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"Big John" Connally

Another Texan Awes the Town

By Stephen S. Rosenfeld

The phenomenon of John Connally is fascinating but the phenomenon of the adoration of John Connally is something else again. From the President on down through most of official Washington (though not Spiro Agnew) and the press, there has been a notable general tendency to render tribute to "Big John," to push past any flaws that might be perceived in his stewardship at the Treasury, to ignore the core of buccaneer conservatism in his political philosophy, and instead to celebrate his personal style and to anticipate eagerly his return to Washington as Secretary of State, at the very least.

Churlish as any comment here might be deemed, it nonetheless seems appropriate to ask whether John Connally has not served Washington's current psychic needs better than he has served the nation's continuing political needs and whether, furthermore, the common idolatry does not mask a disturbing mis-diagnosis of our national ills.

Plainly, what intrigues so many people about Connally is his apparent skill and delight in locating the levers of power in Washington and in using them with vigor and seeming effect. He has demonstrated a knack for taking a mushy situation and finding something hard in it on which to bite. A recent admiring portrait of the President was entitled "Courage and Hesitation." The title for Connally would have to be "Courage and No Hesitation."

Take the economy: it was resisting conventional ministrations, the President was hung up on a commitment to an obsolete ideology, Congress was snapping, and the academics moaning. Suddenly John Connally roared up from his Pecos ranch and the doubts were thrust aside and the tough decisions made. Events leading up to the Smithsonian agreement on international exchange rates described a similar political parabola. Then, the President consulted only Connally (and Kissinger) when he mined Haiphong; one administration Connally-watcher, Life reported, "was reminded of a frontier Texan with his six-shooters blazing. It was Lyndon Johnson and the Alamo syndrome all over again."

It is not hard to imagine why a President would feel kindly towards an advisor who helps show him a way out of tough binds, who confirms him in the forceful remedies which he may have favored anyway but was reluctant to apply on his own, and who can then offer him powerful political support as well—something no mere White House aide can pretend to do. Indeed, no

advisor has done more than Connally to banish the Nixonian nightmare of being regarded as a "pitiful helpless giant." Visiting Connally in Texas, Mr. Nixon said "this is big country and it produces big men." The remark seemed a good measure of his debt to "Big John."

Nor is it hard to see why other Americans—and not just those journalists cultivating an important potential news source—are in some awe of Connally. We like winners and Connally looks and smells like one. He conveys the vastly comforting impression that America's troubles are not so much a matter of intrinsic difficulties as of inadequate leadership: things can be made better if only the right man is allowed to take hold. He conveys that impression, moreover, not in the direct manner of, say, a presidential candidate who promises to deliver if elected, but subliminally, by his personal example, by his style.

So James Reston says he's "a really bold man in a field of doubters and pretenders." Joseph Kraft sees him as a man "at one with the political and economic realities of American life"—whatever that means. Joseph Alsop dubs him "one of the half dozen ablest members of the Cabinet of the last 50 years."

Such tributes are more than a little baffling. Connally served in the Treasury—and it is his Treasury service, not his political time in Texas, where his political base has just crumbled beneath him, that is the basis of his repute—for just 18 months. In that time he played a key role in major policy switches but he did not stick around long enough to ensure that his policies would succeed, or even long enough to see them fail.

He's like the mechanic who slams down your hood, takes your money and goes home for the weekend before you can drive your car out of the garage. The fate of the wage-price controls is uncertain and the Smithsonian agreement is wobbling; no basic problems in the domestic economy or in our international monetary situation have been resolved. But meanwhile, John Connally is back on the ranch.

Journalistic insiders, no doubt inadvertently, offer even more troubling evidence. They say he was "bored" with his Treasury job and couldn't stomach "bureaucratic trivia"; "the laborious task of mastering the intricacies of the domestic and world economy . . . took its toll."

Come now, fellows. "Intricacies" and "bureaucratic trivia" are the heart of the matter. A competent official—that is, one with the President's favor—can stand up and make some bombshell speeches and, on the basis of good briefings, dazzle the folks on the tube. The real tests are whether he can implement a program, sell it to the Congress, gain public acceptance for it, make it work. Our fascination with men of power should not blind us to means of policy. The simple fact of the matter appears to be that John Connally did the quick dramatic parts of his job and then bugged out.

Finally, his rough treatment of foreigners deserves more than the appreciative chuckle he sought to elicit by noting his image as "a sort of bully boy on the manicured playing fields of international finance." Perhaps

the central bankers of Europe deserved the treatment Connally gave them. But in a period when the United States ought to be consolidating and settling down its relationships abroad, it would be disastrous to give general responsibility of our foreign affairs to a man who is pleased to be called a bully boy. To tell Americans that the answer to their foreign cares is to stop pussyfooting may make some of us feel better for the moment but can hardly fail to hurt us all over the long haul.