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Will Prime Minister Stephen Harper's initial cold shoulder to media pay off in the long-run?

By ALLAN BONNER

NEW YORK CITY—He haunts us still. U.S. president Richard Nixon is making his fourth big comeback—this one posthumously. His televised "Checkers" speech, referencing his simple lifestyle, honesty, Pat's "Republican" cloth coat, and the little dog Checkers that was a gift from a supporter kept him on the 1952 ticket with Eisenhower. After the Kennedy-Nixon debate and his failed run for California governor, he vowed the press wouldn't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore.

But then, a technically brilliant 1968 campaign, aided by George Wallace's sapping of Democratic votes, and a 1972 landslide solidified comeback number two.

The third comeback began after his resignation over the burglary at the Democratic campaign offices at the way Watergate complex in Washington. He wrote books, battled for possession of his papers, made speeches and advised future presidents.

President Nixon's fourth comeback is happening right now on Broadway and in bookstores near you. Larger-than-life press baron, historian and author Conrad Black has a formidable book out on Nixon. It's rather kind to the president who fascinates Americans more than any other president, save Lincoln.

Black is the right man for the job, facing 101 years in jail on various charges, including fraud. He needs a comeback too.

On Broadway, Peter Morgan's new play *Frost-Nixon* chronicles a major step in Nixon's third comeback—a series of in-depth interviews with talk show host David Frost. Tony Award-winning Frank Langella plays Nixon and Brit Michael Sheen who played Prime Minister Tony Blair in the movie *The Queen* (also by Morgan), plays Frost.

As I sat watching the play in New York, one scene leapt off the stage at me. It serves as an object lesson for those who study the relations between the press and politicians.

The two characters are near the end of 12 days of gruelling face to face interviewing. Both sides had done research. Famed literary agent Irving Paul "Swifty" Lazar has brokered the deal. Nixon wanted a comeback, and Frost wanted to be seen as a legitimate journalist with the "get" of the decade, not a puffball talk show host.

Late at night before one of the last tapings, Nixon calls Frost and they have a chat. Here's some of the dialogue:

NIXON: *Watergate. It's a small consolation to me that for the next couple of days, that word will be as much of a millstone around your neck as it has been around mine. Because I guess, the way you handle Watergate will determine whether these interviews are a success or failure. ...*

I called former Nixon speechwriter Aram Bakshian Jr., now the editor-in-chief of the periodical journal *American Speaker* in Washington. He says the conversation probably never happened in the way described, but it's a great literary

device.

The observation Nixon's character makes was true during Watergate, with *Washington Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein's careers soaring in inverse proportion to Nixon's downfall. But it's been true all through history. Publisher William Randolph Hearst famously told war correspondents, "You supply the pictures, I'll supply the war"—the war being the Spanish American. A generation of reporters, led by Walter Cronkite, earned their stripes in World War II. The late David Halberstam and Seymour Hersh's careers were linked to the Vietnam war. Hersh is still going strong in *The New Yorker*. Current President Bush's career is inextricably wound up with both the war in Iraq, and the reporters who cover that war.

NIXON: ...No matter how many awards—or how many column inches are written about you—or how high the elected office is for me—it still isn't enough, am I right? We still feel like the little man? Scrambling our way up, in undignified fashion, whatever hillock or mountain it is...

People forget the modest circumstances most reporters come from. Before the explosion of journalism schools right after Watergate made the occupation fashionable and respectable, most journalists came from working class backgrounds and made modest salaries. Like politicians reporters suffer severe ups and downs. Viewers are even more fickle than the electorate and incumbency means little in journalism.

NIXON: If we're honest for a minute...isn't that why we're here now...? The two of us? Looking for a way back? Into the sun? Into the limelight? Back onto the winner's podium? Because we could feel it slipping away? ...Humiliated all the more for having tried so pitifully hard. Well, to hell with that. We're not going to let that happen. Either of us. We're going to show those bums, and make them choke on our continued success. Our continued headlines. Our continued awards, power and glory. ...Am I right?

You're only as good as your last show, they say in show business. Journalists say this to each other too, while not really liking the comparison with actors, singers and jugglers. Politicians are only good (or relevant) as the last election or issue. It's a very strange and insecure life.

The other day I encountered John Turner, alone, leaning against a lamp post on Toronto's Bay Street outside The National Club. I introduced myself and reminded him of a time we'd met during a campaign. He was jovial and discussed his difficulty hailing a cab. He seemed genuinely pleased to have been recognized.

The previous weekend I was at dinner in a famous columnist's home. He'd been the toast of Washington, as they say, with 45 years of columns and books under his belt. It was sad how he was trying unsuccessfully to promote his greatly diminished syndicated column to a fellow dinner guest who was also a publisher.

One more election—covering or running. Finding the big issue that will resonate. The big "get"—the interview no one else can get. Or getting on the Sunday morning talk shows in Washington or *The House*, Don Newman or Mike Duffy in Canada. Journalists and politicians are siblings under the skin, locked in a symbiotic relationship.

As Frost and Nixon keep speaking over the telephone, Nixon gets Frost to admit that he's right about their both competitive and mutually beneficial relationship.

FROST: Except only ONE of us can win.

NIXON: Yes. And I shall be your fiercest adversary. I shall come at you with everything I've got. Because the limelight can only shine on ONE of us. And for the other, it'll be the wilderness'. With nothing and no one for company...

In reality, you can count the politicians who have been able to really square off against the media and win. Can anyone add to the short list of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Pierre Trudeau in Canada? Will Prime Minister Stephen Harper's initial cold shoulder to the media pay off in the long-run?

As Conrad Black points out, perhaps the playwright was wrong. Both Frost and Nixon won. Frost got his favourite table back at Sardis Restaurant and has been on television almost continuously ever since. Nixon wrote his books and even

held court at the State Department, briefing junior officers after an international trip.

The book must be read and the play seen, but in the end it may be BF Skinner who gets the last word. When the behavioral scientist was a grad student, he rewarded pigeons with pellets of food every time they used their beaks to move a lever. They pecked so much, Skinner fed them only every other time, and then randomly to save food.

Yet the pigeons were so keen to get the reward that many pecked with such vigor that their beaks smoked with heat. That's the limelight too—dangerous for both politicians and journalists.

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