

**Timothy Naftali**

My name is Tim Naftali and I'm Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. It's October 30, 2007. We're in Washington, DC, and I have the privilege and honor to be interviewing Sir David Frost for our Oral History Program. Sir David, thank you for joining us.

**David Frost**

It's a pleasure to be with you. Pleasure, Tim.

**Timothy Naftali**

Sir David, please tell us about your meeting with Jack Brennan, who was President Nixon's, former President Nixon's chief of staff when you were discussing the nature of the interview.

**David Frost**

Well, there were one or two of those. Which one were you thinking of?

**Timothy Naftali**

I was thinking of the one where you talk about arithmetics.

**David Frost**

Arithmetic?

**Timothy Naftali**

Yeah.

**David Frost**

Yes, this was very tense. We were afraid that they were trying to delay things beyond a possible point to an impossible point and so pressing for them to move. They were worried about our editing and all of that sort of thing. And defending Nixon, Jack Brennan said, "Listen, 60 percent of what that man did was great, was really good. Thirty percent may not have been good, but he did not realize that." Well, mathematicians watching us now, this moment in history, will realize that that left 10 percent, which were not good and he must have realized they were not good or were wrong or whatever. And that was an early, an amazing sort of seismic thought.

**Timothy Naftali**

But then he pressed you?

**David Frost**

Yes, and he said, "If you don't do justice to the 60 percent, then I will never forgive you. I will pursue you. I will pursue you to ruin," and so on. And I said, "If you screw us on the 10 percent, I will do the same to you." And that was a tense situation between the two of us. And there was one other session, which I didn't know whether you meant, which was when he'd been a little bit slow in some of his answers. Not mentally slow, but just -- and not filibustering, but just took longer. And so although we had 24 hours it didn't seem like enough. And so I took Jack Brennan out to lunch at the Quiet Candlelight [phonetic sp] I think it was called, and I said, "We really need another four hours, not 24 but 28 hours. And we don't have any money left to pay for it." And so he said, "Oh, well, you don't have any money to pay, well, I don't know if we can do that." And then I said, "Because, you know, if we don't get that extra four hours, you know, there are -- we're just going to have to drop some subjects, like China." And of course we got the extra four hours. It was actually a Nixonian tactic played on Nixon's man, perhaps.

**Timothy Naftali**

But there was also, there was also a moment where Frank Gannon played a role in resolving an issue.

**David Frost**

Yes, he -- really engaging guy. He'd worked -- I'd met him before -- he worked as a researcher for Randolph Churchill. And he was known there as the "pudding boy". Why was he known as the pudding boy? Because he ate pudding after pudding after pudding, or dessert after dessert after dessert. But the pudding boy, always the pudding boy. But Frank, very, very, very bright guy, at one of these stages, these key stages in the timing of the Watergate session, and the fact that it had to be done by a certain date in order to get on the air in time and so on. And, I mean, it was very complicated. There were even more complications probably than even in my book, because, I mean, there were delays. There were lawyers. There were worries that as long as Haldeman and Ehrlichman's trials were not over, then he couldn't talk about them and I mean, it was a really complex, complex period. And that's when the tensions were that high. Later on, I mean, Jack Brennan, you know, became a good friend and the teams worked together like friendly legal teams.

**Timothy Naftali**

For the oral history, I'd like you to document if you will the conversation that you had with Henry Kissinger, and tell us where it happened. The one where he responds, after you've interviewed Nixon on foreign policy matters.

**David Frost**

Well, what happened was that the -- one of the most humorous parts of the Nixon interviews was undoubtedly whenever Richard Nixon talked about Henry Kissinger. Because obviously these two men were umbilically linked in terms of credit from history, and they couldn't afford to slag each other off because then the other might slag them and it might affect their giant reputation or their solo reputation or whatever. So they both wanted to go for the top billing and the responsibility for the good things and somehow slough off the bad things, and so on and so forth. And so Nixon would

pursue this policy of saying, "Oh, Henry," as he said sort of like, and "Henry was so, he was so, in terms of -- I mean, he's a real intellectual, I mean, Henry was a real intellectual, I mean, and you know, like most intellectuals you know, he was unstable, and like most intellectuals you know, unreliable and you couldn't be sure he'd stick with a point of view. He wanted us to change our policy on Kent State and after Kent State and after that had happened that we should go back and change our policy on Cambodia. And I had to say to him, 'Remember Lot's wife. Never look back, Henry. Never look back.'" So that was his approach to Henry. And I was speaking to Henry on the phone the week we'd done this interview and he said, "Oh, I've been, you've been getting me this week. He said, "I expect Nixon described me as a sort of unreliable intellectual who needed his strong and sturdy hand." And I said, "Henry, have you been bugging these sessions?" And he said, "No David, I just know my boy. I just know my boy," he said. And the corollary to that was Henry's way of striking back. As I say, he couldn't strike back directly because they were linked by history. So his way of doing it was more or less to say, "President Nixon was a great President. He's underestimated. It's terrible the way he's underestimated. He was a great delegator, that was the great thing. And you know, he delegated most of the important things to me, of course. But he was a great --" you know, and that was --

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you have a chance to interview Henry Kissinger?

**David Frost**

Yes, it's a long story, that. I did an interview with him for the first volume of his memoirs. NBC had signed a controversial contract with him whereby everybody criticized it because they said, "But you can't have Henry as an independent commentator because he's obviously going to commentate on the things being good that he did and the things that someone else is doing as not so good." I mean, you know, this is not -- So they wanted to find an independent interrogator. And this is two years after the Nixon interviews when Henry said that he thought the President on foreign policy was terrific. And this one became a real confrontation. And we scarcely spoke for 20 years. And, I mean, and it was really tense. And so we didn't really capture, we captured some very powerful stuff, but we didn't obviously get the relaxed Henry, the anecdotal Henry to that extent because the thing was rather tense. But it made for a very dramatic program.

**Timothy Naftali**

Did you use the entire program or was it edited?

**David Frost**

Well, what happened was that the -- This was an NBC news program, so it wasn't my production. So they brought me in and asked me to do this, which they rarely did, so that was a compliment. But it was their program. So that, I had to resign from the program because they wanted me to redo some of the questions. And so then they had to finish the program. And luckily they did finish it. And it was very -- I cannot tell you how lonely it was to know that a program of yours was being edited and that you were not doing it for four or five days. But they did do it, and it did go out. I remember feeling it would have been worthwhile to stand firm on these points because John J. O'Connor wrote a thing in

the "New York Times" the day after it went out that it was, you know, somehow made all the agony worthwhile.

**Timothy Naftali**

When you were editing or thinking about editing the Nixon interviews, in your book you say that a lot of the -- that a number of the first minutes of conversation you thought would just go into the toilet, that you were disappointed. It was not as you had hoped, particularly the discussion of the eighteen-and-a-half-minute gap. Give us a little bit of a sense of the evolution of the interview, your confidence in the interview as it progressed.

**David Frost**

Yes, it was really, the eighteen-and-a-half and the first program, the first day, we'd been trying to decide what to do as the first particular day, and we ended up with a bit of a hodgepodge, really. And it was the second day when we started getting really serious about Vietnam, that one realized that we were on to firmer ground. I mean, that Vietnam material, I mean, we went over it at great length, and in my book there is, you know, there is 50 or 60 pages of it. And Nixon, I mean particularly, Nixon being, of course, above everything else, passionate about the fact that it was Congress that lost Vietnam. I mean, that was the thing he cared about saying most of all I think, that the brief period when his peace plan survived, from '73 to '75, was destroyed purely by the Congress and not by anybody else. But so that was the subject that really triggers often the fact that now we're focusing, now we're getting somewhere. One of the other things that, of course, you'll have to be very careful of, that is we had a very good girl, a woman called Jennifer Schowel [phonetic sp] who did the transcripts everyday. And we were doing sessions on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. So she, overnight on the Monday, would produce a transcript so when we watched the previous day's program, we had a transcript. And transcripts, they were almost always perfect. But we came upon one that we couldn't remember what he meant. Nixon said, "And then, of course, I withdrew 50,000 men from Vietnam after I met you at Midway." And I thought, I can't remember this. I mean, I certainly know -- I can't remember him saying it, and I certainly know I was never at Midway. So we went back to the tape and of course what he had actually said was, "After I met Thieu at Midway." But it's the sort of thing that could slip into a transcript and slip out into the --

**Timothy Naftali**

But you were responsible for Vietnamization then. [laughter]

**David Frost**

Exactly, exactly.

**Timothy Naftali**

Tell us, in the play there is a sense, and I suppose in the movie too, that there was some disappointment in the Frost team as you neared the Watergate interview. Tell us about the role that the

transcripts and the other materials played in briefing you. To what extent did you think you were on top of this, that you had what you needed?

**David Frost**

Well, I felt by the time we got to the stage that I really knew the transcripts as well as it was possible to know all the transcripts that were available, including those ones that James Reston who discovered that were available but nobody had spotted them before. And I really felt confident in that sense. And that was a confidence that grew over the period. The anguish and the -- potential anguish -- in the minds of the team, builds up a lot in the play and the film probably because it's important to the drama and so on. As Peter Morgan always says, patiently sighing to me, "David, this is a play, not a documentary." Or sometimes he says, "This is a documentary, not a play." Either way around but the -- so that he lays it on a bit thick. They were concerned. And I think when you actually read again what Bob Zelnick said about the qualities of Richard Nixon just before this session, it was in the book that I did just before, you do realize what a daunting task it was and, you know, I mean, the list of the things. He served as a lawyer for this, he's da da da da da da da ... I mean it's a really daunting list. And we were daunted in that sense. And I was daunted in that sense. But I never lost my faith that we or I was going to pull it off.

**Timothy Naftali**

Before this interview, for which interview do you think you had done the greatest amount of preparation? I mean, what was the hardest interview before this Richard Nixon interview?

**David Frost**

Vietnam, I suppose, because there's so much of Vietnam.

**Timothy Naftali**

Oh, I know, and I meant a person other than Richard Nixon. Was it --

**David Frost**

Oh, I see.

**Timothy Naftali**

Prime Minister Macmillan, did you interview Macmillan?

**David Frost**

No, by the time I was interviewing he had sort of given up interviewing, being interviewed. I would say... That's a very interesting... I mean, in an [unintelligible] sense, possibly General Norman Schwarzkopf because the interview we did immediately after the Gulf War part one was a crucial one and it had headlines for four days, front page headlines for four days and so on. And that involved a lot of research. Sometimes going to countries for the first time involves -- The first time I interviewed

Gough Whitlam, about to be the prime minister of Australia, involved a lot of work because I didn't -- The first time I interviewed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan and the father of, the executed father of Benazir Bhutto, they were. The most difficult interview, however, was -- I was launching -- I had agreed, with another weekend to go to Finland, not to Finland, it was to Norway and Sweden to promote the series called "Frost and Sunny," which was a more lighthearted program, which was going out on the air in both countries. So we did a press conference in Norway in the morning and in the afternoon we did a session in Sweden and then -- it was only five o'clock and so I said, "Well, the plane's not until seven, so we can go on and have a drink at the hotel." And they said, "No, no, no. We're going straightaway to the studios for your live interview with the deputy prime minister." I said, "What live interview? I never heard anything about that." Oh no, look, it's in all the papers here, listed in all the papers that I was interviewing him. He was at that time an unknown man. He became very well-known as Olaf Palme. But he was absolutely unknown to me at that time. I couldn't have told you what party he was in or anything. I knew nothing about him. And I was supposed to interview him in half an hour. And so on the way to the studio I was making a list of all the questions that I could ask that, I didn't know the answers, but I mean, that just were general questions. What do you regard as your greatest achievement? I mean, he could have said anything. He could have claimed to have walked on water, you know, but I wouldn't know if he had done it. What's your greatest achievement and what's your biggest mistake? If you were to look at the map of the world in ten year's time, in what ways would it differ from today? And so on and so forth. And by the time this nightmare, but the time I got to the studio I got 12 or 15 of these generalist questions. And we got through the interview. We had enough to get through the interview. We did the interview and departed from the airport with a sign of relief. And the joke was that the Stockholm papers the next day were unanimous, and they all said, "How refreshing to have an interviewer who does not trouble himself with the minutiae of day-to-day politics and instead concentrates on the great issues of our time." [laughter] One of the best reviews I ever had.

### Timothy Naftali

So you prepared for Watergate. After these interviews, Bob Zelnick says to the press that this in a sense was the trial of Richard Nixon. When did you realize that you actually would have the opportunity to cross-examine a man who, because of the pardon, had never been cross-examined before about Watergate? And how did you think about this new responsibility as a Brit, indeed?

### David Frost

Absolutely, that was, because of the pardon and also because of the phlebitis I suppose. For both reasons he'd never been questioned on these matters. And so that was, yes, that was foremost in my mind from the very beginning, that this was a real responsibility, that it was the first and it might be the only time, as in fact it turned out to be. And so that was very much in our mind from the very word "Go," that responsibility. And that challenged, too.

### Timothy Naftali

Please tell us about because people have seen the film, tell us about how the break occurred in the first Watergate session. The pause?

**David Frost**

That break in the first -- I'll start the answer again. That's very interesting, because that break was obviously unplanned and initially misconstrued by myself because we were approaching the vital last 15, 20 minutes of the interview. We'd been through a lot of the mistakes. We'd been through Haldeman and Ehrlichman's demise or ouster and so on. And Nixon was starting to give even more than he ever had up until that point. And suddenly I saw Jack Brennan, his chief of staff, come into the room with a sign, which as far as I could see, said, "Let us talk." And I thought, "Oh well, he's never been in before. Well, this is interesting. We'll have a quick tape stop and find out." So I said, "We're just going to change the tapes." And so, as he came closer, I realized that it didn't, in fact, say, "Let us talk." It said, "Let him talk." So, in other words, he was pressing for the fact that I not continue too much of an interrogation that might shut Nixon up because he thought Nixon was on the verge of having more things to say that he'd never said before. So Jack Brennan was on the side of the angels at that particular moment, in reality. Equally dramatic in the play is a different scenario where Jack Brennan sees Nixon about to give and wants to get hold of him for a minute, just not necessarily to shut him up, but at least to make him aware of what he's on the verge of doing. So Brennan comes in, interrupts the -- everyone gets angry, and he interrupts to basically say, "I want to talk to -- come with me." And I said, "Where?" And he takes Nixon out. And so in the two versions, both dramatic, one true and one not true, but had different emotions really because Jack Brennan seemed to be trying to slow Nixon down in the play, whereas he seemed to be encouraging me to let Nixon roll in the actual real version.

**Timothy Naftali**

In your writing about this, you say that you're a little worried that after this remarkable moment, he had reached, the President reached a point of vulnerability that you could not get him to again. But you do in the second Watergate interview. How do you do that?

**David Frost**

Well, fortunately, the first interview of the two days on Watergate was such a disaster for him because he was not admitting anything at all, not admitting anything. And his people, who had said that they could never brief him in advance because Watergate was too personal, just too deep a hurt, too personal, must have, in some way, got their point across to Nixon, that this total stonewall was doomed, doomed to failure and perhaps even ignominy. And when he came on the second day, first of all he was late, 18 minutes late. Not 18-and-a-half minutes late; that would have been too poetic. And he looked rather like he did during the days of the actual Watergate thing taking place. And so he came on the second day and he had obviously either worked out, and I never found out the answer to this, either worked out talking with his aides who suddenly decided they had to talk to him about Watergate even though it was so painful, or on his own he had worked out that he had to go further. So what made the second day work after the first day was the fact that the first day was such a disaster for him. And he realized it because I knew the tapes as well or better than he did, and point after point, and particularly the 16 or 17 points about John Dean mentioning money and all the conversations between Nixon and Dean mentioning money, those had such potency that he therefore, it was the very non-community of nature of the first day that made the second day possible, even perhaps inevitable.

**Timothy Naftali**

Do you feel that these, to that point, unused transcripts that James Reston had found, that they were the ones that helped push him over the edge.

**David Frost**

The unused transcripts were very helpful, but they were not that important because there were two days on Watergate, two and a half hours for each, and these tapes came in the first hour, really, the first hour of day one. And so it was four and a half hours later, in television terms, when he started to crumple, to give in or whatever.

**Timothy Naftali**

What do you recall of your reaction when he asked you to suggest a better word than "mistakes" to substitute for mistakes?

**David Frost**

That was the most heart-stopping answer I've ever heard because I knew that he was more vulnerable at that moment than he probably ever would be again and that I must phrase my response in order to get that across. And I threw down my clipboard in order to indicate this was not a scripted job, that this was not a prepared ambush or anything like this. This was a moment that neither of us had ever expected would happen. And then I phrased the -- I tried to say. I said, "It seems to me there are three things the American people want you to say and want to hear. And the first is that there was wrongdoing in the White House, maybe criminality, indeed, that secondly, you'd let down your whole oath of office, and thirdly, that you put the American people through two years of needless pain and you apologize for that." And I said, "That's difficult for anybody, and I know it's particularly difficult for you.

But if you don't do it, I think you'll be haunted for the rest of your life." And that's when he took the three points, remembered the three points and dealt with the three points over the next 20 minutes leading to that climax.

**Timothy Naftali**

What were you thinking --

**David Frost**

I'm going to have to run in a few minutes.

**Timothy Naftali**

Okay. Last two questions.



**David Frost**

Okay.

**Timothy Naftali**

When that was done, you -- what do you recall is your reaction as you're listening to the President say this?

**David Frost**

The question or --

**Timothy Naftali**

To the answer, his answer, as you're listening to it.

**David Frost**

I remember thinking, you know, people often lied about how I listen when I'm doing interviews. Because anyone who does interviews listens if they have any sense, and I was thinking that this is the most powerful example of that, you know, that one must not let a nuance pass as it were in this thing. Not to interrupt him because, as Jack Brennan said, "Let him talk." But in terms of not missing any opportunity. And then as the -- as he came through to the -- And when he said -- he had said on the night before he said his farewell speech, he had said to -- and he quoted this -- that he said to his friends and his group of friends he met about six or seven o'clock in the evening, "I hope I haven't let you down." And at that point, obviously, they all intended to say, "No, of course not, Mr. President, not at all. You've done a wonderful job. It's very unfair," you know, I mean, that would have been -- It wasn't a genuine confession, it was something to get a warm response. But then when in the interviews, and he got to that point and he said, "I said, 'I hope I haven't let you down.' Well, that said it all. I had. I'd let down the hopes of all of them," and so on. But it was just that --

**Timothy Naftali**

Had you expected to get this from him?

**David Frost**

Pardon?

**Timothy Naftali**

Had you expected to get this from Nixon?

**David Frost**

I think he went further than we could really have ever, really, seriously hoped. Now, I'm an optimist, but in this particular case -- I think he said everything and more than one could have hoped.

**Timothy Naftali**

Afterwards, did you talk to any of his associates who commented on this, on whether they were surprised that he had said this? I mean, because you had talked to his associates before, to prep. Afterwards, do you recall any conversations with any of them, with Haldeman, Dean, someone like that saying, "I hadn't expected to hear that from President Nixon?"

**David Frost**

I can remember the relief of his team that day that he had gone as far as this. I mean, the -- I remember that. But I don't remember it was, there was such a cascade of responses to that, and I can't remember the major players. I don't think I talked to Haldeman or Ehrlichman after the broadcast, which wouldn't have been surprising because both Haldeman and Ehrlichman would not have agreed with Nixon's, the gloss Nixon put upon their departure, do you know what I mean? So you wouldn't want to bring out to get their opening because they were probably feeling a bit sore that Nixon had said what he'd said. Although what he said was very effective and tried to be compassionate and so on, but obviously he wasn't. But I'm sure -- for our next conversation, I'll think because there must have been one or two but I can't remember. Forgive me, I must go.

**Timothy Naftali**

Sir David, thank you very much.

**David Frost**

Pleasure.