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Nixon Relives the Agony

He Speaks of His 'Punishment'

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Richard Nixon, professing regret that he was unable to clear his name "through the agony of a trial," said last night that his life became "almost unbearable" after he resigned the presidency in disgrace.

"No one in the world and no one in our history could know how I felt," the former President, his lips pursed and quivering, told David Frost in the fourth of their nationally televised conversations.

His description of physical and mental collapse, of "life without purpose," was in indirect response to Americans who, Nixon said, understandably were incensed that he was "able to get off with a pardon."

He justified, as politics-as-usual in Maryland, former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew's acceptance of cash kickbacks from contractors and said he could "well understand" that Agnew had not spoken to him since resigning in 1973 out of bitterness that Nixon had not "put the arm on" the attorney general to go easy on Agnew.

Nixon described a plan to launch a Watergate defense fund for H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, once his senior aides, with $100,000 of a secret campaign contribution from the late industrialist, Howard R. Hughes.

He insisted he had been unaware in 1970 that an aide had fraudulently backdated the

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deed for a gift of pre-presidential papers to the National Archives in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to help Nixon avoid payment of $432,787 in federal income taxes.

The former President defended his once-covert attempt to undermine the Chilean government of the late Marxist president, Salvador Allende, by saying that a right-wing dictatorship in Chile was preferable to a left-wing democracy in terms of U.S. security.

In phrases, gestures and tones at odds with the textbook image of an elder statesman, Nixon spoke of having counseled Agnew to avoid prison through "the resignation option," of an unfulfilled pledge to pardon Haldeman and Ehrlichman should they get "a bum rap" at the Watergate coverup trial; of a denial, which he challenged any listener to disprove, that he had "a whole bundle of cash" hidden away somewhere; and particularly of his resentment of the American press, which he characterized as "sanctimonious."

"I don't want 'em repressed," he said of the news media, "but believe me, when they take me on or when they take any public figure on — Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative — I think the public figure ought to come back and crack 'em right in the puss."

Nixon's harshest words were reserved for Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, whose reporting on Watergate won a Pulitzer Prize for the Washington Post and led to their best-selling book describing in detail "The Final Days" of the Nixon presidency.

Refusing to use the names of the two reporters, Nixon called them and their book "trash." He said he could understand and even "respect" Woodward and Bernstein for seeking professional advancement by "pandering" to a liberal audience, "but when it comes to fictionalizing fact and doing it in a vicious way, that I will not forget and I consider it to be contemptible journalism."

He said he had not read "The Final Days" and that, "All I say is Mrs. Nixon read it and her stroke came three days later." Moments later, Nixon withdrew the suggestion that the book, in which his wife was described as sexually estranged and increasingly reliant on liquor for solace, had caused her illness.

Nixon did confirm to Frost one of the most dramatic disclosures by Woodward and Bernstein in their book — the tearful scene in which Nixon and Henry Kissinger, then the secretary of state, knelt together in prayer two days before the President resigned.

Amid reminiscences in the privacy of the Lincoln sitting room of the White House, "we were crying," Nixon recounted. "Not in a, not, you know, sobbing, but it was an emotional moment because we knew it was the end of a long relationship and the beginning of something new." On impulse, he confided that he had faced difficult decisions before by kneeling in prayer at the table where Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Nixon said, and he invited Kissinger to join him then after saying:

"I'm a Quaker and you're a Jew and neither of us is very orthodox,

but I think both of us probably have a deeper religious sensitivity than some of those that are, are so loudly proclaiming it all the time."

Nixon said he later telephoned Kissinger and asked that he keep the incident secret.

By the former President's account, he agonized over whether to formally accept the pardon that former President Ford extended to him on Sept. 9. 1974, one month after his resignatiom, because he knew that Ford and the nation would interpret the act as an admission of guilt.

He said he had told Herbert Miller, one of his lawyers, "I'd just as soon go through the agony of a trial and, so that we can scrape away at least all the false charges and fight it out on those in which there may be a doubt and then I'll take whatever the consequences are."

But he signed the document, Nixon said, because Miller persuaded him there was no chance of a fair trial and because the former President was "so emotionally drawn, mentally beaten down, physically not up to par that I said, 'Well, okay, I'll do it.'"

Nixon told Frost that he had felt as if he faced "life without purpose, not having anything to live for" once he secluded himself at his estate in San Clemente.

Nixon emerged from self-exile to submit to the interviews only under an arrangement that will enrich him by at least $600,000 and perhaps as much as $1 million. But, in a long soliloquy, he said Americans who envy those able to live in languor at "international watering places" are misguided.

"They don't know life," he said, "because what makes life mean something is purpose, a goal, the battle, the struggle — even if you don't win it."

His recollection of an anguished, grudging decision to accept a full pardon stood as a counterpoint to the attitudes Nixon displayed as he recited, without apparent regret, traumatic events that preceded his final days in the White House.

As edited by Frost, the most striking illustrations of the former President's views on official mores dealt with the disgrace of Agnew and the almost cavalier uses of secret stores of political money.

Nixon said that Elliot L. Richardson, then the attorney general, and Henry E. Petersen, then the assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division of the Justice Department, informed him on Sept. 25, 1973, that the charges against Agnew were serious, apt to be corroborated and of sufficient magnitude that he should serve time in prison.

Agnew insisted he was innocent of bribery charges, Nixon told Frost.

As the former President described it, Agnew did not dispute the evidence that contractors who had done business with Baltimore county, when Agnew was its executive, or Maryland, when he was its governor, had "contributed to expenses" of Agnew, in keeping with "common practice."

But Nixon said Agnew had assured the President "he never did anything while he was vice president for which he received any funds" and that he had not accepted kickbacks "from somebody who would not have otherwise been entitled" to a government contract in Maryland.

Which version, Agnew's or the prosecutors', had Nixon accepted, Frost wondered.

"I was very pragmatic," Nixon replied. "In my view, it didn't really make any difference." He explained that it had been clear from the attitude of Richardson and Petersen that the vice president "was, frankly, going to get it. So, under the circumstances, it became an irrelevant point. I'm not going to sit here and judge Spiro Agnew."

The former President said he had agreed with the former vice president's expectation that a trial would amount to "a kangaroo court," in part because Agnew had been Nixon's point man in an attack on the political left and the news media and was never "one of the liberals' favorite pin-up boys."

Accordingly, Nixon said, it was up to Agnew to bargain a solution without a prison term "and, therefore, the resignation option became absolutely indispensable."

As for the planned defense fund for his two former aides, which they spurned, Nixon said it had shown "what a good friend" he had in C. G. (Bebe) Rebozo, the Miami banker, that Rebozo had talked the President out of offering Haldeman and Ehrlichman personal funds in 1973.

Rebozo said, "Never," Nixon recalled, and proposed that the President use $100,000 secretly passed to Rebozo by Howard Hughes and, as Nixon put it, "other campaign funds that were possibly available for this, which we don't need to go into."

At one point, Nixon said that the Hughes money had been a campaign contribution, arguing that "if it had been a gift, why Bebe would have had it invested in something and we'd made money out of it or something like that."

Moments later, Nixon amended the statement, saying he never had "accepted any kind of gift like that because it would compromise me in dealing with potential government contractors."

Toward the end of the program last night, Nixon summed up his ignominy by saying he could understand those who say, "Gee whiz, it just isn't fair, you know, for an individual to be, get off with a pardon simply because he happens to have been President."

In mitigation, he offered this self-appraisal:

"I can only say that no one in the world and no one in our history could know how I felt. No one can know how it feels to resign the presidency of the United States. Is that punishment enough? Oh, probably not. But whether it is or isn't, as I have said earlier in our interview, we have to live with not only the past but for the future and I don't know what the future brings. But whatever it brings, I'll still be fighting."