

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

In an affecting memoir, a dying John Connally mused about the Kennedy assassination

John Connally played out his life on the national stage, but never quite in the center spotlight. He helped elect Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, yet saw his own presidential ambitions fizzle. Last week Democrats and Republicans alike gathered in Austin, Texas, to mourn the passing of Connally, who was dead at 76. A three-term Texas Governor and Democrat turned Republican who served as Richard Nixon's Treasury Secretary, Connally nonetheless will be best remembered as the man who sat in front of John Kennedy in a Dallas motorcade on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963. As burial preparations were under way, FBI officials sought permission from the Connally

family to extract fragments of the bullet that tore through Connally's chest that bleak November day. Their aim was to settle once and for all the perennial question of whether Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in Dallas. Instead, the request only unsettled Connally's kin. "It's an appalling attempt to capitalize on Governor Connally's death to gain publicity for worn-out theories," said Julian Read, a family spokesman.

*Shortly before he died, Connally finished his memoirs, *In History's Shadow*. In the following excerpts from the book, he ponders the what ifs and what might have beens.*

IF NOTHING ELSE, I HAVE BECOME an expert on fate, possibly bad judgment, too.

I helped elect three Presidents, watched from inches away the murder of one of them, experienced the bloody madness of war, lost a beloved daughter, was tried and acquitted on a criminal charge, went broke, watched my wife Nellie defeat breast cancer, and endured. I have witnessed more history than any school can teach.

But I have kept a secret from the public at large. That John Connally changed forever on Nov. 22, 1963.

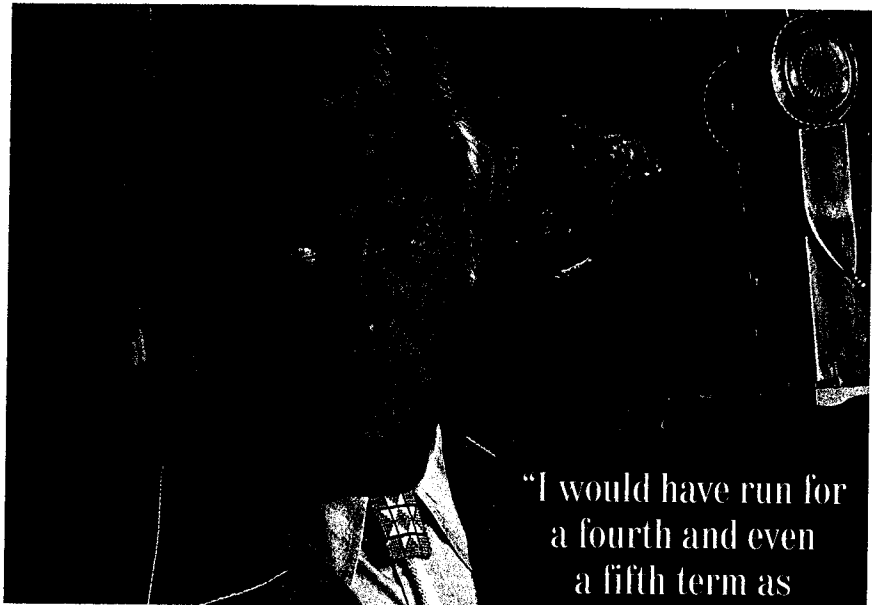
In the weeks after the assassination, the weeks spent in Parkland Hospital, my temperament changed. John Kennedy's death gave me a different perspective on life, its frailties and its meaning. It made me impatient with trivia and egos and self-aggrandizement. The fires of ambition had been considerably banked by the tragedy. Not out of personal fear but out of a new awareness, I no longer had any irresistible desire to subject myself or my family to a continuing political career. Today I have no regrets that there was never a President Connally.

It is a sad but compelling assignment to imagine how the world would be today if John Fitzgerald Kennedy had lived. Would the world be vastly different? Different, yes, but perhaps not vastly so. The world, I feel sure, would still be as dangerous and unstable a place.

I don't doubt for a moment that Kennedy would have been re-elected in 1964. The major changes would have been in the management of the Vietnam War and the

presidential succession. If Kennedy had lived, Lyndon Johnson would have run again in the second spot on the ticket, and he would never have been elected President. By 1968, his health and age—and the diminishing effect of eight years as Vice President—would have eliminated him.

The intriguing question relates to Robert Kennedy. He could have been nominated to succeed his brother and would have been elected. But while this country may just after royalty and might not have been troubled by the idea of a dynasty, I believe Bobby Kennedy might have been. I think he would have wisely resisted the kind of rock stardom that was building around the brothers. He could easily have waited four years or eight.



The former Governor at his ranch in 1979: "I have witnessed more history than any school can teach."

"I would have run for a fourth and even a fifth term as Governor of Texas, if for no other reason than to set a record."

My guess is that Jack Kennedy would have withdrawn American troops from Vietnam shortly into his second term. Although he did hesitate to raise the ante, he was less charmed by the generals than Johnson and less susceptible to their pressures. I believe he had already concluded that the war was unwinnable and had found his pitch: we wanted to help, but in the end the sons of South Vietnam had to fight for their own country.

If Kennedy had lived, I assume my own attitude would not have changed, and it is

conceivable I might have presumed to run for President myself in 1968. My political ambitions would almost certainly have taken on more steam. If not the presidency, I would have run for a fourth and even a fifth term as Governor of Texas, if for no other reason than to set a record. That goal is one I now regard as ignoble, but there is a time in your life when records matter.

I am often asked if I regard my switching parties as a mistake. In terms of making a difference, of changing the country or even the Republican Party, I have to say that it did not. Some of my friends still entertain themselves by speculating that I could have been elected President as a Democrat. I do not subscribe to this theory for reasons that by now need no repeating. One excuse works as well as another, but, in my time, the Democrats were not going to nominate a Texas conservative. In politics, something is always wrong: the year, the opponent, the issues. Think of how few people actually run for President; only one gets elected every fourth year. For most, it is like a romance that is never in sync; one of the parties is always free when the other is married.

In any event, my switching had nothing to do with presidential ambition. At the time, in 1973, I was just a wild card. I was too long a Democrat, too soon a Republican, to hold any such lofty ideas. But it long ago became clear to Nellie and me that we were at least as comfortable among our old friends as our new ones. "I think you have to be born into the Republican Party," said Nellie, "before they will accept you at something other than entry level."

In 1979, the year before I ran for President, I spoke at Republican fund raisers in 46 cities. I campaigned once for Ronald Reagan and supported him twice, but I conclude with regret that in 12 years Reagan and Bush turned the clock back and wasted their separate mandates to improve our society in a profound and lasting way.

In the summer of 1991, as a result of Desert Storm, the popularity of George Bush remained at an all-time high. I was among an almost invisible minority who believed this support was transitory and illusory. I thought his numbers would drop like a rock down a rain pipe, and his support would erode and fade as quickly as it had soared. I expressed that opinion to a number of people, although I am not sure I convinced any of them.

One in particular who rejected my forecast was Lloyd Bentsen, the senior

Senator from Texas, who had gained enormous respect across the country as the running mate of Michael Dukakis. He won praise despite the defeat of the ticket and the campaign strategy of Dukakis, which was virtually beyond comprehension.

Well before the 1992 campaign began, I sent word to Senator Bentsen that I thought Bush would slip, and on three separate occasions I urged him to announce his candidacy. Like many Democrats, at the height of the Desert Storm celebrations, he thought they needed to worry about retaining control of the Senate. Through the summer of '92, as Bush's popularity shrank and the Clinton campaign gathered momentum, I wondered many times what might be going through Lloyd Bentsen's mind.

With the possible exception of the race by Dukakis, the Bush campaign in 1992 was probably the weakest, dumb-

I cannot say that I think about the assassination every day, but I don't miss by much. There is an endless stream of letters, and questions from students, occasionally from strangers and even friends. Richard Nixon has asked people around me about that day in Dallas, but never put a question to me directly.

The long-term effects of my injuries have been mixed. I have a slight rigidity in the right wrist. I am now plagued by a pulmonary fibrosis, which results in a shortness of breath whenever I undertake any physical exertion. My doctors attribute this condition to the assassin's bullet that ripped through my lung.

As I neared the end of this book, I returned to the Warren Report to verify a passage of my testimony. And a feeling of awe welled up inside me. So much was changed, so much destroyed, in so few ticks of time. I looked up from



The Kennedys and Connallys on Nov. 22, 1963: "I don't doubt for a moment he would have been re-elected."

"John Kennedy's death gave me a different perspective on life, its frailties and its meaning."

est and most out-of-touch campaign waged in modern times. My own view is that it was worse than the Dukakis effort because Bush was an incumbent President and had every conceivable advantage.

I think I have the capacity to be objective in looking at a political operation, but I must admit to some prejudice as far as the Bush campaign is concerned. I never thought that he had the vision or the wisdom to be President in the first place. What he had was a great résumé, largely because Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan had appointed him to positions that kept him alive politically. Then, largely on the coattails of Ronald Reagan, he succeeded to the presidency.

my desk and through the windows of my office I could see the roofs of a tree-shaded neighborhood in Houston. Here we are, I thought, 30 years later, still speculating about what did or did not happen. And no one will ever know the complete truth.

On May 17, Connally developed severe breathing problems and was admitted to Methodist Hospital in Houston. He died last week of complications of pulmonary fibrosis.