

Charles B. Seib

The Richard Nixon Show

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Richard Nixon has had the last laugh in his long and bitter feud with the press.

By selling his story of his presidency and its disastrous end to David Frost and friends he has rejected the news business in favor of show business—and netted upwards of a million dollars in the bargain. He has also pointed up a question that is becoming

The writer is an associate editor of The Post, serving as an internal ombudsman. From time to time he also writes a column on the media.

increasingly thorny in the news business: Should news be bought?

Under the deal with Frost and unnamed associates, Mr. Nixon will be interviewed at San Clemente, and the results will be packaged in four 90-minute TV programs. Since none of the three networks is involved, apparently the show will be peddled to television stations here and abroad for broadcast after the 1976 elections.

The dickering for Nixon's appearance before the cameras had been going on for some weeks before the contract was signed on Aug. 9. It was marked by cagy maneuvers and escalating dollars more appropriate to a professional sports deal than to an ex-President's report to the country.

The first sign that something was in the works came early in the spring when friends hinted that Nixon might be willing to submit to a television interview if the price was right—and the right price was said to be \$250,000.

That trial balloon was shot down by San Clemente, but last month the idea surfaced again in a much more substantial form. It was disclosed that Irving Lazar, Mr. Nixon's agent, had approached CBS with an interview proposition and had been told no thanks. CBS, you will recall, was accused of checkbook journalism when it paid a reported \$100,000 for a pair of dreary hours with the former Nixon chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman.

ABC also said it wasn't interested. Both networks gave the same reason: the Nixon interview would be news and they don't buy news.

A few days later came word that NBC was nibbling. The checkbook journalism charge had been defused, it was thought, by tying the TV deal to completion of Mr. Nixon's written

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memoirs. Memoirs aren't news, was the theory, so paying would be okay. By that time, the reported asking price had reached \$750,000.

A day or two later, NBC announced that it was out of the picture because Lazar was dickering with others who apparently were willing to pay more and who "might be more compatible with the former President's wishes." NBC had made it clear that it would insist on full control, that Watergate would not be off limits, and that it would use film, tapes and other supplementary material in the interviews.

Lazar then confirmed that the NBC deal was off. He said money was the

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reason and that he was working with other parties. He also said the price could go well over \$750,000. A few hours later the deal with Frost was closed.

That sequence illustrates the dilemma the Nixon story raised for television news executives and for the news business generally. It is a widely accepted principle that news organizations do not pay for news. The theory is that as soon as money enters the picture, the source is motivated by a desire for personal gain rather than a desire to inform the public, and the news is therefore tainted.

That is why CBS and ABC said no. The reasoning was that if Nixon discussed Watergate—and it was inconceivable that anyone would be interested if he didn't—the interview would unquestionably produce news and therefore shouldn't be paid for.

NBC thought the tie-in with the

memoirs would be a way around the taboo. Other Presidents have published their memoirs and some have made a great deal of money doing it. So what is so different about Mr. Nixon contracting to sell his memoirs to television?

A good try, but the fact is that big money is not being paid here because anyone thinks the public will be enthralled by excerpts from the book Mr. Nixon is writing. The payoff will be Richard Nixon before the cameras. And that will be news by anybody's definition.

So the networks are now out of the picture, and show business rather than the news business will preside over the spoken recollections, reflections and justifications of the most controversial President in the nation's history.

Frost says that Mr. Nixon will have no editorial control over the interviews—that he will not screen questions nor have the right to edit the material before broadcast. He also says that no subject will be barred.

Like all entrepreneurs, Frost and his associates are taking a risk. It might turn out that the public will decide it doesn't need or want six hours of Richard Nixon on Richard Nixon. As CBS's experience with Haldeman demonstrated, paid interviews tend to bog down in generalized pap and tiresome self-justification.

Despite Frost's skill as a talk show host, the Nixon interview may produce a great national yawn. But that is something that will be decided in the crucible of commercial television. If the Richard Nixon series flops—well, that's show business.