

Packaging Mr. Nixon

Is "executive privilege" for sale to the highest bidder?

After refusing to appear before Congressional committees and the Federal courts in Watergate-related cases, former President Nixon has now made a deal to "tell all" in a series of telecasts that will be filmed now and shown after the 1976 elections. "No subject, including Watergate, has been barred," declares David Frost, the British talk-show packager and host who put the deal together.

For all this pledge of limitless illumination, right from the start a cloud of secrecy hangs over the project. Mr. Frost says that he acquired the rights in behalf of an "international consortium of broadcasting organizations," a blind phrase that until explained carries the muffled rustle of laundered money. This obscure arrangement is quite different from a project for written or televised memoirs under the auspices of publishers and broadcasters, here or abroad, with known managements.

No frank information is forthcoming from Mr. Nixon's Hollywood agent, Irving Lazar, who says that the ex-President picked Mr. Frost because of his "unique and wide-ranging experience." This explanation scarcely fits the facts. Mr. Frost's experience can best be described as that of a "news entertainer," not a journalist with any particular knowledge of Watergate or of Mr. Nixon's career.

The reality for some time has been that the former President's information about Watergate and the White House years was for sale to the highest bidder. The president of NBC News broke off negotiations when, among other things, the asking price went too high. Commendably, the president of CBS News, admitting that it had made a mistake in buying an interview with Watergate conspirator H. R. Haldeman, said that his network would not again indulge in checkbook journalism.

Last month, Henry S. Ruth, the special Watergate prosecutor, said that he would not seek to make public former President Nixon's testimony to two grand jurors at San Clemente because of Federal laws against disclosure, adding that Mr. Nixon could of course testify before Congressional committees or answer court subpoenas.

If Mr. Nixon has decided the time has come for frank disclosure, a Congressional committee would seem to be the appropriate forum. Or a grand jury in need of answers to the many questions left over from the impeachment hearings. The least that is required is full disclosure of the personnel of the "international consortium" that is to be Mr. Nixon's new financial angel.