did not have a "corrupt motive".

In the end, however grudgingly and surprisingly, he was forced to acknowledge his high crimes and misdemeanours, the standard for impeachment. "I have impeached myself... by resigning," he said. And then his extraordinary apology poured out. "I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden for the rest of my life. My political life is over. I will never again have an opportunity to serve in any official capacity."

Might we some day anticipate something similar from Bush's mouth? Would such a sincere apology be satisfying? Yes. Would it be an important moment in the reconstruction of the country after the Iraq War? Absolutely. Would it dissipate the contempt that we feel for Bush, humanise and transform him into a harmless curiosity of a bygone era? Indeed, it would. But don't hold your breath. Bush is no Nixon. He is a far less complex villain. He possesses none of Nixon's subtlety and authority and accomplishment. For all his faults, Nixon was a giant of American politics. He had dominated the American scene for 30 years. He had opened China. He was a great friend of arts and letters. He had

transformed American political campaigns with his "Southern strategy", dividing the country into Republican red states and Democratic blue states. Bush, by contrast, is a midget.

Nixon was an elusive, intimidating, Protean target. That the quarry was such a challenging target made his defeat all the sweeter and historic.

His words of contrition in 1977 were immensely satisfying to me. Hard-won as they were, they could only be viewed as sincere, heart-felt and authentic if they emerged as the outgrowth of a withering interrogation. Inquisition, acknowledgement and apology were linked. The sad spectacle of his apology was an essential, necessary ingredient of a national reconstruction and reconciliation. The apology did not make him sympathetic or tragic, but it did humanise him. The country could finally move on.

Not all historians agree with this assessment. Nixon's sincerity has been questioned, its authenticity challenged. Robert Dallek, for example, the author of *Nixon And Kissinger: Partners In Power*, believes the apology was fake. He sees it as quintessential Nixon orchestration, a cynical, scripted scenario. Tricky Dick knew he had to express a semblance of contrition. He had to confess something, so long as he did not specifically confess to an impeachable offence or a criminal act. Whether that apology was sincere or scripted remains the last mystery of the Frost-Nixon interviews. To form a solid opinion of that issue, one needs to see original footage. Both on the stage and in the movie, the skewering of Nixon and his apology takes about seven minutes.

Of course, I have often fantasised about how Bush might receive a Frostian treatment. Who would be the interviewer? What strategies might be used? How might it be staged? How big might be its audience? Deep in my imagination I can hear him say, "I was the last casualty of Iraq," and I can hear the interviewer reply softly, "Tell that to the paraplegics."

The nature of television since the Seventies, of course, has utterly changed. With the 24-hour news cycle, the emphasis now is on the quick fix, the gotcha question, the high-volume accusation and the bumbling response that can make one exchange into a memorable soundbite and create a buzz. It's hard to imagine a journalist now who has the time to master the voluminous facts of Bush's transgressions and to employ a performer's

skill for using them like a good butcher. Frost was both more and less than a journalist. Where he was less, he got good help to shore him up. And where he was more, he used his natural wit, humour and sense of irony to devastating effect. In the Watergate interrogation (as opposed to the foreign policy and ad-hominem segments where he failed utterly), he knew when to be tough and when to be kind, when to confront and when to back off. He had an instinctive knack for the dramatic and an appreciation for what is boring. He knew how to craft an argument in paragraphs, loading his delivery with the presumption of guilt rather than innocence. And he knew how to sustain an interrogation over time, when that interrogation had a defined goal. Importantly, he was a foreigner, liberated from the usual deferences of a patriotic American. Best of all, he knew how to spring a trap. These were formidable weapons in facing

## With Bush, the task would be to penetrate platitude, obfuscation and self-righteousness

a daunting, hostile, unrepentant subject.

With Bush, the task would be to penetrate platitude, obfuscation and self-righteousness. Where Nixon's final defence rested on his lack of a "corrupt motive", Bush would certainly argue that through the past eight years his motives have been uniformly noble. He possesses a moral certainty, despite the clearest evidence to the contrary, that not only were all his actions correct, but that "history" will prove him right. He is utterly without self-doubt or second thoughts. The smoke screen of Bush's motives could never be penetrated by high-volume accusation that is so common on American television.

We hear a lot from his apologists that he is another Harry Truman. America's 33rd president, who dropped the atomic bombs, took the country into Korea and had a public approval rating at the end of his presidency that was even lower than Bush's. Later, upon reflection, historians have elevated Truman to the pinnacle of the "near great". But Truman's

transcendent qualities were honesty and good sense. His doctrine of containment protected the democratic West from the Communist East without nuclear war. The Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war does not compare. Perhaps the only link between Bush and Truman is their ordinariness. An interviewer who has any real sense of history could make the Truman argument laughable, but not by laughing out loud. More subtle means would be necessary.

We know now, especially from the work of Robert Dallek, that in the last year of his tenure, Nixon was emotionally disturbed by the demise of his presidency, receding into alcohol and self-pity. Bush, by contrast, seems emotionally and psychologically disconnected from the damage he has wrought. He seems pathologically incapable of admitting error. That is intriguing to the clever interviewer. How does any man disengage himself so totally from the carnage all around him? Is it the psychology of the reformed alcoholic? Or the theology of the born-again, messianic Christian? How could that wall be penetrated? And if it were penetrated, would anything interesting emerge on the other side?

Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps there is an emotional side to Bush that we have never seen in his public persona. The success of the "Bush interviews", if they were ever to take place, would depend on the interviewer and the potential for enlightenment. Through toughness and cajoling and mastery, a subtle interviewer might conceivably tap into remorse, regret and even guilt that we have never seen and guide the pariah of Crawford deftly toward an epiphany. In his profession of faith, the hope for redemption and salvation might prove to be a useful lever. His relationship with his father, especially as it might have played into Bush's decision to invade Iraq and complete his father's work, needs a full exposition. The psychology of the reformed alcoholic might explain his stubbornness and inflexibility. It is precisely the absence of this line of questioning with Nixon — the roots of his personal corruption — that Frost failed the most in 1977.

Were Bush to have a Nixonian epiphany, such an interview might again garner an audience of 57m and maybe even spawn another play with Shakespearean pretensions. But if we were to get the same old questions, the same old techniques and the same old answers three years from now, I doubt that anyone would be interested. **E**

*Frost/Nixon is out on 23 January*