

SFChronicle

The Unchanged Nixon on TV

A THOUSAND DAYS after his resignation from the presidency, Richard Nixon's public character remains substantially unchanged from that which the American people observed before the fall. In the David Frost interview Wednesday evening he showed himself still the self-serving, unrepentant Nixon, still unwilling to acknowledge the criminality of conduct that has disgraced him beyond any other President.

We saw the "old Nixon," evasive and shifting, seeking to fill the blank space in the gallery of contemporary American statesmen with the "new Nixon". He did not, in our view, succeed. No doubt he'll do well on the proceeds of his arrangement with Frost, telling what he has to tell. Still it remains "perfectly clear" that he has not told all about Watergate in this first interview, not confessed what the people know he has to confess, not come clean with them.

HE REMAINS, IN SHORT, the unindicted (but since pardoned) co-conspirator of the Watergate coverup conspiracy, still insisting he was not guilty of obstructing justice when the tapes of his own voice convict him of it.

His motives in doing what he did and saying what he said — "Tell them (the CIA), don't go any further into this case, period"; "Get the million bucks, it would seem to me that would be worth while"; "Would you agree that this is a buy-time thing? You'd better damn well get that done, but fast" — were "pure political containment", he says. Then, taking refuge in the man he once reviled but whom, unaccountably, he has made his hero, he says cryptically that if political containment were a corrupt motive, Harry Truman would have been impeached.

OF COURSE, HE SUGGESTS, impeachment was not what Truman deserved nor was it what he deserved: "I did not commit...the crime of obstruction of justice. Because I did not have the motive required for the commission of that crime...I did not commit, in my view, an impeachable offense."

Yet the House, he acknowledges, overwhelmingly ruled that he had, and so to spare the country six months it couldn't afford of "having the President in the dock", he impeached himself, he says, by resigning.

One could be moved — Frost was — by Nixon's "I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life." But granting that that moment of emotion was genuine, practically all the rest was scenario.