

Nixon, Haldeman, Frost

post 2/15/78

One of the pleasures in the routine of the week is carefully arranging the Sunday papers in a certain, never-changing order and then leafing through the sections. My method takes me through the main news, the editorial pages, the arts and drama. Finally, when all else lies scattered about on the living room floor encircling my chair, I settle down to linger over two special parts of the various papers.

The New York Times Magazine and its Book Review are fixed habits of a lifetime, still compulsory reading, the essential way to end the weekly ritual. Thus, last Sunday morning and turning, at the end, to the Book Review.

Emblazoned across all of page two was an ad for a new book and there, standing out amid the bold type, was a photograph of Richard Nixon. His mouth was open, giving him a rather slack appearance, and he was staring wildly.

The book is "I Gave Them a Sword," and promises to give anyone who cares the "behind the scenes of the Nixon interviews." David Frost is the author.

My first inclination was to turn the page quickly, in hopes that all the unpleasantness it instantly stirred would pass. But, I confess, a morbid fascination drew me to the blurbs strategically stationed about the page by the ad-man's art:

"Hard-nosed reportage is lifted to a level that transforms the book into a fragment of living history."

And:

"A fascinating look at modern, high-stakes media entrepreneurship."

And:

"There were two behind-the-scenes dramas involved in the international telecasts of Frost's series of interviews with Richard Nixon in 1977. One was the private drama of Nixon's decision to go ahead with the interviews, knowing the tremendous inner pressures they would entail. This story may never be known. The other was Frost's own story and his decision to pull off the journalistic coup against high odds . . . by getting Nixon's signature on a deal."

High odds, and journalistic coup, eh? The deal, you might remember, was for Nixon to give his version to Frost for a tidy \$600,000. What else he gets for a few hours before the TV cameras doesn't seem quite clear. One account tells us he's to receive 10 percent of the profits above production costs. Another says

he's to get 20 percent of the profits. Frost himself has been quoted as saying that could net Nixon an extra sum ranging from a quarter of a million to half a million dollars.

Some deal, some journalistic coup.

That almost ruined the morning, but not quite.

Monday's mail brought a flyer from another publisher, Grosset & Dunlap. There, in profile, was another photograph of Nixon, but this one contemplative, serious, the author at repose. For this blurb was about his effort. Coming in May, at a price of \$20, was "a book without precedent." If that weren't enough, the publisher went on to say:

"In a book both extraordinary and historic, Richard Milhous Nixon sets forth his own personal story."

This version of the truth, we are assured, "will be eagerly devoured by countless persons

Haynes Johnson

TRUTH

who know that the real story has not yet been told and who demand a full accounting."

The afternoon paper arrived, bringing more evidence of historic untold stories about to be told. A promotion ad beat the drums: "The tape gap? Deep Throat? Nixon's role? Look for startling revelations in H. R. Haldeman's 'The Ends of Power.'"

Now here's drama, to be sure. "The revelations in 'The Ends of Power' are sure to make world-wide headlines," we're informed. What's more, these revelations "are of such magnitude that The New York Times Syndicate, distributors of the series, have adopted security measures comparable to those used during the acquisition and editing of the Pentagon Papers."

Enhancing the magnitude of the disclosures was a story, in the same edition, that began in melodramatic fashion like some new chapter out of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew":

"It was after 11 p.m. when the Toyota stopped in a raging blizzard at its secret destination, a brightly lit building several hours from

and . . . Hype

New York City. Two men in heavy overcoats climbed from the car carrying armloads of slick printed paper. They hurried past armed security guards and through the doors, where they gave their bundles to craftsmen who would work all night. Turning to go, one man whispered: 'We'll be back in the morning.' It was just another night in the book publishing business. . . ."

That night, at home, and still no escape: the day's mail brings the Book-of-the-Month Club News, listing its spring selection. Haldeman: "The Ends of Power." His is the only book "that does justice to the break-in and the cover-up and all the mad thinking and scheming that went into that great national nightmare."

Photograph, Haldeman, caption underneath: "He turned himself into a 'Nazi' for the sake of the President." Photograph, Haldeman and Nixon, caption: "He felt that the President's paranoid impulses would be the death of him if they ever achieved full expression."

Driving to work yesterday morning a voice on the classical music station interrupted to say, in sepulchral tones: "What was Watergate? Who was Deep Throat?" Hype for Haldeman. At the office, Grosset & Dunlap's catalogue extols, in slick paper, its forthcoming publication with world-wide serialization and foreign rights already sold in 10 countries. Hype for Nixon: "The most complete, revealing discussions of the entire 'Watergate' affair that will ever be told. By the only man who could tell it."

When will it all end?

So, what we have now is Frost giving us the inside story about Nixon, Haldeman telling what Nixon really did, and Nixon revealing what they *all* did. And all of it true, of course, and all of them cashing in on each other—and, in the end, from us.

At least, they hope so.

Freedom of choice may be a tattered concept these days, but it still exists. Here's one citizen who pledges not to buy, nor contribute in any way, to any of these offerings.

Besides, I'm already deeply into a great new book. It's Jackson Bates' splendid biography of Samuel Johnson, that ennobling figure whose life was a testament to triumph over adversity and the most rugged sense of bedrock integrity. What a spectacle this would have presented for his matchless talents. "Why, Sir," I can hear him say, "you do remember what I said about scoundrels?"
