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Watergate — Truth After the Fact?

Washington

Victor Lasky is a whiz at division, especially when it comes to reducing American presidents to their lowest common denominator. His aim? To prove that Richard Milhous Nixon wasn't so bad after all.

"I'm not an apologist for Nixon," says Lasky. "I think what he did was stupid, he botched it up. Like he says, he handed his own enemies a sword."

"But I have a great deal of sympathy for the man because if Watergate had happened under a Democratic administration, and with a Democratic Congress, it wouldn't have ended the same way."

In his new book, "It Didn't Start With Watergate" (Dial Press), Lasky puts the pre-Watergate presidents under the microscope.

"Lyndon Johnson was probably the worst, playing bedroom tapes of Martin Luther King in the Oval Office," charges Lasky. "At least Nixon didn't release his tapes until he was forced to when he got into trouble."

"Nixon didn't throw 110,000 Japanese-Americans into concentration camps the way Franklin Roosevelt did," he adds.

Contending the Kennedys were the champion wiretappers of all time, Lasky maintains that in one instance Robert Kennedy had the New York Times military analyst Hanson Bald-

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win and Pentagon correspondent Lloyd Norman wiretapped. And that, as attorney general, Kennedy authorized the tapping of King's phone.

Lasky himself draws some strong parallels between Nixon and President Jimmy Carter. "Nixon is a workaholic and, in many ways, he's like Jimmy Carter. They are both driven men, both want to make a place in history." And both are very isolated, despite all that symbolic stuff to show Carter is open to the people — taking a walk at his inauguration, for instance.

"Nixon," Lasky, a good friend of Nixon's, adds with something like pride, "would never do anything like that."

Lasky wasn't too pleased with David Frost's first interview.

"I don't like to see the man who led the free world and did very well at it being browbeaten." Adds Lasky, "If he really wanted to obstruct justice, why didn't he just burn the tapes?"

"David Frost's first interview with Richard Nixon evoked the memory of a 1939 Dracula movie. Just as the burgmeister is about to pound the stake in its

heart, the vampire jumps up to give the Checkers speech and everyone forgets about the stake because the vampire has reformed."

So says Richard Ben-Veniste, former Watergate assistant special prosecutor, the man who, after a year building the case against Nixon, never got Frost's chance to cross-examine the defendant.

Instead, he and George Frampton Jr., another assistant special prosecutor, settled for writing a book: "Stonewall: The Real Story of the Watergate Prosecution" (Simon & Schuster).

"The Frost program wasn't any kind of substitute for the special prosecutor's role," says Ben-Veniste. "We would have been more interested in establishing the facts and forcing an explanation. If no suitable explanation was forthcoming, the only inference is that corruption was involved."

"Frost, forced to choose between interrogation and good television, opted for good television," Frampton contends.

Unlike those who viewed Nixon as a tough adversary, the Ben-Veniste-Frampton team hold Nixon's own bungling as largely responsible for the fact that "the system worked."

On Nixon's decision to create a Special Prosecutor's Office, Ben-Veniste says, "By itself, Congress would not

have been able to do the job. I think that's where Nixon really miscalculated, by allowing the attorney general to create an independent special prosecutor's office."

"Stonewall" comes down hardest in many ways on Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski, who, the authors argue, may have used former President Gerald Ford to avoid prosecuting Nixon.

"Jaworski's hope was that someone wouldn't put the Nixon monkey on his back. And President Ford ultimately adopted the monkey," says Ben-Veniste. The authors raise the question as to whether Jaworski contributed to Ford's decision to grant a pardon to Nixon to avoid taking the heat for a decision to indict.

As for Nixon's first TV performance, Ben-Veniste's criticism is not that the former president gave the Checkers speech, but that he delivered it too late.

"It's always been in his interest to give the Checkers speech and he would have undoubtedly survived if he had done it at the right time and taken a responsibility for Watergate."

"Because America is made up of very forgiving people, he can take an approach which appeals to them. But at some point the people have to balance one man's tragedy against the disgrace he's caused the country."