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AP Wirephoto

Interviewer David Frost and Richard Nixon as they taped the program seen last night

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Nixon's TV Interview -

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— 'I Let The American

People Down'

Watergate Admissions

By James M. Naughton
New York Times

Washington

Former President Richard M. Nixon said last night that he had "let the American people down" by lying, disregarding his constitutional oath and abetting the Watergate coverup while in the White House.

But the former President insisted, in a nationally televised interview, that he had committed no criminal or impeachable offenses because his deeds sprang, he said, from purely political and humanitarian motives.

"I brought myself down," Nixon told David Frost in the emotional climax of an interview videotaped last month. "I have impeached myself," he said, "by resigning."

The dramatic apologia, marking Nixon's first public comment on the Watergate scandal since it cut short his presidency 999 days ago, nonetheless was more rueful than remorseful.

He refused repeatedly, in long and sometimes sharp exchanges with the British interviewer, to concede that his conduct had amounted to obstruction of justice and he offered a novel interpretation of that federal law.

He specifically denied knowing in advance of the June 17, 1972, burglary at the Democratic party headquarters here, condoning payment of hush money to the Watergate burglars and coaching White House aides on how to avoid perjury charges.

At one point, the former President suggested that Frost was "making the case" as though for the prosecution and said that he therefore would act, "even if I were not the one who was involved, for the defense."

But after Frost urged him to admit and apologize for "wrongdoing" lest he be "haunted for the rest of your life," the 64-year-old Nixon, his ruddy face wrenched by apparent emotion and his eyes moist, said:

"I let down my friends. I let down the country. I let down our system of government and the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government

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but think it's all too corrupt and the rest. I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life."

Moreover, in the course of the 5½ hours of videotaped interviews that were condensed into the 90-minute program telecast last night, Nixon made the following admissions:

- He said that he had made statements from the White House about the coverup "that were not true." He did not specify the statements.

- He acknowledged that after John W. Dean III, then the White House legal counsel, warned him on March 21, 1973, of the deep involvement of White House and Nixon campaign officials in the coverup, "I started acting as lawyer for their defense."

- Although insisting that "technically, I did not commit a crime (or) an impeachable offense," the former President said that any reasonable person reading the record of his tape-recorded White House conversations on Watergate "could call that a coverup."

Nixon and Frost, who spent 11 days together producing "The Nixon Interviews" for private syndica-

tion, both stand to realize a substantial profit from this and three subsequent programs. By some estimates, the former President could receive as much as \$1 million.

The ambivalence that ran through Nixon's televised comments — his descriptions of personal misconduct alternating with his denials of legal or constitutional wrongdoing — provided a vivid explanation of the rationale that he said "snowballed" into his central role in the scandal.

He contended, in a tone reminiscent of the suspicious and combative atmosphere of his administration that he had quickly interpreted the 1972 Watergate break-in as a political problem.

By early 1973, he said, "it was a five-front war with a fifth column. I had a partisan Senate (Watergate) committee staff. We had a partisan special prosecutor staff. We had a partisan media. We had a partisan (House) Judiciary Committee staff in the fifth column."

Some allies were telling him, Nixon said, that there was "a conspiracy to get you."

But he told Frost he rejected the notion "that what brought me down was a coup, a conspiracy" because, "I brought myself down. I gave 'em a sword. And they stuck it and they twisted it with relish. And

When he learned of the aides' involvement, Frost asked, "why didn't you pick up the phone and tell the cops?"

The former President couched his explanation in personal terms. He said he resisted for two weeks before finally deciding he had to dismiss Haldeman and Ehrlichman on April 30, 1973, because he was "concerned" about them and their families and "I felt that they in their hearts felt they were not guilty."

He described a tearful scene in which he prefaced his resignation instructions to Ehrlichman by telling the aide, "I hoped, I almost prayed I wouldn't wake up this morning."

Accordingly, Nixon theorized that his actions had not been illegal or unconstitutional because his motives had been rooted in humanitarian impulses.

Obstruction of justice, he contended, requires evidence of corrupt intention. "No, I did not have a corrupt motive," he declared.

Nixon appeared stunned when Frost, who had studied the obstruction statute just before beginning the Watergate questioning last April 13, spoke with authority on the law and said that proof of criminality rested solely on a show-



UPI Telephoto

NIXON ON THE TV SCREEN 'I brought myself down'

I guess, if I'd been in their position, I'd (have done) the same thing."

The "sword" he handed opponents, Nixon made clear, was his involvement — documented on the Watergate tapes — in a frantic and ultimately unsuccessful effort to prevent the scandal from touching his closest associates, particularly H. R. Haldeman, the former White House chief of staff and John D. Ehrlichman, the former domestic adviser.

ing that actions had a corrupt purpose, whatever the personal motive.

"If I try and rob a bank and fail, that's no defense," Frost said. He told the former President as well that the Watergate tapes were replete with the "language of almost 10,000 gangster movies."

But Nixon clung to his own interpretation of the law throughout the interview, asserting that "political containment is not a corrupt motive" and only grudgingly making one after another concession of "bad judgments" under cross-questioning by Frost.

The former President asserted, for instance, that he never had authorized the payment of hush money demanded by E. Howard Hunt, the former Central Intelligence Agency agent who recruited the Watergate burglary team.

When Frost recited 16 Nixon quotes from a March 21, 1973, tape recording — including, "get the million bucks; it would seem to me that would be worthwhile" — Nixon accused the interviewer of "reading there out of context."

The debate raged on until Frost asked of the hush money, "why didn't you stop it?"

"It's possible . . . It's a mistake that I didn't stop it," Nixon conceded.

Similarly, Frost questioned the former President's apparent coaching of Haldeman and Dean to skirt perjury, recalling that Nixon had said such things as, "just be damned sure you say, 'I don't remember. I can't recall.'"

Nixon replied that he had only been counseling aides not to volunteer anything when they appeared before the Watergate grand jury, as "every lawyer" does with a client. But he acknowledged that in doing so he had "put himself in the position of (an) attorney for the defense," and said he wished, in retrospect, he had not felt obliged to do so.

Much of his rationale stemmed, Nixon said, from his close personal relationship with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. He recalled how President Eisenhower had put the onus on Nixon, then the vice president, to tell Sherman Adams, a close Eisenhower aide, that he must resign in 1958 because of allegations of favoritism in dealing with regulatory agencies.

But Nixon said he could not ask his vice president, Spiro T. Agnew,

to dismiss the two aides because "they didn't get along well" with Agnew. He said he concluded by April 15, 1973, that Haldeman and Ehrlichman "had to go on the basis of the evidence that had been presented," but he still took two weeks to tell them because it was a "heart-rendering" task.

It was on the basis of such personal attitudes that Nixon told Frost, "I didn't think of it as a coverup. I didn't intend it to cover up.

"Let me say," he continued, "If I intended to cover up, believe me, I'd done it. You know how I could (have) done it? So easily? I could have done it immediately after the (1972) election simply by giving clemency to everybody and the whole thing would have gone away."

Yet Nixon, who accepted a full pardon from former President Gerald R. Ford one month after resigning the presidency, contended he had resisted such a course because "clemency was wrong."

The telecast last night did not answer all of the questions about Nixon's role in Watergate. Among the continuing mysteries is why he never destroyed the tapes that proved his undoing, as some allies had counseled him.

And, as Nixon suggested last night, his explanation may not suffice for those who did not think when he resigned, "it was enough to admit mistakes." But he added, "if they want me to get down and grovel on the floor, no. Never."

But the program, the first of four 90-minute telecasts, drawn from more than 28 hours of interviews, may further the former President's reported objective of becoming a more sympathetic figure in exile and a more credible author of his forthcoming memoirs. Frost will air Nixon's views on foreign and domestic matters and the former President's use of his powers on the nights of May 12, 19 and 25.

Frost and Nixon seemed on the verge of tears in the climactic final moments of their encounter as they leaned toward one another. The videotape darkened briefly, reportedly to mask the excision of the minutes it took Frost, as much as Nixon, to regain composure after the former President had looked off to the side and said:

"My political life is over. I will never yet, and never again have an opportunity to serve in any official position. Maybe I can give a little advice from time to time."