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Nixon and Walters

'Our Show': Tapes, Russia and Old Pals

By Tom Shales

Not a cobra and a mongoose, no no. More like a butterfly and an iguana. Barbara Walters fluttered and jabbered and punched the night air and Richard M. Nixon sat there looking contemplative, unflappable and older than the last time we saw him.

And in the closing minute of ABC's live interview with Nixon on "20/20" last night, the former president admitted that if he had it to do all over again—and he won't—he would burn the Watergate tapes that brought down his administration six years ago.

"They were private conversations, subject to misinterpretation, as we have seen," said Nixon after Walters made the tape-burning question the last one to be popped.

Nixon's upper lip began to perspire about 18 minutes into the program, and there were the old tricks and Nixonian phrases like "Now let's understand one thing" and "Let me say this." But he looked a little less scrappy and seemed a little less mocking than usual. It was a scaled-down, mellowed-out Nixon who at one point paraphrased Douglas MacArthur by telling Walters, "old politicians usually die, but they never fade away."

Still, it was a terrific hour of live TV, brightened when Walters and Nixon occasionally stopped for a procedural tangle or a volley of asides.

"Yes, go ahead, it's your show," said Nixon during the interview, as if to dispel advance reports that Nixon aides tried to control the content of the program.

"Our show," corrected Walters. "You give the answers." Later Nixon repeated the "it's your show" assurance after implying he would not answer political questions and told Walters, "You can ask political questions if you want."

A small tussle evolved out of Walters quoting Henry Kissinger's assessment of Nixon as cold and remote. Nixon's reply was an amusingly cold and remote, "I like Henry very much." Then he said to Walters "Why don't we get serious?"

"We have a different idea of what serious is," countered Walters.

"Oh, I don't object to the questions," Nixon rushed to reassure her.

The exchange had something of the flavor of a spat in the breakfast nook.

Nixon tried his old gambit of disarming interrogators by co-opting them. He recalled to Walters how she'd made herself so omnipresent on Nixon's trip to China that some people thought she was part of the group. Barbara said quickly that this was the only one of Nixon's trips she went on. Then Nixon, sensing her resentment, allowed as how "it was delightful" having her along.

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Other remarks were Nixonian in a rather classic sense. On the delicate balance between detente and containment of the Russians during his administration, Nixon declared, "Because we stood up to them, we were able to sit down with them."

Without oil from the Mideast, Nixon said, the United States would be plunged into a greater depression than that of the '30s and would soon fall under the control of a right-wing or left-wing dictatorship, "and," Nixon

opined, "I think that can and should be avoided."

Nixon "never" felt he might become emotionally unhinged during Watergate, he said, because "that's just part of my makeup," which is only funny if you think about it. And on the topic of why he and wife Pat don't go to cocktail parties anymore, Nixon said, "having done the top, we don't want to do any other."

When Walters got into the coldness and remoteness that supposedly mark Nixon's personality, his first response was to ask her, "Why are you interviewing me, then?" Nixon seemed uncomfortable with the personal questions Walters asked during the middle third of the interview, so finally she reached down under her chair and took out a pack of foreign-policy questions to ask Nixon. He appeared to love being asked foreign-policy questions.

Indeed, the first part of the interview was a generous plug for "The Real War," Nixon's new book on foreign policy. Walters quoted from it more than once. But she also asked early in the program about Watergate and said, "Watergate, Mr. Nixon, was you. Don't you feel responsible?"

Nixon said he thought that "the country is coming out of what I call the Watergate syndrome" and said there had been "overreaction" to Watergate in the watering down of the CIA and in the American military.

Host Hugh Downs appeared at the beginning of the program to swear, though not under oath, that "Mr. Nixon is not being paid for this interview, and he has no control over the questions." Curiously enough, the last question Walters asked, about the burning of the tapes, was the very question that "60 Minutes" producer Don Hewitt said Nixon's people used as an example of questions not to ask when they proposed that Nixon be interviewed on Hewitt's show. Hewitt turned them down flat.

Was Nixon sorry he didn't burn the tapes? "I probably should have," he said. "I shouldn't have even installed them." That was that, and the interview was over. Walters had been hyperactive, solicitous, coaxing, a bit jittery, and quite wonderful. Nixon had been Nixon had been Nixon . . . It was all anyone could ask.

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