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A Varied Encore on Watergate

The Watergate story has swollen to the point of dwarfing the event itself. But, believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen, there really was a break-in and an attempted bugging of the Democratic National Committee.

Unanswered questions of no small import arose from that event. So the recurrence of Watergate stories is not merely a publicity gimmick, or media hype, but an example of how the press and television work in a free society.

I am impelled to make those observations by the flood of Watergate stories that suddenly appeared over the weekend. The occasion was the debut, this week, of the series of four interviews being done with former President Nixon by the British television journalist and producer David Frost.

Before going further I must say that I have known Frost for many years. I helped him a bit in recruiting researchers for the Nixon interviews, and I saw some of the early exchanges.

My strong impression is that the Frost endeavor has been a serious effort to develop a full picture of the Nixon presidency—including warts. One of Frost's research assistants, Robert Zelnick, did an extraordinary job of bringing together the vast corpus of foreign-policy actions undertaken by the Nixon administration and the curiously slim record in domestic policy.

Another assistant, James Reston Jr., did an equally fine job in summarizing and identifying for questions the major issues in Watergate. In the course of his work, Reston developed previously unpublished information on several White House tapes.

In particular, he learned of a conversation between Nixon and a White House politico, Charles Colson, on June 20, 1972, three days after the arrest of the Watergate burglars. The tapes seemed to show that Nixon knew of the break-in within a few days after the event, and perhaps before.

Inevitably the course of the Frost interviews moved from very low to very high gear. At the outset Frost was chiefly concerned with getting a feel for his man, without worrying too much about substance. Thus in the first interview, Frost let Nixon run on for 23 minutes in response to a question about why he did not destroy the tapes. But having begun at a relaxed pace, the process led to a sharpening and tightening of questions, ending up in genuine confrontation on Watergate in the final sessions.

Inevitably, too, networks, magazines and papers with a strong interest in the Watergate story were bound to keep an eye on the Frost operation. They did so in different ways.

Time magazine, for example, early on established a cooperative relationship with Frost. Time reporters were given special access, and while there may not have been a firm commitment, there

seemed to be an understanding that there would be a cover story on the Nixon interview.

The Washington Post worked against that grain. It early published gossip disparaging the Frost interviews. It acquired and published internal communications between Frost and his assistants. It acquired, along with Newsweek and The New York Times, and published, tapes of presidential conversations, which included some material unearthed by Reston and some additional matter.

One consequence is that we now know a little bit more about Nixon's involvement in the Watergate break-in. It is clear—though it was hard not to believe before—that he was aware of some hanky-panky very early. For junkies hooked on the subject, that is something.

Moreover, there remains the major question of why the Watergate break-

in occurred at all. What information was being sought? And on whose behalf? As long as those questions abide, some hard-working and tenacious journalists will be pushing to learn more. They will work in their own ways, often trying to attract favorable publicity, and at other times acting in a rivalrous spirit toward competitors.

The process will not be neat or edifying, and there will be heavy dependence on interested parties. No reporter will know everything or be completely objective; still less any paper, magazine or network. But the intense competition among a large number of journalists working for a score of different outlets offers the assurance that there will be a rich diet of information, a pluralism of interpretation, and an avoidance of what is death for a democratic society: a single, unquestioned orthodoxy.

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