

'IMPEACHED MYSELF' ^{NYT}

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In TV Interview With Frost Former President Says Motives Were Political

By JAMES M. NAUGHTON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 4—Former President Richard M. Nixon said tonight that he had "let the American people down" by lying, disregarding his constitutional oath and abetting the Watergate cover-up while in the White House.

But the former President insisted, in a nationally televised interview, that he had committed no criminal or impeach-

able offenses because his deeds sprang, he said, from purely political and humanitarian motives.

Transcript of program, pages 32, 33.

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

First Comment Since End

The dramatic apology, marking Mr. 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 in the Watergate office complex here, condoning payment of hush money to the Watergate burglars and coaching White House aides on how to avoid perjury charges.

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Frost, who spent 11 days together producing "The Nixon Interviews" for private syndication, 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.

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

Statement Amid Emotion

But after Mr. Frost urged him to admit "wrongdoing" and apologize for it lest he be "haunted for the rest of your life," the 64-year-old former President, his ruddy face wrenched by apparent emotion, 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 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, during the five and a half hours of videotaped interviews that were condensed into the 90-minute telecast tonight, Mr. Nixon conceded the following:

"That he had made statements from the White House about the cover-up "that were not true." He did not specify the statements and he added that "most of them were fundamentally true on the big issues, but without going as far as I

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should have gone and saying perhaps that I had considered other things but had not done them."

That after John W. Dean 3d, 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 cover-up, "I started acting as lawyer for their defense." Although obliged by his constitutional oath to enforce the law, Mr. Nixon said, "I did not meet that responsibility."

That any reasonable person reading the record of his tape-recorded White House conversations on Watergate "could call that a cover-up," although, he said, "technically I did not commit a crime [or] an impeachable offense."

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Ambivalence in Comments

The ambivalence that ran through Mr. 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 the former President said had "snowballed" into his central role in the scandal.

He contended 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." Mr. Nixon asserted: "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, Mr. Nixon said, that there was "a conspiracy to get you." That may have been the case, he added, hinting of "shenanigans" by the Central Intelligence Agency that have yet to come to light.

But he told Mr. Frost that he had 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 I guess, if I'd been in their position, I'd [have] done the same thing."

The "sword" he handed opponents, Mr. 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.

In that and other exchanges, the tone and content of the telecast went beyond expectations built by advance notices in several publications. Mr. Frost, chosen by the former President to be his inquisitor, became persistent and almost prosecutorial in the Watergate questioning. The encounter recreated once-familiar scenes of Mr. Nixon, on the defensive, peering intently at an interrogator, ticking off rhetorical points on his fingertips and pulling a finger across a perspiring lip.

When he learned of the aides' involvement, Mr. 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 Mr. Haldeman and Mr. 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 Mr. Ehrlichman by telling the aide, "I hoped, I almost prayed I wouldn't wake up this morning."

Accordingly, Mr. 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.

Frost Describes the Law

Mr. Nixon appeared stunned when Mr. 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 showing that actions had a corrupt purpose, whatever the personal motive.

"If I try and rob a bank and fail, that's no defense," Mr. 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 Mr. Nixon clung to his own interpretation of the law throughout the inter-

view, asserting that "political containment is not a corrupt motive" and only grudgingly, under cross-questioning by Mr. Frost, making one after another concession of "bad judgments."

The former President asserted, for instance, that he had never authorized the payment of hush money demanded by E. Howard Hunt, the former C.I.A. agent who recruited the Watergate burglary team. When Mr. 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"—Mr. Nixon accused the interviewer of "reading there out of context."

The debate raged on until Mr. 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," Mr. Nixon conceded.

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

Mr. 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 the former President acknowledged that in doing so he had "put himself in the position of attorney for the defense" and said he wished in retrospect he had not felt obliged to do so.

Much of his rationale stemmed, Mr. Nixon said, from his close personal relationship with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman. He recalled how President Eisenhower had put the onus on Mr. 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 Mr. Nixon said he could not ask his Vice President, then Spiro T. Agnew, to dismiss the two aides because "they didn't get along well" with Mr. Agnew. He said he concluded by April 15, 1973, that Mr. Haldeman and Mr. 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-rending" task.

Personal Feelings Stressed

It was on the basis of such personal attitudes that Mr. Nixon told Mr. Frost: "I didn't think of it as a cover-up. I didn't intend it to cover up. Let me say, if I intended to cover up, believe me, I'd [have] 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."

Mr. Nixon, who accepted a full pardon from President Ford one month after resigning the Presidency, contended that he had resisted such a course with his aides because "clemency was wrong."

The telecast tonight did not answer all of the questions about Mr. 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.

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. Mr. Frost will air Mr. 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.

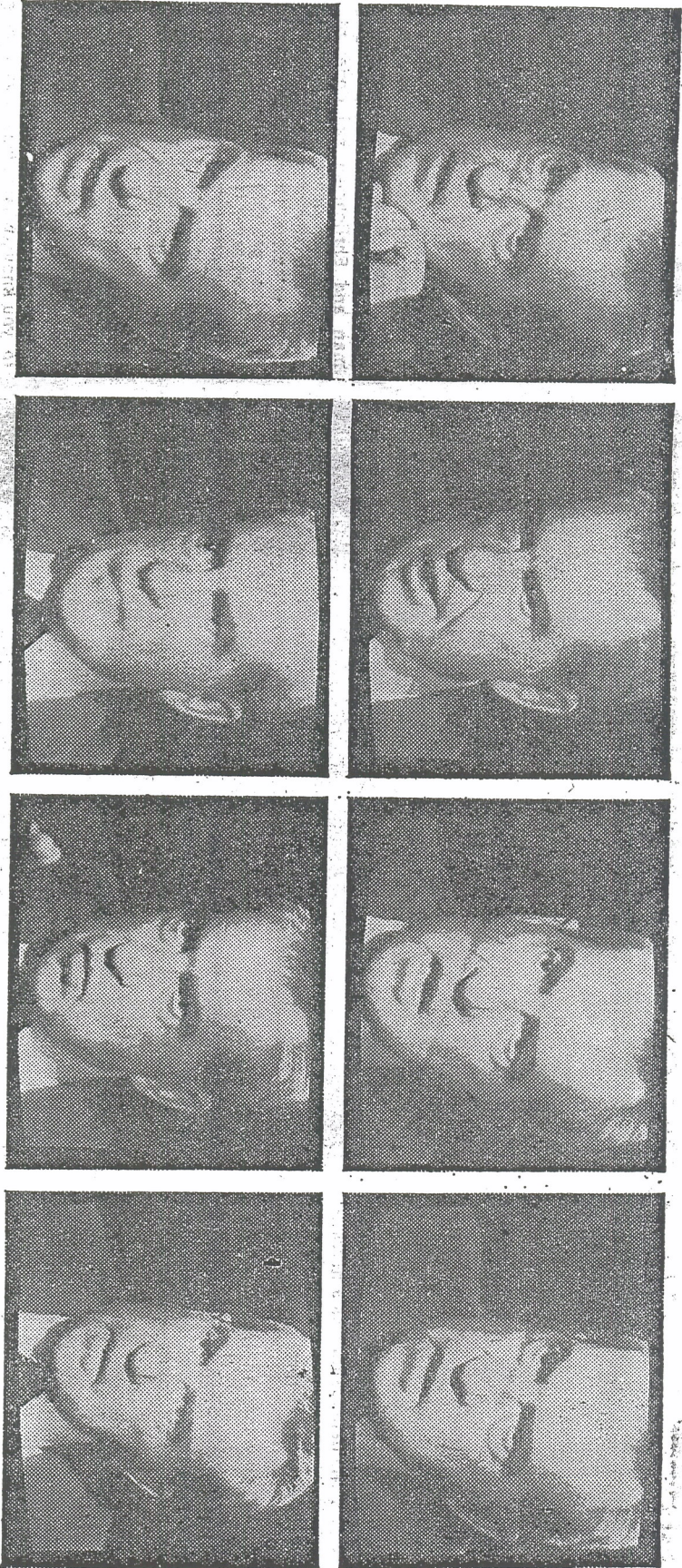
Mr. Nixon will receive \$600,000 plus a percentage of the profits from syndication of the programs on 155 television and 730 radio stations in the United States and abroad. His share could come to \$1 million.

The two men 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 Mr. Frost, as much as Mr. 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."

Moments later, Mr. Nixon offered this counsel: "It was so botched up. I made so many bad judgments. The worst ones, mistakes of the heart rather than the head, as I pointed out. But let me say a man in that top judge, top job, he's gotta have a heart but his head must always rule his heart."

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Former President Richard M. Nixon responding to questions from David Frost during the first of their four taped interviews, which was shown last night

John Bryson