Lights, Camera, Gotcha

The new movie "Frost/Nixon" underscores the importance of confrontation interviews. Here are some keys to making them work.

By Mark Feldstein

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In death as in life, Richard Nixon continues his eternal campaign on the comeback trail, this time courtesy of Hollywood, which never seems to tire of having Nixon to kick around. "Frost/Nixon," the recently released film about the disgraced president's television interviews with British talk-show host David Frost, occasionally allows cinematic license to trump historical reality, but it nonetheless reveals larger truths about the staging of confrontation interviews in an era of ceaseless media manipulation.

The dirty little secret of TV muckraking is that, all posturing to the contrary, interviewing is not really about getting a target's side of the story; it's about convicting him in the court of public opinion. Mainstream news reporters may cling to the fiction of objectivity, but hardened investigative reporters suffer no such delusions.

For the uninitiated, here is a primer on how a television gladiator choreographs an adversarial encounter to produce the necessary theatrical climax:

- **Take charge immediately** – Besides painstaking research and robust role-playing to anticipate and parry an adversary's answers, aggressive correspondents establish psychological dominance at the outset of the interview. Unlike Frost's series of conversations with Nixon, most television journalists only get one bite at their (bad) apple.

As a result, a combative questioner must seize control immediately once cameras start rolling, ruthlessly interrupting self-serving filibusters and carefully avoiding pleasantry that might weaken the necessary resolve to go for the jugular.
- **Go for the tight shot** – Arrange in advance to have the videographer zoom in slowly on the interviewee's face when the exchange grows heated. This cinematic effect visually reinforces the editorial goal of zeroing in on the quarry. At the same time, such close-ups more vividly accentuate sweating brows and darting eyes, the body language of guilt that Nixon so unwillingly perfected.

- **Use props** – In "Nixon/Frost," the TV performer tried to rattle the ex-president by showing him film of carnage in Vietnam, thereby forcing Nixon to choose between appearing icily unperturbed by the human misery he helped create or having to admit that Frost was right about civilian suffering that occurred on Nixon's watch. As every good trial lawyer knows, such tangible exhibits – video, photos, documents – not only help buttress a cross-examination but also add theatrical flair.

- **Set up targets to lie** – You can't force them to do so, of course, but it is always better to give them the opportunity to tell a falsehood on-camera before (not after) you pull out the smoking-gun memo that proves their culpability. A single lie captured on-camera shakes the edifice of everything else they say afterwards. Catching the interviewee in demonstrable deceit also makes it easier to bluff out the truth in subsequent questions because the disoriented target now fears that you possess more evidence than you actually do.

- **Spitballs work** – In "Frost/Nixon," the wily former president tries to throw the playboy host off his game just seconds before taping begins by asking: "Did you do any fornicating last night?" Such off-camera comments designed to rattle an opponent can be the journalistic equivalent of trash-talking on the basketball court. Another unnerving on-camera trick used by some TV investigative reporters: quietly pulling out thick files ostentatiously labeled to suggest they contain explosive new material – even if the files are merely stuffed with blank paper and no questions are ever asked about them.

- **Always keep one camera rolling no matter what** – That way, if your subject rips off his microphone or storms out of the room, you have footage of his defensive tantrum. Also, interviewees may blurt out embarrassing comments during a lull when they think they are not being recorded.

- **Aren't you sorry?** – Ask the target what he would do differently if he had it to do all over again. It's a no-win question: either the subject effectively admits his own guilt, or else he demonstrates a shameful unwillingness to acknowledge his sins. Heads you win, tails he loses.
Control the final product – When all else fails, remember that you decide how the interview will be edited. You choose which sound bites are broadcast, how long they run, and what gruesome video or tearful victim interviews are juxtaposed against it.

Are these tactics unfair? No more so than the carefully coached evasions, posturing, pontificating, stonewalling and outright lying that your target has perfected over a lifetime. Besides, you’ve already done the research to establish his guilt or else you wouldn’t be taping the interview in the first place; the trick now is to create the theatrical climax to dramatize the evidence you’ve already laboriously assembled.

So have at it. As David Frost’s researchers realized three decades ago, a bruising television interrogation may be the only justice that scoundrels like Richard Nixon ever get.

Like love and war, all is fair in the confrontational interview.

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