

Ron Howard's Frost/Nixon: Trivializing a war criminal

By Patrick Martin
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Directed by Ron Howard, script by Peter Morgan from his play, based on the book by James Reston, Jr., The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews

There are many problems with *Frost/Nixon*, Ron Howard's film adaptation of the play by Peter Morgan, but the main one is the subject matter itself: British television talk show host David Frost's lengthy interview with the disgraced former president Richard M. Nixon, broadcast in four 90-minute segments in May 1977.

More than 30 years ago, the newspaper of the Workers League in the United States, the *Bulletin*, one of the predecessors of the *World Socialist Web Site*, denounced the broadcasts as "The Great Nixon TV Fraud."

"The programs form part of the continuation of the Watergate cover-up," we wrote then. "At times in Episode One, Frost almost fell on all fours in front of the unconvicted criminal Nixon. It was difficult to determine who was the greater ham of the two: Nixon choking with grief as he described the sacking of [John] Ehrlichman and [H.R.] Haldeman [his two closest aides], and Frost sitting on the edge of his chair wringing his hands, his eyes glistening with forced tears."

There is little reason to alter that judgment. Frost's interview, while widely publicized and viewed at the time, contributed nothing to a genuine examination of Nixon's crimes and the complex political history out of which they arose. There was little broadcast time devoted to the major crimes that led up to the Watergate debacle: the systematic assault on democratic rights provoked by fear of the protest movement against the Vietnam War, and the war itself, which caused the deaths of more than 21,000 US soldiers and 1 million Vietnamese during Nixon's presidency.

The *Bulletin* commented at the time: "When Nixon leaned forward, stared at the camera and declared, 'I'm not a butcher,' he was quoting lines drafted by his

speechwriters. It is only necessary to point out that the remark was made on the seventh anniversary of the Kent State massacre, when National Guardsmen opened fire on students, killing four of them. The real authors of the killings were Nixon and his Attorney General John Mitchell. The man who now claims he isn't a butcher ordered the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, the blitzkrieg of Cambodia, the secret war in Laos. From 1968 until his resignation in August 1974, Nixon's regime dripped with blood."

The article concluded: "At the end of the program—for those hardy elements who endured it all—there was scarcely a viewer who would buy a used car from either of them."

This sarcastic remark points to the essential sleaziness of the whole affair. The Frost/Nixon interviews were not a crusading effort at political exposure, but an agreement in which mercenary considerations were uppermost on both sides.

The six hours of television mainly benefited the two individuals whose names now comprise the title of the play and movie: Frost revived his TV career, then on the decline, and today enjoys wealth, celebrity and a knighthood. Nixon collected an initial payment of \$600,000 up front, and a total of \$1 million with subsequent royalties, and helped promote his self-justifying memoirs, published soon afterwards.

Yet in the hands of Ron Howard, this tawdry bargain between a political gangster and a media huckster is presented as though it were the latest installment of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* franchise, with Frost as the underdog, bloodied fighter and Nixon in the role of Apollo Creed. Frost—played with far greater sympathy than he deserves by the appealing Michael Sheen—is shown overcoming financial and political obstacles, his own mistakes and the intransigent opposition of Nixon himself to achieve a journalistic knockout just before the

bell.

Howard was quite conscious of the effect he was seeking, telling an interviewer, “It’s a humanizing look at both of these very complicated characters in this event ... it’s really about these two lone wolves going at each other, and that’s really where the drama and the entertainment lies.”

The acting, as a whole, is the strongest element in the film. Besides Sheen, with Sam Rockwell (as James Reston, Jr.), Oliver Platt (Bob Zelnick) and Matthew Macfadyen (John Birt) as his principal aides, Frank Langella stands out in the role of Nixon, although the characterization is ultimately allowed to cross the line into bathos in the scene (invented by Morgan) in which Nixon makes a drunken midnight phone call to Frost that spurs the interviewer to change his approach.

There were, it must be said, some significant comments by Nixon in the course the 28 hours of discussion with Frost. Unfortunately, some of the most important never make it into the film.

At one point, Nixon expressed the deep fear of mass opposition from below that dominated his administration. “Nobody can know,” he said, “what it means for a President to be sitting in the White House working late at night, as I often did, and to have hundreds of thousands of demonstrators around charging through the streets.”

The quote that has gone down in history, highlighted in the film, is Nixon’s response to a question about whether his efforts to halt leaks of embarrassing information—including the authorization of break-ins and wiretapping—had violated the law: “When the President does it, that means it’s not illegal,” he told Frost.

This remark is only one of many parallels between the Nixon administration and the outgoing presidency of George W. Bush that explain the attraction of this subject to Morgan and Howard. The two were careful not to go too far, however. According to one recent press interview, Morgan wanted to limit such comparisons as much as possible. When he realized that “people were seeing inferences and parallels,” he told the *New York Times*, he “went back to the play and threw stuff out.”

This reluctance to be drawn into too obvious a political commentary characterizes Howard’s approach as well. If anything, the film director seems to have been even more anti-political than the playwright. In one recent interview, on Comingsoon.net, Howard seems to suggest that it was Frost rather than Nixon that struck him as the more compelling subject for a film.

“It was a big event,” he said, referring to Frost’s efforts

to cobble together broadcast outlets for the interview after the three television networks turned him down. “First of all, on an entrepreneurial level, no one had ever created a fourth network before for a program. The idea that this was not going to be on CBS, ABC, or NBC, but was showing up on your local station was really weird.”

Howard described his own reaction, as he and a “Happy Days” co-star, Anson Williams, watched the Nixon resignation on television in an airport lounge. “It was horribly humiliating as an American to see your President resign in shame like that,” he recalled. “We went over there and stood back there and watched him resign, and it was shattering. Neither Anson or I spoke for ten, fifteen minutes after that.”

The reaction to Nixon’s resignation among broad layers of the American population—particularly among the more oppressed sections of the working class and among young people (who then included Howard)—was far different. Jubilation, not humiliation, was the mood. The shame was Nixon’s, not the American people’s.

In his more than two decades as a director, after an equally long stint as a television and film actor going back to childhood, Ron Howard has shown facility at crafting popular entertainment from an eclectic mix of materials. This writer enjoyed *Apollo 13*, but Howard has never seemed to be able to rise above the level of his sources and make an independent artistic contribution.

His most recent opus, besides *Frost/Nixon*, was a pro-Obama campaign video that expresses the flaccid and conformist liberalism of the Hollywood mainstream. Such political and ideological equipment is hopelessly inadequate for seriously tackling a subject like the enormous social and political crisis that compelled a US president to resign.

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