

# What Was President

By Blake Green

After David Frost put away his familiar clipboard, straightened his shoulders and shook hands with Richard Nixon for the last time, "I said to someone that if I didn't enjoy life so much, I'd die happy right then."

"Making history" — as he believes he's done — had that effect on Frost. Nixon didn't appear to find the 28 and three quarter hours the two spent together filming his television "memoirs" quite so exhilarating.

"When you look at him (on film) on the 11th day and compare him to the first," Frost points out, "you can see he has visibly aged in this reliving of his life."

For Nixon, of course, making history has been far from fun.

There were other ways the public viewed the much-publicized, greatly discussed Nixon/Frost interviews that were aired last summer:

When plans were announced in 1975, the initial interest centered around the financial negotiations between the two. This itself took several approaches: admiration, moral indignation, jealousy.

There were those who were fascinated with the prospect of revelations and those who were convinced there would be none. Those who thought that Richard Nixon was crazy and others who thought, yeah, like a fox.

Some people said that Nixon had agreed to talk with Frost because he had liked the treatment he received when he had been interviewed during the 1968 presidential campaign.

Frost says that Nixon felt "he had been fairly edited" then; other observers have pointed out that Frost had asked Nixon abstract questions about his hopes and dreams for America, leading the former president to assume that, as an interrogator, Frost wasn't the sort to go for the jugular.

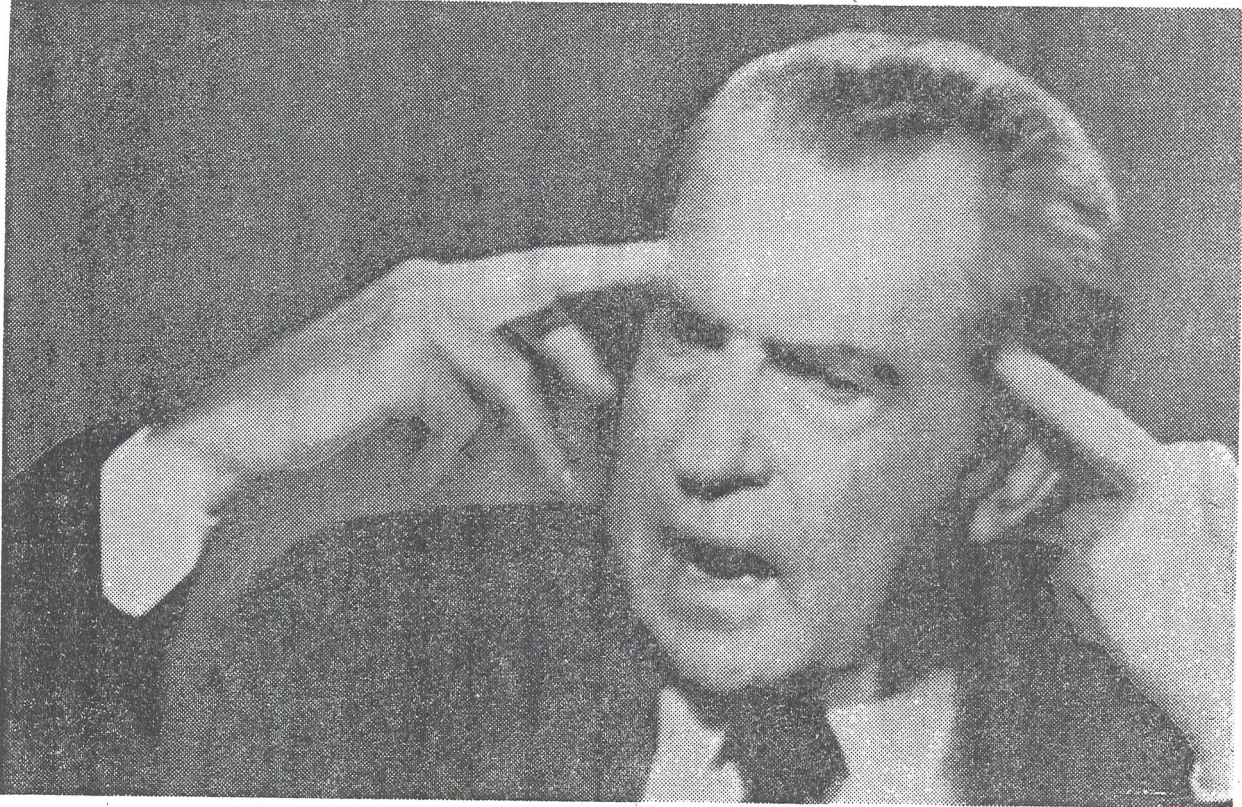
As it turned out, Nixon was at least partially right. Frost wasn't that sort. He was, as always, the well-mannered, properly respectful Englishman. But he also surprised a lot of people with the depth of his research, the probing questions he asked and the fact that, more often than not, he insisted that Nixon

*'I've never seen a man reveal so much of himself,' says David Frost*





# Nixon Really Like?



David Frost recalled what it was like to film the Nixon interviews

clarify some of his legendary obfuscations.

Richard Nixon himself said, after he saw the five segments edited from the hours of interviews, that he felt that his interviewer had been "tough but fair."

"It is difficult to think of anything that was as great a challenge," Frost said the other day during a visit to the city to talk about his new book, "I Gave Them a Sword," his account of "Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews."

Included in the book are everything from the tidbit that during the filming Nixon kept a handkerchief saturated with ammonia chloride to combat his legendary facial perspiration to Frost's own pontifications on what brought about the former president's downfall.

Frost calls the interviews "electronic memoirs," and he insists that he was always "confident that they would be judged on editorial merit rather than financial terms" — and

that this judgment would be a favorable one.

The financial aspects apparently weren't bad, either, although Frost insists that "financial reward was not of paramount importance to me," and that the "figures quoted were absurdly inflated."

The interviews, he says, cost more than \$2 million (for this Nixon received in excess of \$600,000) and the eventual "excess of income over expenditure" will be "between a quarter and a half million."

"Electronic memoirs," Frost says, "are in a sense more demanding (than written ones) because someone is there testing your account at every turn." There was nothing precedent-setting about this check-book journalism (as critics referred to it) — Lyndon Johnson had been paid for his televised recollections.

The precedent that was set, according to Frost, was that "I had sole control over the editing."

Nixon had no prior knowledge of the questions and there were no off-limit areas.

"For all the anguish of these memoirs," Frost points out that Nixon received "only a quarter of what he is receiving for his book (which will be published later this year). If one's concept of privacy means anything, a man's life is his own to choose to dispose of any way he chooses after he leaves office."

The Richard Nixon who sat across the room from Frost in a Laguna Beach house for all those hours of interviews was in many ways the enigmatic, fiercely private man who had always puzzled both his friends and enemies. By the time the filming was over, Frost says that his aides "had stopped discussing which was the real Nixon — the Nixons changed from subject to subject."

But, Frost says, "There were certain things I did learn about

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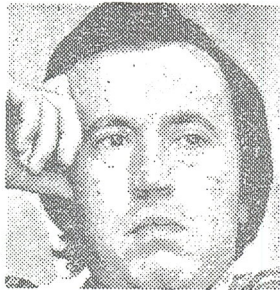


# Recalling Nixon's TV 'Memoirs'

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him" from all of those hours together.

"In one sense you could say that I now don't understand Nixon on a deeper level than before. But in another sense, one realizes, when talking to him, that his concern for foreign policy that seemed to be so self-serving or safe to talk about from



Interviewer Frost

afar is a basic motivation and force — and may well keep him alive.

"When you turn to the subject of foreign policy, it is like opening a refrigerator door and the light going on inside." To illustrate this, Frost imitated the former president sagging, exhausted at the end of the interviews as they discussed "some downbeat subject like taxes," and then snapping to attention when he was asked about Brezhnev. ("He has one of the world's most expressive faces — I've never seen a man reveal so much of himself simply by the involuntary change of facial demeanor," said Frost.)

"Rather than stumbling around and being full of obtuse phrases, Nixon launched into a five-minute answer full of very exact observations, incredibly good adjectives and perceptions. We didn't have to touch it — it was as accomplished an answer as I've ever received on any subject.

"One realized," Frost continued, "that his stated concern about foreign policy wasn't public relations but part of what made him tick."

John Birt, Frost's co-producer for the interviews, went into the interviews thinking "here's a man whose prime thrust of life is dirty tricks — and then there are other things, such as foreign policy." He came out of it feeling that "here's a man whose prime thrust is to achieve — as he wistfully had hoped — greatness through foreign policy.

"The dirty tricks were not any fewer or didn't exist, you understand," said Frost, "but they were not the motivating force; his participation in politics was really not his consuming passion."

Of all the comments that Nixon made during the interviews — laying the blame for Watergate on John Mitchell's obsession with his wife Martha's health; on it being permissible to be "paranoid for peace"; on the book by two Washington journalists being responsible for Pat Nixon's stroke — Frost says that he was most surprised by the former president's insistence that if the President does it, it means it's not illegal.

"This was one of those things you normally say about people — that deep down I bet that's what he really thinks — but you rarely get them to admit it, and it was at the heart of so much of his definition of presidential power. I had never thought he'd say it so nakedly."

Since the filming, Frost has often been asked whether or not he personally liked Richard Nixon. "I didn't dislike him in the end," Frost says. Although they have not communicated directly since Frost paid a visit to San Clemente after the second show, he says rather abstractly that "I'm going to send him a copy of the book. But it is difficult to really say how I feel because it was such a professional relationship.

"I suppose what also amazed me is that I was moved by him — I think we all were."