

## **Lies, Damn Lies and Dramatizations** **The Frost/Nixon Stage Play**

[While similar to the movie review of the same name, the stage play differs significantly from the film version, hence a somewhat different review—also written in January of 2009]

### Introduction

In a sense, son-in-law Edward Cox was mistaken when he told President Nixon shortly before his 1974 resignation that doing so would not stop the onslaught.

You don't know these people. I know them. Let me tell you something about them. I worked in the US Attorney's Office in New York. And I went to school with some of these people. They're tough. They're smart. But, most of all, they hate you with a passion. Most because of the war, and some because of other reasons. And they and others like them, and the press, they're going to hound you. They're going to harass you for the rest of your life.

Nixon died in 1994, almost fifteen years ago, but even his death did not stop the vicious onslaught from those radicalized by their opposition to the Vietnam War.. The *Frost/Nixon* movie is the latest *ad hominem* attack.

Being the only President to have resigned, there is a gracious plenty of wrongdoing involved in Watergate that could still be explored—but the misrepresentations and sheer inventions from Producer Ron Howard, Playwright Peter Morgan and Consultant James Reston, Jr. reach a new low in political revisionism.

I call them 'lies, damn lies, and dramatizations,' but they raise the essential question of how much the truth can be shaved in film making without becoming outright propaganda.

Given Hollywood's lingering hatred of Richard Nixon, such questions seem irrelevant—and it should come as no surprise that that *Frost/Nixon* has been nominated for five Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Film Editing.

### Background

The play is a dramatization about the taping of almost thirty hours of interviews done by British TV host David Frost with former President Richard Nixon, with the help of Frost's two researchers, Bob Zelnick and James Reston, Jr. The edited version—four ninety minute segments--was broadcast in 1977 to great critical acclaim and drew the then-largest worldwide audience for a news interview—with an estimated forty-six million viewers in America alone.

The play's difficulty is that from Nixon's furtive glance after giving the victory sign as he boarded the helicopter on the day of his resignation to the vignette about the Gucci loafers, its most dramatic moments bear little resemblance to what actually happened during the interviews themselves. How can we know this for sure? For those caring to look, there are three primary sources—all prepared by Frost or one of his researchers.

First, a DVD exists of the actual broadcasts, issued in Great Britain with an afterword by Sir David Frost. While readily available, apparently none of the movie's reviewers saw fit to view the actual broadcast, since

they show that time and again the movie version alters, omits or improperly edits what was actually said by Nixon and by Frost.

Second, there Frost's own book, published in 1978 and entitled, "I Gave Them a Sword", Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews. As the inside scoop on 'the story behind the story', at least from Frost's point of view, anything of significance not actually contained in the taped interviews themselves would surely have been mentioned in his 320 page book.

Finally, there is the 181 page booklet by James Reston, Jr. that was published in 2007. Entitled, *The Conviction of Richard Nixon, The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews*, it attempts—albeit some thirty years later—a rather audacious historical re-write designed to show how he (and he alone) brought Nixon down by discovering an unknown tape recording whose last minute use by Frost was not only the 'gotcha moment' in the interviews, but proves Nixon was at the center of the Watergate cover-up.

The booklet was hardly a critical success—and Reston's claim so patently absurd as to be dismissed entirely— but for one reader: Peter Morgan, who based his stage play on Reston's version of events. Reston—and not Frost or Zelnick—also is the one on whom Ron Howard relied for any historic accuracy in the movie version. As we shall see, their reliance was entirely misplaced.

While the play fairly portrays the Frost team's extensive preparations and his two researchers' massive disappointment in Frost's seeming inability to nail Nixon on either foreign or domestic initiatives of his presidency, its portrayal of Nixon's actions and statements is patently fraudulent.

Fortunately, we can review what was actually filmed or written by the very people on Frost's team that appear in the stage play—and contrast that to the play's version of events. This is not a situation of being faced with competing claims from Nixon supporters; it is an exercise in comparing what Frost said happened then—and what people are portrayed as saying in the play.

### Specifics

At least three participants are unfairly maligned in *Frost/Nixon*: David Frost, who is portrayed as a washed up, witless dandy; Jack Brennan, Nixon's aide-de-camp, who is cast the heavyweight protecting Nixon from himself; and former President Nixon, who is portrayed by Frank Langella as doing and saying things Nixon simply did not do or say.

Let us begin with a simple example: The play would have us believe that David Frost picked up Caroline Cushing on his flight to California by offering to include her in his first meeting with Nixon, scheduled for the very next day. In his book, Frost carefully details that first meeting, naming all participants--without any mention of Cushing. Yet he does mention her appearance and participation in several other events. A harmless dramatization? A little white lie just to show where Frost's interests really lay? Perhaps, but factually incorrect and a substantial disservice to both Frost and Cushing.

Another dramatization has to do with the Gucci loafers worn by Frost and commented upon by Nixon. The movie ends with Frost giving Nixon a pair as a gift—apparently oblivious to the fact that Nixon disdained them as effeminate. Isn't it intriguing that this little vignette—which provides such clear insight into the personalities of both Nixon and Frost--is nowhere mentioned in Frost's own book? Oh, it could have happened—but it didn't. The Gucci loafer scenes are a complete and knowing fabrication.

Aside from such dramatizations, there are far more serious breaches of historic accuracy, including:

- Opening Question: While the opening question (about why Nixon did not destroy the tapes) did indeed occur, Frost's book notes that he had informed Jack Brennan of his intent and obtained Brennan's concurrence before that morning's filming began—so Nixon was hardly surprised at the question—and no doubt agreed it would heighten viewer interest. Since Nixon would receive 20% of the gross, he had a very real interest in gaining a wide audience.
- Midnight Phone Call: Among the most dramatic moments of the play is Nixon's late night call to Frost, supposedly after having too much to drink—surely a poignant moment where Nixon reveals his inner torments. There is no mention whatsoever of such a call in Frost's book; Frost has since confirmed that was no such call; and even Ron Howard, who produced the movie version, has admitted it was an invention—justified, of course in the name of dramatization.
- Brennan's Threat to Ruin Frost: Brennan made the statement, but in the context of improper editing (where Nixon's responses might be omitted) and not with regard to any questioning about Watergate. In fact, Frost characterizes their exchange as sort of an informal compact that he would fairly present Nixon's accomplishments and they would not try to stonewall questions about Watergate.
- "Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal": Nixon actually made this statement during their interview, but it was in the context of why members of any administration should not have to worry about being indicted by a later administration based upon a differing legal interpretation. While others might disagree, this is precisely the point the outgoing Bush administration would make about their aggressive questioning of certain terrorists (i.e.: waterboarding): If done under presidential order after full legal review, those carrying out the instruction should not be subject to second-guessing—or government employees could never feel safe in carrying out presidential directives. The play's positioning this as his justification for the Watergate Cover-up is a deliberate and substantive misrepresentation.
- White House Tape Quotations: According to the play, Reston's last minute research uncovers an unpublished transcript of a June 20, 1972 meeting between Nixon and Charles Colson, which he slips under Frost's door while Frost is out partying. Amazingly, Frost realizes its import and utilizes it to devastate Nixon. Three more instances of dramatic license:
  - Reston did not discover the transcript among court records, it was improperly passed to him (most likely by former members of the Special Prosecutor's staff)
  - He had the transcript for six months before the taping sessions began
  - The supposedly damning quote used in the play is not from the June 20<sup>th</sup> transcript, but from a meeting that occurred eight months later.

There is also a 'bait and switch' element in the subsequent transcript quotations, supposedly from Nixon's March 21<sup>st</sup> meeting with John Dean, the 'cancer on the presidency' speech where he first details his views of how Watergate all came about. Again, what is missing:

- This was among the Nixon tapes first released by the White House itself, on April 30, 1974. In context, it is embarrassing, but not damning—Unbeknownst to Dean, Mitchell has already OK'd a partial payment to Hunt (of his documented legal expenses). Further, Nixon is exploring whether it is important to meet Hunt's demands while they pursue alternatives for disclosure. It is clear from the full tape such payments won't work in the long run; they rule out the use of clemency; and they need buy time to fully understand how to stay ahead of the disclosures that are sure to come. Their best alternative seems to be before a Grand

Jury, where there are rules of evidence, rather than before the Ervin Committee, where there are not.

- Even so, half the quotes used in the play are substantively inaccurate.
- Brennan Interruption: Another telling and dramatic moment occurs as Nixon (purportedly) is about to confess to the crimes of Watergate and Brennan deliberately invades the set to interrupt the proceedings. In truth—as written by Frost himself—Brennan merely held up a sign saying, “Let him talk”, and it was Frost himself who decided to call for a time out in the filming—by telling Nixon they needed time to change tapes—with the intent of enabling Nixon to collect his thoughts before proceeding. Frost details his following discussion with Brennan, but makes no mention whatever of Brennan then counseling Nixon in private.
- Nixon “Confession”: In the play’s version, Nixon is caught by his own words on the tapes and confesses to being a part of the Watergate cover-up. But his actual words from those interviews were changed rather dramatically in the play’s version. What Nixon did (which was most appropriate) was to apologize to the Nation for his mistakes during Watergate—rather a distinct difference. Frost’s book details how everyone—on both teams—seemed pleased with their Watergate exchange. Indeed, even the 1977 DVD cover blurb characterizes that part of the interview as, “culminating in the unprecedented sight of a president apologizing to his people.” He is strong and precise; stoutly maintaining his mistakes were those of the heart and not of the head.
- Farewell Meeting: The movie ends with Frost calling upon Nixon in his San Clemente home following the broadcasts and that Nixon, dressed in shirt sleeves and musing about golfing in retirement, implies that he had been unmasked and undone. In contrast, Frost wrote that he had met with Nixon for their final time in his office just after the second program on foreign policy had been broadcast [i.e.: before any broadcast of their Watergate segment]—so no such observations by Nixon could have occurred. There is no mention of shirt sleeves, only an allusion to Nixon’s staff always being careful to wear coats and ties when entering his office. By then, Nixon was hard at work on his Memoirs, the second of the ten books he would write. While Frost doesn’t dare say so, it is even possible they congratulated each other on the apparent success of their venture.

## Conclusion

What are we to make of all this—a play whose portrayal of Nixon is so biased and based on such sheer invention as to be meaningless? A conservative producer could make a movie about any of the last three Democratic presidents—and portray Bill Clinton as a philandering lightweight, Jimmy Carter as the most inept president of our lifetime, or Lyndon Johnson as a bullying, intemperate redneck. But if their film changed the words and actions of actual events to ‘prove’ their version of these leader’s souls, there would be adverse editorial comment and public reaction—as there was when this was tried with Ronald Reagan and the public outcry led to cancellation of the planned broadcast.

The Frost interviews were (and still are) mesmerizing—but they show something entirely different from the movie’s version: They show Frost probing and Nixon responding, defending his decisions and his administration. He is and remains the dominant foreign affairs president of our lifetime: Detente with Russia, the opening to China, ending the Vietnam War—all remain accomplishments of great magnitude. His domestic agenda, forged with a Congress dominated by the opposing party, shows a creativity and innovation unsurpassed by subsequent administrations. Watergate, of course, overshadows all else, but recent revelations about the true identity of Deep Throat, about the conduct of Judge John Sirica, and about the complex roles played by John Dean may yet lead to a different interpretation of those historic events.

But the Left's residual hatred of Richard Nixon has no bounds and we are left with a play and a movie based on the terrifically biased version by a junior researcher, basking in his fifteen minutes of fame. *Frost/Nixon* contains great acting to be sure, but the factual basis of its most telling moments is virtually non-existent. The much heralded moment of Nixon's dramatic collapse is simply missing from the actual interview. The play's premise exists only in the mind of one still disgruntled researcher: James Reston.

Are Academy Awards given out on the basis of how evil some wish our thirty-seventh president to have been? Apparently not--but the American people have a right to ask how Frost/Nixon could have been produced, promoted and reviewed without anyone pointing out how much of it is merely a fictionalized version of events.

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Geoff Shepard was an attorney on Nixon's White House staff for five years, including helping in his Watergate defense. His book about the politics behind the Watergate prosecutions, *The Secret Plot to Make Ted Kennedy President, Inside the Real Watergate Conspiracy*, was published last year by Penguin Sentinel.

## Annotations

Ed Cox quote: Frost, pp 273-274.

DVD: *Frost Nixon, Their Historic Watergate Confrontation*, including an interview with Sir David Frost. Produced by Duncan Sibbald and Trevor Poots of David Paradine Productions.

Book: Frost, David. "I Gave Them a Sword", Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interview. William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York (1978).

Booklet: Reston, Jr. James. The Conviction of Richard Nixon, the Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews. Harmony Books, New York (2007). Reston's own biography states:

Born in New York in 1941, he was raised in Washington, D.C. and attended the University of North Carolina on a Morehead Scholarship where he earned his B.A. in philosophy. At UNC he was an All South soccer player and after forty two years still holds the single game scoring record for the university. (5 goals against N.C. State, October 18, 1962.) He attended Oxford University for his junior year.

Reston was an assistant to U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Steward Udall, 1964-65. U.S. Army, 1965-68. Lecturer in Creative Writing, University of North Carolina, 1971-81.

Caroline Cushing Mentions:

Later in January [1976], I thought it was time to make a social call on San Clemente in order to keep in touch, and give what I somewhat overoptimistically described on the telephone to Brennan as a "progress report."

Nixon then invited my companion, Caroline Cushing, to join us and pose for a photograph. Frost, p. 36.

"Now," I added, "in case you've forgotten, you're all invited to my birthday party—by Caroline, I hasten to add. Why on earth she thinks I want to spend my birthday with such a miserable bunch of manic depressives I cannot imagine, but there it is. . ." Frost, p. 202.

Before I left [California], I drove to San Clemente with Caroline, to say farewell to Richard Nixon. Frost, p. 313.

Opening Question:

I took Brennan to one side and asked him what he thought of opening with the tapes. He said he thought it might work, then went off to join Khachigian and Price. . . Frost, p. 92.

"Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal."

"By definition. . ." [Frost] said encouragingly.

"Exactly, exactly," Nixon replied. "If the President, if, for example, the President approves something, approves an action because of the national security or, in this case, because of a threat to internal peace and order of significant magnitude, then the President's decision in that instance is one that enables those who carry it out to carry it out without violating the law. Otherwise, they're in an impossible position." Frost, p. 184.

#### Brennan's Threat to Ruin Frost:

"How do we know," resumed Brennan, when we were alone, "that you are not going to screw us on the editing?"

I demurred and quickly put the question that was on my mind. "How do we know that you are not going to screw us with the stonewalling?"

We had both stated as baldly as possible our basic fears; We had not put each other's mind to rest, but at least it did make dialogue easier. Brennan went on.

"You know, 60 percent of what this guy did in office was right," he said. "And 30 percent may have been wrong, but he thought it was right at the time."

I stared at Brennan without having to say a word. Both of us had passed arithmetic in elementary school. Ten percent of what Nixon did was wrong, and he knew it was wrong. Brennan finally broke the silence. "If you screw us on the 60 percent, I'm going to ruin you if it takes the rest of my life."

I did not want to quibble over the exact percentages. Putting my arm around him, I replied, "And if you stonewall us on the 10 percent, I'm going to ruin you if it takes the rest of my life."

It was a curious compact, born of belligerence, but I found it oddly encouraging." Frost, p. 82.

#### Midnight Phone Call

In his critique of the London play, Bob Zelnick (Frost's other researcher), confirmed there was no such midnight phone call. Ron Howard, in his January 28, 2008, interview with Hugh Hewitt, did the same.

#### Brennan Interruption:

The moment was slipping. We had been close, so close to the sort of purging statement that both history and justice required, and then Nixon had backed off.

A break might help, I thought. We had made some progress that we had scarcely dared to believe was possible. But now—how to encourage this reluctant witness to complete his task? I needed time to think. And to talk to my colleagues. Yes, and to talk to Jack Brennan, too. A few minutes earlier he has entered the room for the only time in the whole twenty-eight hours and tiptoed over behind the camera, where I could see him holding up a piece of paper. It was difficult to read, but I thought it said, "Let us talk." Then he had tiptoed out again. Nixon and I had been in the middle of an exchange, and I had ignored the message at that time, but now perhaps Brennan would have something to add.

I told Nixon that we needed time to "change tapes," asking the crew at the same time to agree to a late lunch break. Although we planned to resume in a few minutes, I had no idea when we would finish.

Nixon rose slowly and returned to his room, where Khachigian dashed to join him. I started for our own monitor room. But Brennan was waiting in the hall. His face was flushed.

He began to talk in a jumble of words. I heard only isolated phrases. "Critical moment in his life. . ." "Can't cross-examine him. . ." "Know he'll go further. . ." "What do you want?"

On the floor lay his piece of paper. It did not say, "Let us talk." It said, "Let him talk." Frost, p. 264.

#### Farewell Meeting:

I only saw Richard Nixon once more. It was a little over a week later, just after the second program on foreign policy had been broadcast. The reaction to the Interviews from both press and public had been greater than I could have dreamt possible.

The law entitles former Presidents one federally financed office at a location of their choice. Nixon decided to use the Coast Guard compound adjacent to the grounds where his home stands. It used to be called the Western White House.

It is quiet there now, but outwardly little has changed. The lawns are still manicured, the building meticulously kept, the photographs of Nixon at various meetings with world and national leaders still line the walls. On some days you may see Rose Mary Woods answering the phones outside the private Nixon office. Ken Khachigian likes to work in shirtsleeves in the office directly across from Nixon's. But when the former President wants to see him, even for a moment, he puts his jacket on and makes sure his tie is straight. Frost, pp. 313-314.