

# The Man Who Questioned Nixon on Watergate

David Paradine Frost

By JON NORDHEIMER

Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, May 4—When the grocer's son from Whittier met the parson's son from Kent for what contained the promise of a history-making television interview, there were Americans who wondered if David Frost had the instinct for the jugular that would help him break through Richard M. Nixon's defenses. After all, the salient impression in this country of the 38-year-old Mr. Frost is that behind that toothy, urbane charm is an unflaggingly pleasant private man who really, but really, has not a drop of venom or malice in his British blood.

Man  
in the  
News

That started to depress those around Mr. Frost when it became clear more than three-fourths of the way through the scheduled 28 hours of taped interviews with the former President that Mr. Frost was still sparring gently while Mr. Nixon was bobbing, ducking and weaving and was ahead on points by landing an occasional punch of his own. They wondered what had become of the man who had a reputation with British audiences of being an abrasive interviewer who, with clipboard in hand, could make his subject cower.

Then came the questioning on Watergate, the segment of the Nixon-Frost talks presented tonight on national television; and Mr. Frost came away from the confrontation with a personal sense of assurance that he had forced the former President to face the inescapable realities of his personal involvement in the scandal.

## Nixon Future on Line

It was a critical test for Mr. Nixon, and the public perception of how he handled the interview may well influence his public image for the remainder of his life. Another interviewer, perhaps one with an even more acerbic, prosecutorial style, might possibly have dragged more damaging information from Mr. Nixon, but at the price of creating a large measure of audience sympathy for the deposed President.

In an age when televised impressions can instantly change attitudes and ameliorate lifelong passions, the audience reaction to Mr. Frost's style will inevitably be coupled with the opinions formed about Mr. Nixon's performance.

Unless Mr. Nixon again subjects himself to more cross-examinations on Watergate in some other forum, his dialogue with the parson's son from Kent may have to serve the public and historians as his last word under pressure on the subject.

David Paradine Frost was born on April 7, 1939, the only son of Wilfrid and Mona Frost, who had a Methodist parish in the rural village of Tenderden in the extreme southeastern corner of England. With pulpit-bred skills he became a lay teen-ager preacher of some note, and he was good enough as a soccer player to receive an offer from a professional club in Nottingham.

## Student Editor and Wit

He went to Cambridge University on a scholarship, however, earning a Master of Arts degree while serving as edi-

tor of the university magazine and as a sharp-tongued wit in student satirical revues.

After Cambridge he began doing satirical routines in London cabarets, was spotted by a British Broadcasting Corporation producer, and at the age of 23 achieved overnight acclaim for developing and starring in "That Was The Week That Was," the weekly irreverent television lampoon of British politics, manners and morals.

He was master of ceremonies on an American version of the British lampoon that never quite scaled the heights of popularity, froth and irrepressibility that it had in England. The long underfed appetite for controversial satire in this country, however, kept the show going for two years despite allegations that it was a watered-down model compared with the original.

Mr. Frost went on to be a ubiquitous figure on British television although never again commanding the audience or affection of the original lampoon period.

## Intimates Call Him Frosty

"A lot of his English audience, particularly the women, find him rough and sharp with the people he interviews," remarked one London observer,



John Bryson

An almost foppish exuberance masked sharp questioning.

"and hardly anyone finds him cuddly enough to call him Frosty, as I've heard some intimates refer to him."

He did the David Frost Show for American television in the late sixties, a weekly interview program where the host's lavish praise and almost foppish exuberance in greeting his subjects misted over some very sharp, incisive questioning that enticed some guests to supply more information about themselves than they might ordinarily have offered.

For instance, Arthur Godfrey once confided on the program that his sex life had improved greatly after he had been sterilized.

"That's what I aim for," Mr. Frost once said in an interview, "for a man to feel comfortable enough on my stage to say, 'Want to know a secret?'"

"People are so comfortable with David, so assured by his interest in them, that they wanted to share confidences," said one admirer of Mr. Frost's technique.

By past standards, Mr. Frost's star had dimmed somewhat in recent years although his production company and other interests had made him a very wealthy man-about-the-globe who traveled about 200,000 miles a year on business and pleasure and who began to feel more at home on airplanes and in hotels than he did in his London townhouse.

## One Woman at a Time

A bachelor who has left more glamorous women in his wake than the star of a French farce, he has settled down to the life of what he called "non-monogamy," keeping the company of one woman before moving on to the next. His present companion is Caroline Cushing, the former wife of Howard Cushing, a socialite.

Yet he has never been a lady killer in the public eye, and his middle-class manners and morals do not give off the kind of sparks that women seem to find appealing in less articulate but earthy British pop stars.

He does not have a peevish nature, rarely loses his temper in a show business world where hotheaded producers and narcissistic stars are everywhere to be found, prefers white wine to hard liquor, and will walk out of a room if someone lights up a marijuana cigarette in his presence, as he did at a recent Beverly Hills party.

He is fiercely ambitious, energetic and self-assured with a circle of friends and business interests around the world. His share of the profit from the Nixon shows will probably be more than \$1 million. Meanwhile he has also kept busy with other projects, including an eight-part television series he is producing on the history of the Persian Empire.

London this week is abuzz with stories about Mr. Frost and his Nixon coup. He shared the covers of Time and Newsweek with Mr. Nixon, and it seems clear that his star has acquired new luster although he apparently must continue on through life without the innate charisma that was not part of the birthright of the parson's son from Kent.

NYT 5-5-77