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The Same Old Nixon Once More

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Now we know. Richard Nixon has confessed. He is guilty, not as charged, not as he is so widely believed to be by so many, not as the master conspirator plotting his crimes, but as an old friend betrayed. He is guilty of a kind heart.

That, in essence, is what Nixon offered by way of explanation, if not defense, last night. He entered our living rooms again after an absence (not coincidentally) of a thousand days to the accompaniment of drums, literal and figurative — the drums of intense publicity and the drums signalling his return on camera.

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Then he proceeded, for the next 90 minutes, to give us all the familiar Nixon responses we have all seen for more than generation. Those advance reports about Nixon being broken — or shattered — or even shaken by the withering interrogation of David Frost are in error. Nixon is in control throughout. He offers little that is new, and less that is of material substance.

Richard Nixon last night stirred all the old memories, and employed all the old devices. He evoked eerie echoes of his Checkers speech, and of countless Nixon performances over the years since then:

He was willing to admit mistakes, and more than his share.

But he didn't commit any crimes. He didn't commit any impeachable offenses. He didn't participate in an obstruction of justice. Not in his view, at least. What he did was done in the best interests of his friends — and, in the end, of his country.

He had a deep regret about it all. But he wasn't going to blame anybody else. He was going to take it like a man. If "they" wanted to get down and grovel on the floor — well, that wasn't the way of Richard Nixon.

At the beginning of last night's TV program, David Frost stepped forward with a prologue about Nixon's fall, which he correctly called the most dramatic in our political history. Then he asked:

"Why? What went wrong with the Nixon presidency? How did the grand design get mixed up with domestic abuses, great and petty?"

We don't learn the answers to those questions.

What we see instead is something else. It is a pathetic picture that flashes across our TV screens. There is the former President of the United States, parrying questions about criminality with rationalizations about his real motives, his real intent, and all for the price of what probably will be a million-dollar deal.

The Nixon we see looks remarkably unchanged. His jowls are more pronounced, his voice tones even deeper than remembered, but he shows scarce evidence of the scars he carries. He comes on somber, serious, a study in blue, but poised and ready.

The only traces of change are in his speaking delivery: He slurs his words at times, he stammers more often; uh, uh, uh, and ah, ah, ah, are heard throughout.

To this viewer, the most fascinating moment in the show comes as Nixon shifts the blame from himself to his most trusted aides, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. He kills them with kindness and high unction.

"I didn't want to have them sacked as Eisenhower sacked (Sherman) Adams," he says, after saying how heart-rending that experience was for him.

He recites the emotion of telling his aides they must go.

They agreed to leave, Nixon tells us, and then, in his defense, "so it was late, but I did it. I cut off one arm and then cut off the other arm."

Yet he carefully lets us know that he believes them guilty. In the single most arresting passage of the interview, Nixon says:

"Now, I can be faulted, I recognize it. Maybe I defended them too long; maybe I tried to help them too much, but I was concerned about them. I was concerned about their families. I felt that they in their hearts felt they were not guilty. I felt they ought to have a chance at least to prove that they were not guilty, and I didn't want to be in the position of just sawing them off in that way."

Then, his peroration:

"And, I suppose you could sum it all up the way one of your British prime ministers summed it up, Gladstone, when he said that 'the first requirement for a prime minister is to be a good butcher.' Well, I think the great story as far as summary of Watergate is concerned, I, ah, I did some of the big things rather well. I screwed up terribly in what was a little thing, and it became a big thing."

At this point Richard Nixon delivers his own epitaph.

"But I will have to admit," he says, "I wasn't a good butcher."

After all the testimony, all the tapes, all the years of division and scandal and acrimony, that's what Watergate comes down to him. He wasn't a ruthless enough butcher to carve up his friends.

Throughout his first televised interview Nixon appears basically at ease. He wears the mantle of the experienced elder statesman, wronged, misunderstood, given to mistakes, but not about to demean himself by descending to the level of his enemies.

The program was billed as a dramatic and historic encounter between Nixon and his opponent, the relentless David Frost. It was nothing of the sort. Frost's manner was laconic and low-keyed throughout. He did ask his questions, but he seemed almost diffident in doing so.

By the very end of the program, Frost looks as though he's swept up by Nixon's responses. After Nixon describes the maudlin scene where he and the others from Congress vent their emotions on the day he resigns, Frost appears drained emotionally. It's Frost who seems to need the reassurance.

"This has, ah . . . this has been more — " he begins, fumbling for words.

In the ultimate irony of the evening, it's Richard



Nixon who comes to David Frost's defense.

"Been tough for you?" Nixon says, smiling a bit.

Frost, stammering, answers: "Well, no, but I was going to say that, ah, I feel we've ...

Again, Nixon speaks up confidently. "Covered a lot of ground," he said.

"... been through life almost, rather than an interview," Frost says in tones of awe.

The tables have turned. Frost had met his match.

A younger Richard Nixon came over the screen in 1952 in another famous television appearance — his Checkers speech during the election campaign that year