

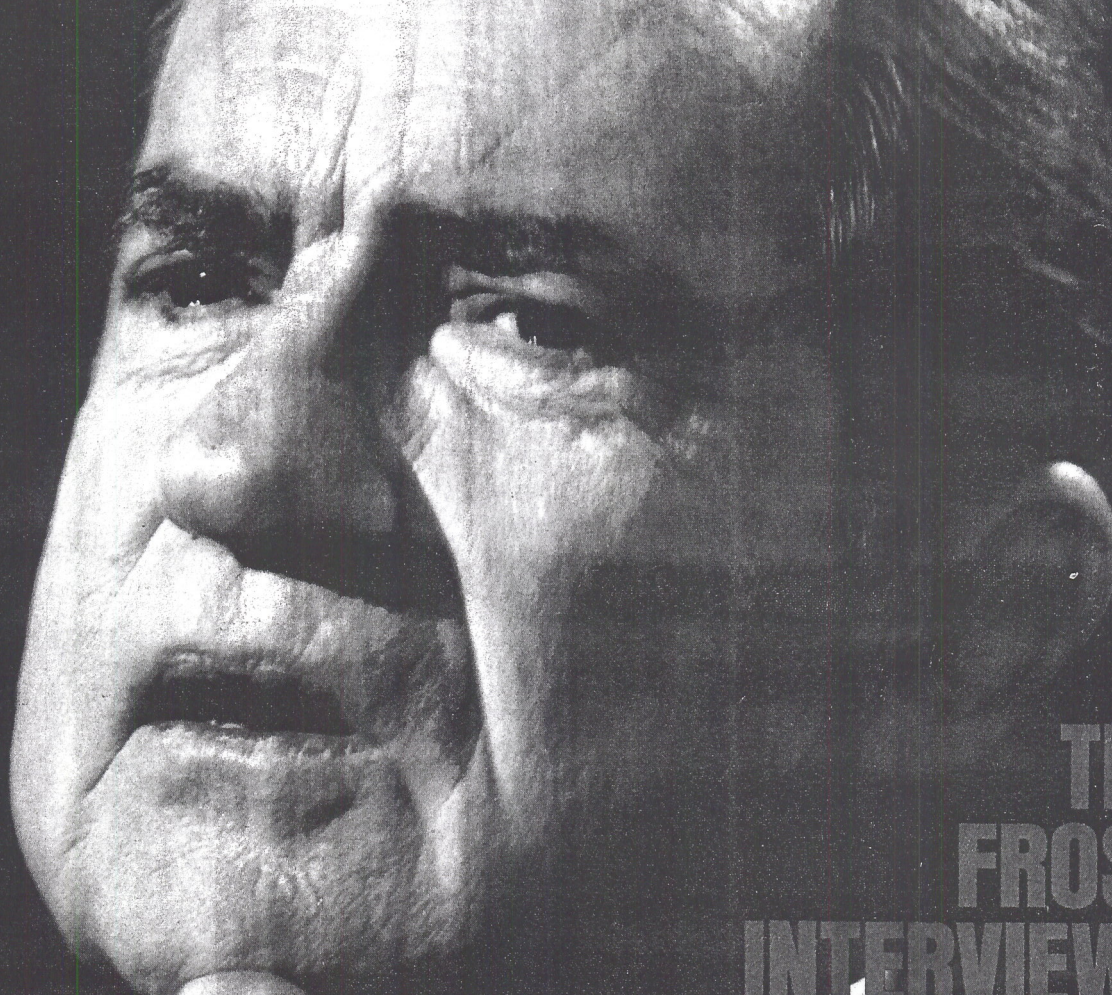
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TIME



THE
FROST
INTERVIEWS

NIXON TALKS



He is back among us. And, as always, in a memorable manner, both painful and poignant, sometimes illuminating, usually self-serving. The once too-familiar face of Richard Nixon re-enters the homes of America this week for 90 minutes of dramatic television.

The only U.S. President to be forced from office makes his first extensive accounting of his tumultuous presidency. He does so not in a court of law, as did his highest aides. Nor at a Senate impeachment trial—he resigned to avoid that. Instead, nearly three years after a helicopter lifted him off the White House lawn and into seclusion at his San Clemente retreat, he appears in a four-part TV series, *The Nixon Interviews*. One obvious reason: he will get \$600,000 and a share of the show's worldwide profits. Another reason: his hope that he can change the people's perception of him, perhaps even resume a responsible role in public life.

For David Frost, 38, British show-business celebrity, talk-show host and interviewer, who stands to make at least \$1 million, the program represents a coup. He outbid a U.S. television network and countless other news organizations to sign the exclusive contract with Nixon, then patched together a network of his own.

Whatever the motives of the fallen President and the enterprising TV showman, the historical perspective is extraordinary. For the first time, Nixon is facing a lone inquisitor who is under no restrictions on what he can ask about those presidential years. A public that may have grown quite weary of Richard Nixon can hardly deny its fearful fascination with, and continuing curiosity about, the man who became and still remains America's anti-hero.

Confronted with the precise, tough questions on Watergate he had long evaded, would Nixon continue to stonewall? Or would he break under the pressure of so public a forum and the interrogator's grilling? Would he finally do now what he might have done some four years ago: admit with genuine humility that he had conspired with his aides in a vain effort to keep the scandal from destroying his presidency? Or would the politically inexperienced Frost prove

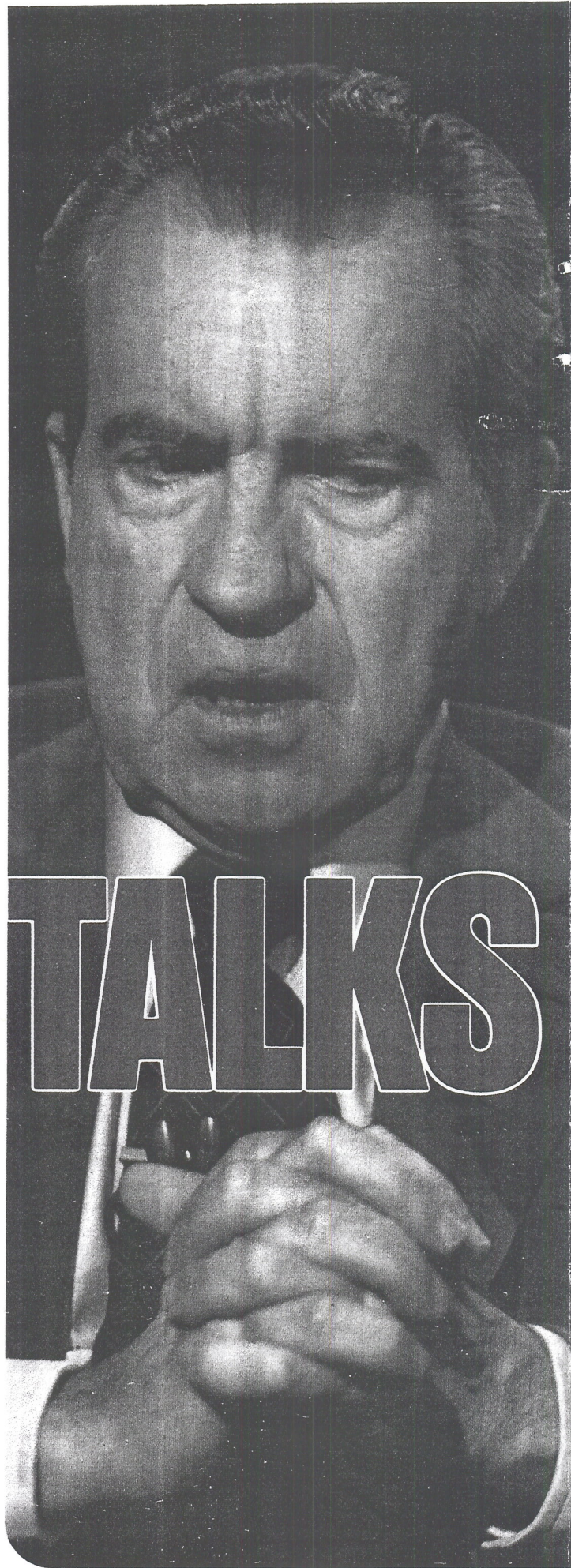
COVER STORY

NIXON

a patsy and let Nixon filibuster with those same skillful diversions that always seemed to be answers but never were?

After 20 hours of an agreed-upon 24 hours of taping, from which the four 90-minute shows would be edited, there was real fear among Frost's team of researchers and production experts that Nixon had indeed snowed their man. Those early tapings had ranged across Nixon's tough Viet Nam War policies, his attempts to stifle dissent at home, his pioneering drive to reach out to China, his opening of the long road toward strategic arms limitations with the Soviet Union, his peace initiatives in the Middle East, abuses of power, and Spiro Agnew. Through it all, the resilient Nixon sometimes ate up valuable minutes with long, dull answers. But there were also many astute replies, carrying a ring of self-assurance and authority. Declared one technician on the California TV set after a Nixon performance: "If he keeps talking like that, I may vote for him."

Indeed, Nixon was so fully in command as the show-down session on Watergate approached that Frost's producer, John Birt, walked up to the partygoing interviewer before Frost's own birthday bash in Los Angeles and declared, "David, I don't think you're up to this." His assessment galvanized Frost. In the days that followed, Frost pored over his



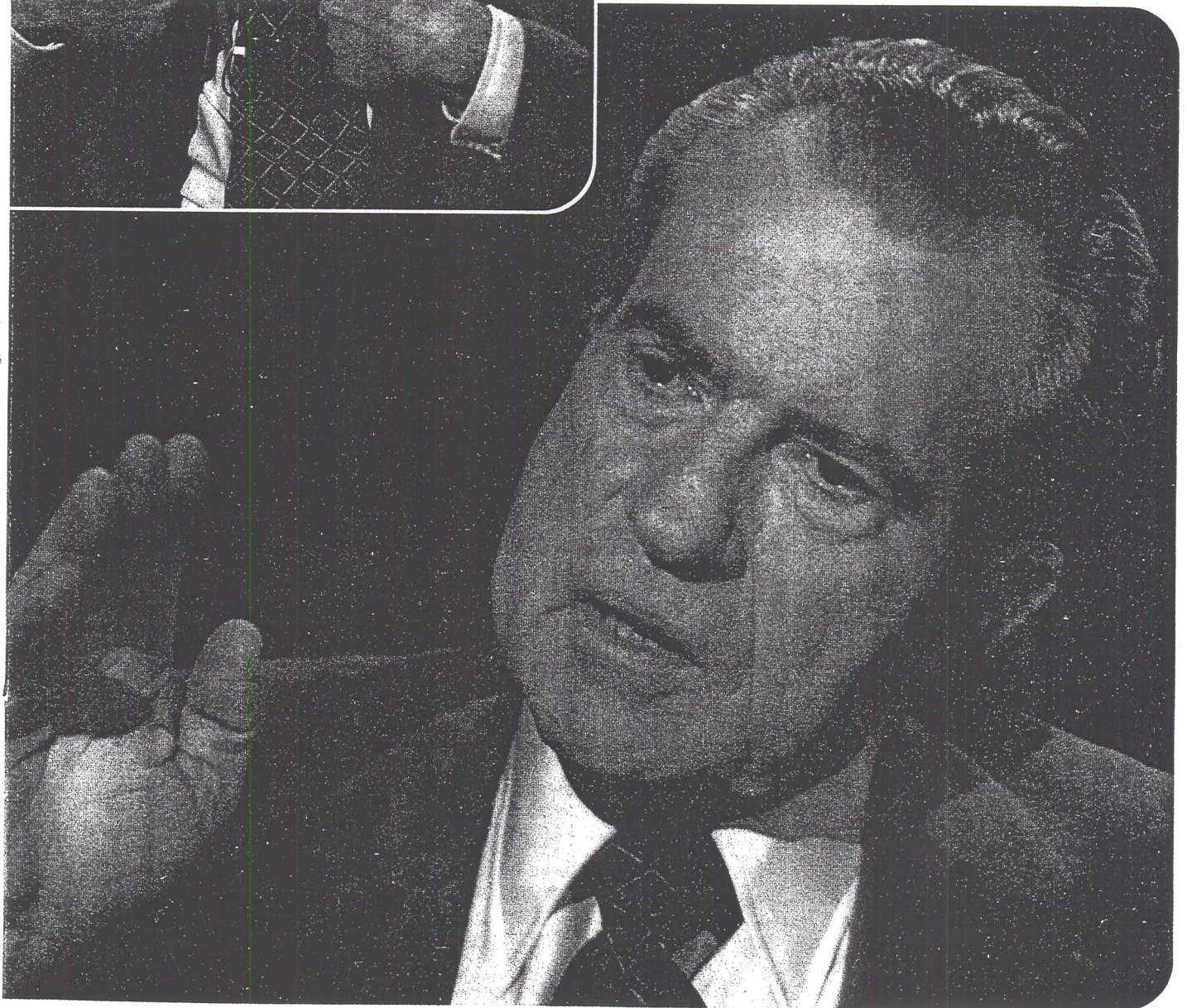


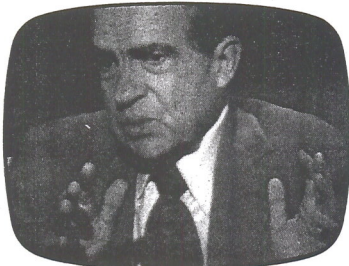
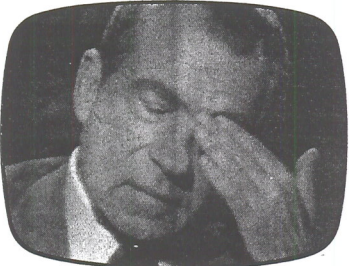
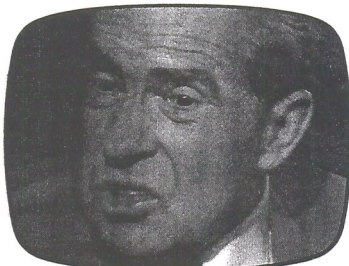
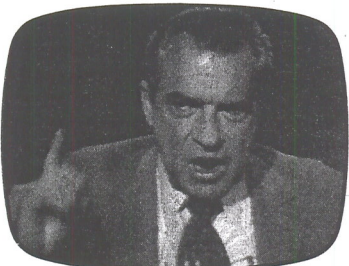
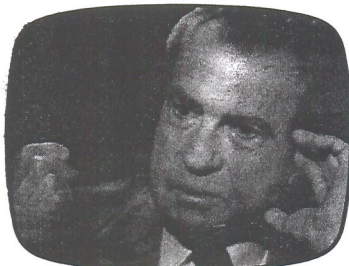
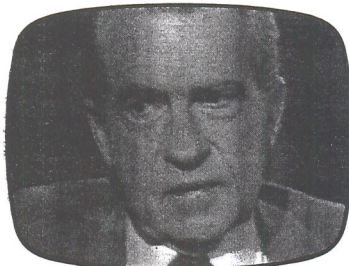
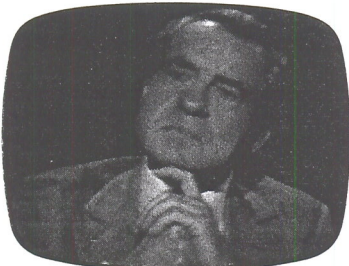
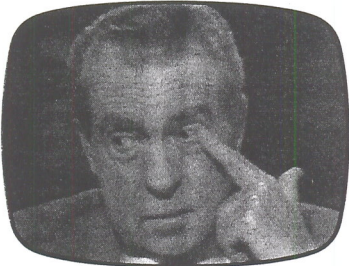
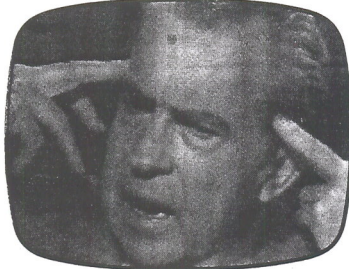
briefing books and endured hours of sessions in which a staffer attempted to answer each Frost question the way Nixon might. With his homework properly done, Frost proved that he was indeed a formidable adversary for Nixon. The British charmer turned into an English bulldog.

The result, on 145 U.S. TV stations and 14 foreign outlets this week, is a highly emotional encounter in which the many Nixons are brought to the surface. He is alternately haughty, patronizing, incisive, rambling, peevish—and, finally, subdued. Under Frost's barrage, Richard Nixon's Watergate defenses are shattered.

The showdown comes in a tranquil setting—a large, split-level seaside house in Monarch Bay, some ten miles north of San Clemente. The principals sit in beige easy chairs in front of two large bookcases brought into the living room specially as backdrops for the show. (The books are mostly historical reference works, selected to establish an atmosphere in which Nixon would be comfortable.) Frost is seated to favor his best profile. Heavy curtains obscure the rugged coast and the sunny Pacific. Nixon looks a bit older than in his White House days but surprisingly strong and tanned—a daily round of golf has become part of his routine. He brims over with confidence. He appears far more presidential than in those final weary days in the White House.

Frost begins gently, asking Nixon to characterize his role in Watergate. Assured but wary, Nixon defers. He says he





would rather answer Frost's specific questions. They follow rapidly, as Frost turns chilly. What did Nixon really say to his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, during the notorious 18½-minute gap on an Oval Office tape recording made on the morning of June 20, 1972? That was only three days after the Watergate burglary, and the vacationing Nixon had just returned to Washington.

Nixon replies calmly that he merely ordered Haldeman to launch "a public relations offensive on what the other side is doing." That same day the Democrats had filed a \$1 million lawsuit against Nixon's re-election committee for the raid in the night. Nixon's explanation meshes neatly with a note Haldeman made at the time about the conversation. It said: "What is our counterattack? P.R. offensive to top this."

Frost looks at his clipboard. Why, then, did Nixon tell another high aide, Charles Colson, that very afternoon that "we're just going to leave this where it is—with the Cubans"? That was a reference to the four Cuban-Americans already charged with the burglary. And why did Nixon also admit to Colson, "At times I just stonewall it" on Watergate?

Nixon shows no surprise that Frost had access to this previously undisclosed Colson tape. It was subpoenaed by Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski for use against Nixon's top aides in their criminal trial, but was not put into evidence. The implication of the tape is that Nixon—on his first day at work after the burglary—was already directing a cover-up effort. Now, for the first time in the days of interviewing, Nixon's speech begins to falter.

"My motive in everything I was saying or certainly thinking at the time was not to try to cover up a criminal action but . . . to be sure that as far as any slip-over—or should I say slop-over, I think, would be a better word—any slop-over in a way that would damage innocent people." He begins to ramble. "We weren't going to allow people in the White House, people in the committee [his re-election committee] at the highest levels who were not involved to be smeared by the whole thing. In other words, we were trying to politically contain it."

As he has done before, Nixon is clinging to the frail legal distinction that he was not intent on covering up any criminal acts by his men, which would be a crime in itself, but merely working to avoid what he contends would have been unjustified political criticism of the White House and his re-election committee. Understandably, Frost does not buy that.

Did not Nixon go far beyond a political act in directing his aides to get the CIA to ask the FBI to stop following certain leads in its official investigation of Watergate? Nixon can no longer deny he did so, since the celebrated June 23, 1972, "smoking pistol" tape shows conclusively that he did.

For the first time, Nixon, his taut face betraying his discomfort, admits publicly that his repeated claim that he was only trying to keep the FBI out of national security matters is "untrue." Indeed, it is obvious that what he sought to stop was the FBI's tracing of money found on the Watergate burglars back to his political committee. Nixon concedes: "It was a grievous mistake to have gotten the CIA involved in this thing."

But, Nixon insists, this was not a criminal act. He did not at that time know, he claims, that his aides had been involved in planning or directing the burglary.

Frost pounces. "But surely, in all you've just said, you have proved exactly that that was the case, that there was a cover-up of criminal activity because you've already said, and the record shows you knew, that Hunt and Liddy [E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, who had served on Nixon's secret White House plumbers' team] were involved . . . you knew that, in fact, criminals would be protected."

"Now just a moment," protests Nixon with a fleeting half-smile.

"Period," says Frost.

Speaking slowly as his mind gropes for a way out, Nixon recalls that in a familiar July 6, 1972, conversation, he

told acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray to "conduct your aggressive and thorough investigation." Nixon does not note that this was after the CIA had refused to put its concerns about "national security" in writing, as Gray had insisted. Nixon tells Frost that this FBI go-ahead shows that, whatever he might have said in June, by July he certainly was not obstructing justice.

This puts Nixon in deeper verbal trouble. Declares Frost: "An obstruction of justice is an obstruction of justice if it's for a minute or five minutes, much less the period June 23 to July the fifth." Nixon looks shaken.

Adopting a patronizing tone, Nixon turns lawyer. He says his absence of motive precludes any criminal intent, but then Frost probably has not read the law on obstruction of justice. It is an unfortunate bit of condescension. Just minutes before, on the way to the taping, Frost, at the request of his advisers, had read the law. He surprises Nixon by attacking Nixon's knowledge of the law. Nixon fumbles, explains first that he has not really read the statute since his law-school days, then pulls back further when he has to acknowledge that the law was not written then. Still, he insists, he had no criminal motive.

"The law states," says Frost with emphasis, "that when intent and foreseeable consequences are sufficient, motive is completely irrelevant." Nixon says nothing. He is now subdued, a somewhat forlorn figure who contrasts sharply with the forceful debater whom television viewers see in later programs in the series (which were actually taped earlier).

Throughout Frost's Watergate assault, the old Nixon mannerisms inject an uneasy *déjà vu*. The most discomfiting is his reflexive, contrived smile, flashed when he is under harsh attack. Sometimes his face freezes impassively, his eyelids fluttering. He stutters a bit under stress, and his syntax breaks down. At certain moments his lips shut tight, his mouth seems to shrink.

Frost moves ahead to the renowned tape of March 21, 1973, in which Nixon discusses with Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and John Dean the demands by the convicted Hunt for cash so the burglars could meet legal fees and support their families. If not satisfied, Hunt threatened, he would tell all of "the seamy things" he had done for the White House. As he always has, despite the contrary evidence, Nixon now tells Frost that "March 21 was the date in which the full import, the full impact of the cover-up came to me."

But Frost's staff has uncovered two other tapes of conversations in the White House between Nixon and Colson. (Several other previously unpublished tapes were to become public prior to the airing of Frost's show. They brought little new light to Nixon's cover-up role, but did evoke those improbable and ironic Oval Office days when conversations about tapes were being taped. For example, Nixon to Haldeman on April 26, 1973: "I don't think it should ever get out that we taped this office, Bob. Have we got people that are trustworthy on that? I guess we have.") The Colson tapes are dated Feb. 13 and 14, 1973. On the Feb. 14 tape, Nixon says: "The cover-up is, is the main ingredient . . . That's where we gotta cut our losses. My losses are to be cut. The President's losses got to be cut on the cover-up deal."

Frost's citing of this tape stuns Nixon, who seems hardly to believe he said such things. Frost then starts to unroll a bit of the Feb. 13 tape. Nixon interrupts, asking apprehensively: "It hasn't been published yet, you say?" Replies Frost: "No." "Oh, I just wondered if we'd seen it," Nixon says.

In fact, Nixon has never seen this transcript. (After the session, he asked his aides: "What was that tape? Find out about that tape.") The Colson tapes, of course, contradict Nixon's assertion that he first learned of the cover-up on March 21. Moments later, Frost has Nixon in full retreat. This round ends tartly. "You could state your conclusion and I've stated my view," Nixon says. "So now we go on to the rest of it."

Frost ignores the suggestion. With rapid-fire intensity, he reads a devastating litany of quotes from the March 21 tape, in which Nixon clearly sanctions the payment of hush money to Hunt. On this tape, as it was introduced in the House Judiciary Committee hearings on Nixon's possible impeachment, Nixon says such things as:

"You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash . . .

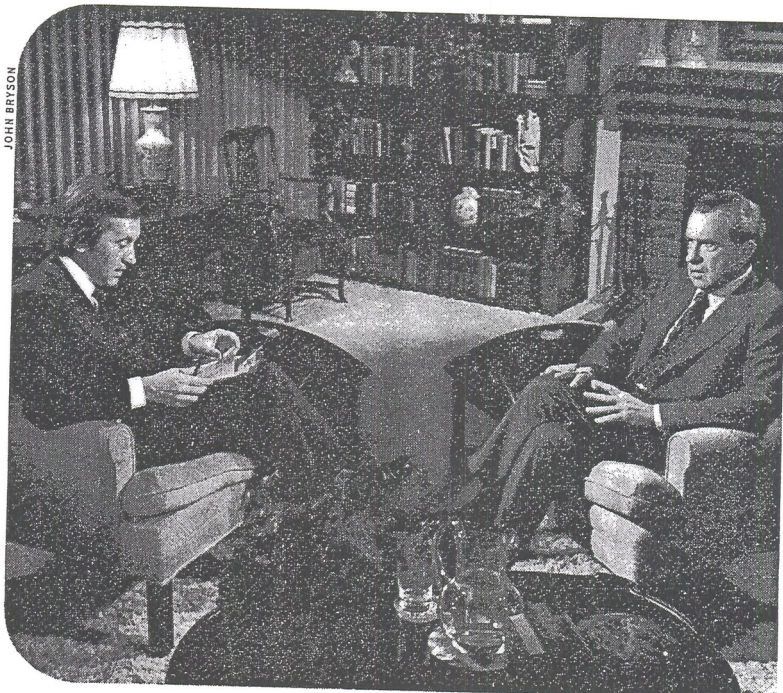
Don't you think you have to handle Hunt's financial situation damn soon? . . . We have to keep the cap on the bottle that much . . . That's why for your immediate things you've got no choice but to come up with the \$120,000, or whatever it is. Right? . . . Would you agree that's a buy-time thing that you damn well better get that done? . . . Get the million bucks, it would seem to me that would be worthwhile . . . You'd better damn well get that done, but fast."

Frost barks out quote after quote. Finally Nixon has heard enough. "Let me, let me just stop you right there," he interrupts. "Right there."

The man who once held the most influential leadership post in the free world is being verbally assaulted by a normally mild-mannered television interviewer. Nixon turns more defensive.

"I could have notes here," he says, gesturing toward Frost's clipboard. "As you know, I've participated in all these broadcasts without a note in front of me." As this type of pounding comes to a merciful end, Nixon looks like a beaten man.

Unknown to television viewers, the Watergate show is the result of two separate tapings. All the above exchanges occurred on April 13; the rest of the Watergate program was recorded



THE SOOTHING SET FOR THE TOUGH TV SHOWDOWN ON WATERGATE
"Let me, let me just stop you right there. Right there."

two days later. According to one of his associates, Nixon did not review his Watergate briefing papers between the two sessions—he was concerned about broader questions. "Much of the detail had been covered on Wednesday," says the aide. Nixon presumed the Friday session would be the toughest of all, since this would be Frost's final chance.

Nixon showed up for this meeting 16 minutes late; it was the first time he had not been punctual. He looked tired and drawn. His combativeness had ebbed. "The questions in this session were more philosophical," in a Nixon man's view; Frost was digging at the immorality underlying Watergate.

Some brief crucial moments of this taping have been kept in strictest secrecy by Frost. According to those who have seen the taping, Nixon's responses provide a dramatic high point in the interviews. Frost feels they add a memorable moment to Nixon's long political life. A Nixon aide, however, thinks "the boss" came off well, though the experience was "draining." If by any chance Nixon comes off too well—in terms of either his answers or his dramatic appeal—there will certainly be Watergate authorities more than eager to set his record straight.

However damning to Nixon's never really credible Watergate defenses, the spectacle of such a once proud man being so humbled in public is certain to create sympathy for him. His

worst moments in the Frost tapings, paradoxically, could conceivably mark the beginning of Nixon's reincarnation as a public figure whose crimes may be tolerated by millions of forgiving—and forgetful—Americans. Such inclinations may well be strengthened by segments of the remaining three 90-minute interviews, which will be aired on May 12, 19 and 25.

Nixon is at his best in the shows that cover the one area in which his presidency is most likely to leave a positive mark on history: foreign affairs. Although it took him four years to disengage from the disastrous war in Viet Nam (14,750 Americans and 107,500 South Vietnamese died in that period), he forcefully defends his punishing prelude to withdrawal. He shows justifiable pride in his overtures to Peking and demonstrates a clarity about SALT that is pertinent to the impending new U.S.-U.S.S.R. negotiations in Geneva.

One fascinating part of the final programs is Nixon's rather paternal attitude toward his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. He describes Kissinger as brilliant but a bit immature, overly concerned about potential power rivals like Texan John Connally, too intrigued by Hollywood and other show-business



NIXON & COLONEL JACK BRENNAN ON THE LINKS NEAR SAN CLEMENTE
No signs of phlebitis, a round almost daily.

celebrities. Nixon claims he was not bothered by some indiscreet criticism from Henry. "An odd man ... unpleasant ... very artificial," Kissinger was once heard to say about Nixon at a dinner in Ottawa when he was unaware that his table microphone was on. Nixon tells Frost with good humor: "He didn't remember to turn off the microphone, but on the other hand, I didn't turn it off in the Oval Office either on occasion." However, Nixon adds, the remarks "drove my family up the wall."

Nixon handles the final show on the many ways other than Watergate in which he had abused his office with a hard-line approach—but without pugnacity. He attempts to explain away calmly such charges as his use of the IRS and FBI to harass those on his "enemies lists," his illegal wiretapping of so-called security risks, his vast underpayment of income taxes. Yet his bitterness erupts at times as he lacerates the *Washington Post* and its Watergate reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, as well as lawyers on the Watergate special prosecutor's staff.

Through much of the early taping, which went far better for Nixon than he could have expected, he was relaxed and affable. When a television light explodes loudly over Frost's head, the interviewer is startled. Frost thinks it could have been a gunshot. Nixon laughs. "With all these Secret Service men around, don't worry about it," he assures Frost. "One of these days I'll give

you a lecture on security." After two hours of one session, Frost suggests that Nixon might want a break. Nixon looks at the technicians, and jokes: "Those guys look pretty well fed to me. They can hold out for another hour." The taping resumes. Nixon is described by one adviser as "ebullient" at his ability to handle the questions. Adds one intimate: "It sounds odd to put it this way, but in a sense he enjoyed it. He rose to the demands."

Nixon had one advantage. By the time the tapings began late in March, he had long been at work on his memoirs, minutely scouring his presidential records with the aid of his personal research staff. Frost assembled his own research group, which amassed an imposing quantity of material. He hired Robert Zelnick, 36, a Washington journalist and lawyer, to head the team. James Reston Jr., 36, co-author with Frank Mankiewicz of *Perfectly Clear: Nixon from Whittier to Watergate* and son of the *New York Times* editor, was assigned to concentrate on Watergate, and Washington Freelance Writer Phil Stanford to focus on abuses of power. John Birt, 32, a London TV news executive, produced and directed the overall production.

It was Zelnick who played Nixon's role in briefing sessions, to the point of using Nixon mannerisms and hand gestures. There was only one Nixon answer for which the briefing staff had not prepared Frost, says Zelnick. It came when Nixon blamed Congress for having failed to resupply the South Vietnamese, and thus causing the fall of Saigon. Says Zelnick: "I didn't think he'd have the balls to say that."

The original plan to do all of the taping in Nixon's San Clemente study had to be abandoned: a test showed that radio signals from the Coast Guard's neighboring navigational-aid transmitters interfered with the TV gear. The seaside home owned by Mr. and Mrs. Harold H. Smith, longtime Nixon supporters, was rented part time for one month at \$6,000. The taping sessions were held three times a week.

For each session, a vigorous Nixon, showing no signs of the phlebitis he suffered in 1974, swept grandly onto the property near Laguna Beach in his Lincoln Continental. His escorting Secret Service agents scoured the house for hidden microphones and made certain that Smith's collection of some 100 rifles and shotguns were all unloaded. Nixon was usually accompanied by the key members of his team: Colonel Jack Brennan, his former White House military aide; Chief Researcher Ken Khachigian; former Speechwriter Ray Price; former Press Assistant Diane Sawyer; and Richard Moore, the former White House aide who was a sympathetic figure in the Senate Watergate hearings. Nixon's people were told what topics would be covered, but never the questions to be asked.

As an assistant director and three cameramen scurried about the taping set, the staffs of both Nixon and Frost went to separate bedrooms from which they would watch the taping on monitors. The staffs were not allowed to communicate with either of the on-camera adversaries once taping began. Despite the high stakes involved, the Frost and Nixon teams mixed easily and cordially. Nixon often engaged in his stilted small talk when off-camera. He willingly obliged autograph seekers awaiting him outside the guarded gates as he left, smiling broadly as he chatted with them. Reporters were not allowed on the property, and all the technicians working on the site signed pledges of secrecy about the contents of the tapings.

The crucial turnabout for Frost came during an agreed-upon seven-day Easter break in the interviewing. It was then that his staff was close to panic. Frost later conceded that he was "genuinely daunted before Easter" by Nixon. Frost had been partying as usual, leaving one taping to don a tux and emcee the Hollywood première of a movie he had helped produce. But then came the baiting challenge from Birt before the birthday party and a telling jest in one of the songs sung that night in Frost's honor. To the tune of *Love and Marriage*, it went: "Frost and Nixon, Frost and Nixon/ There's an act that's gonna need some fixin'."

On the day following this needling, Frost set aside his favorite white wines (Montrachet and Pouilly Fuisse) and began closeting himself with his staff and reading far into the nights in his suite atop the Beverly Hilton Hotel. He was still in a mood for cramming, fortunately, as his rented blue Mercedes rolled to-



AFTER TAPING SESSIONS AT MONARCH BAY, NIXON & FROST SIGN AUTOGRAPHS (TOP), GREET SKIING ACCIDENT VICTIM (CENTER) & WALK TO CAR

ward the final Watergate taping. En route, he read the statute on obstruction of justice that was to prove so helpful.

When the tapings were over, Frost's people were confident, perhaps overconfident, that their boss had scored a journalistic as well as a financial triumph. But Nixon's inner circle was just as certain that its man, even with his battering on Watergate (or perhaps because of it), had done much to raise his standing with the public. The show's viewers, said one Nixon friend, "should be sympathetic. It gives a much better understanding of what he thought. Those who like to make judgments will be better informed on their judgments now."

The series had by no means been an assured commercial success from the start. It represented a bold gamble by Frost. He had been in Australia when Nixon left the White House on Aug. 9, 1974—and he immediately decided to try to pin the fading ex-President down to a TV contract. To Frost, Nixon's "likely unavailability" was a challenge; it was "the appeal of the impossible" that lured him. He telephoned an offer from Australia. For nearly a year, Nixon showed no interest.

In July 1975, after Nixon had signed his \$2 million memoirs contract, he sent his agent, Irving ("Swifty") Lazar, to talk to the TV networks in New York. When Frost found out about this he offered Nixon a flat \$500,000 for four shows. NBC was also bidding, and Lazar coaxed Frost into raising the ante to \$600,000, plus a reported 20% of any profits. Helping Frost land the contract was Herbert Klein, Nixon's longtime press confidant, who felt that Frost was not the kind of U.S. journalist who is "always trying to put in his own opinions." Klein's other recommendation: U.S. TV's talkative Merv Griffin.

With the contract in his pocket, Frost still had no one to air the shows he would produce. CBS was shy of "checkbook journalism" after having been widely criticized for buying an interview with Nixon's former chief of staff, Haldeman. News executives at some networks were willing to put Nixon on the air, but only if their own journalistic stars could do the grilling. Undaunted, Frost got Syndicast, a New York-based independent TV marketing agency, to sell broadcasting rights to individual stations. He contracted with Pacific Video in Los Angeles to do the taping. Both were cut in on the profits. Investors like Jimmy Goldsmith, the banker-owner of the French magazine *L'Express*, helped Frost meet his \$2.5 million in production costs. Frost will retain about half of all profits.

While advertising for the controversial shows sold slowly in the U.S., foreign networks were much less hesitant. The rights to foreign broadcasts alone have netted Frost \$1 million so far, putting the production into the black. Final profits are expected to exceed \$2 million. This means Nixon may pick up \$1 million or more for undergoing his grilling by Frost. It might seem, with this on top of his memoir proceeds, that abuse of office pays. Without Watergate, Nixon's views would hardly command such sums.

But what does the nation—and history—profit from this uniquely modern electronic means of eliciting a personal accounting from a discredited President? Certainly, after viewing the series, millions will be forcefully reminded of the high personal price Nixon has paid. Yet he is destined to fail in these interviews to persuade any but his partisan followers that his Watergate lies and, yes, crimes, were the result of mere failures of judgment. If these same televised questions and answers could somehow have been transformed into a court of law, any reasonable jury would almost certainly have found Nixon guilty of participating in the crimes for which so many of his men were sentenced to prison.

In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the deposed king says, "Oh, that I were as great as is my grief..." Watergate-show viewers will be painfully aware that Nixon's grief is far from feigned. He even seems at last to realize that his agony was caused by his own failings. This, perhaps, is as much as he ever can or will feel about his role in those years that were as much an ordeal for the country as for him. It may not be quite enough to alter Richard Nixon's place in history.