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Connally Switches, Lauds GOP, Nixon

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HOUSTON, Tex., May 2—Former Gov. John B. Connally of Texas rallied to the side of the beleaguered President today by switching to Mr. Nixon's political party, a move that enhances Connally's own chance of some day running for the White House.

At a press conference, the former Nixon Cabinet member who led "Democrats for Nixon" in the 1972 campaign, deftly danced away from all questions about his own political aspirations and instead dwelled on defending his new party and the Republican President.

"I believe that in our time the Republican Party best represents the broad views of most Americans whatever their formal political affiliation," Connally said. "I believe

that it can provide the strength and stability to unite our people to deal effectively with the problems which this nation faces. I know that it now best represents my own personal convictions."

Connally's conversion has been expected for months so only its timing was startling, a psychological boost for the GOP at a time when it is caught in the midst of the Watergate scandal. Connally dismissed the coincidence as inconsequential, but if he becomes a presidential candidate in 1976, it will be remembered that he came to the aid of his party when it was most in need.

As for his immediate political plans, the former Treasury Secretary repeated his usual disclaimer about not seeking

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any public office, but he added this coy remark:

"We all serve in different ways. John Milton said, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Hopefully, that's the role I can play."

But he insisted: "I seek no office — political or appointive."

Nancy Palm, Harris County Republican chairman who was on hand to celebrate Connally's switch, was more specific. She said that "without question" Connally will be a presidential candidate in 1976 and a formidable one.

Connally's comments on

Watergate seemed designed to restore the self confidence of his new party, while condemning the culprits who did the wiretapping and burglary.

"There's no question that the Watergate is a sordid mess," he said. "It was a silly, stupid, illegal act performed by individuals. The Republican Party didn't do it. And one of the things I think we need to put in perspective is the fact that the acts of individuals ought not to be attributed to the mass of members of a particular party."

While Connally harshly condemned the practice of wiretapping in and out of govern-

ment and said that all of the guilty must be "flushed out," he also complained that Watergate is being used by some to obscure the great accomplishments of the Nixon administration.

In any case, he thinks the long-run political damage to Republicans will be slight.

"I think perhaps we're exaggerating the impact the Watergate will have in 1974," Connally said. "Obviously it's not going to help the Republicans. But by 1974, people will have an opportunity to get a better perspective on what this incident was. By '76, I'm sure that will be true."

Connally said he called Mr. Nixon after the President's Watergate speech Monday night to commend him for it. Reporters asked if he thought the President had prior knowledge of the thought, Connally told reporters he replied:

"I don't know what the President had prior knowledge of. He said the other night he did not. I believe him."

Connally phoned the President again this morning to inform him of his political switch, but in neither conversation did the President solicit the move, according to Connally. Likewise, he said, the President has not discussed any Cabinet post or White House assignment despite a lot of speculation that Connally will return to Washington.

"I hope that your raising the question does not trigger the thought," Connally told reporters.

When the questions persisted, he replied: "I know all of you basically feel that the other shoe hasn't fallen. You all have heard these rumors around Washington that I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that. That's just not true. Now, if you all know something I don't know, please tell me."

Republicans from Mr. Nixon down welcomed Connally warmly yesterday, with few apparent reservations. The White House said the President was "pleased," and Vice President Agnew, for whom Connally represents a rival for the 1976 nomination, said "I know that all Republicans will join me in welcoming Mr. Connally aboard."

Some Republicans said

Connally's effectiveness in campaigning for congressional candidates next year would provide a test of his supposed political ambitions.

Democrats, meanwhile, passed off the switch as no surprise and of no importance.

In historical terms, Connally's between-elections switch is reminiscent of an Indiana Democrat named Wendell Willkie, who became a Republican and went on to win the GOP presidential nomination of 1940, despite some carping from party traditionalists. One important difference is that Willkie won the leadership of a party that was out of power and enfeebled by the Roosevelt landslide of 1936, while today Republicans hold the White House and respectable minority strength in Congress.

As a protege of Lyndon B. Johnson, Connally first came to national prominence as Secretary of the Navy under Democratic President John F. Kennedy in 1961. Connally returned to Texas and won the first of three terms as governor. He was riding with President Kennedy that day in Dallas in 1963 when the President was slain and Connally was wounded by a sniper's bullets.

Through the late 1960s, Connally was increasingly critical of left-liberal Democrats in the national party and spoke for the conservative Southern wing at the party's tumultuous 1968 convention. In early 1971, he joined Mr. Nixon's cabinet as Treasury Secretary, played a preeminent role in the administration, and was lavishly praised often by the President himself. Last year, after returning to his law practice in Houston he organized the na-

tional auxiliary of "Democrats for Nixon." He is 56 years old.

His old party, Connally said today, "has moved so far left behind the majority of Americans who occupy the middle ground in this country." The Republican Party, meanwhile, has moved from the right and preempted the center, he said.

Texas Republicans hope for immediate political impact in strengthening the state party with the conversion of other conservative Democrats. Mrs. Palm predicted expansively that 25 legislators and three congressmen will follow Connally's lead in the coming months.

Henry Grover, the unsuccessful GOP candidate for governor in 1972, also turned up to welcome Connally to the party. "I think it's got to be a big plus for the party," he said. "We've come a long way since 1966 when I switched."

Texas Democrats, however, see fewer reverberations in the future. State Democratic chairman Calvin Guest said he foresaw no "major impact" on the party, and others said the risk of losing their seniority would keep the state's Democratic congressmen from changing parties.

Connally himself employed a casual self-deprecating banter when he was assessing the political meaning. "I don't want to be so presumptuous to assume the Republican Party has been breathlessly awaiting my entry," he said.

The only remark that might be taken as a remote dig at another potential contender for President, Vice President Spiro Agnew, was Connally's observation that the nation faces a troubled political atmosphere that might defeat a lot of incumbents of both parties.

As for the Democratic reaction, he observed: "My traditional opponents in the Democratic Party will be jubilant. They'll say, 'Good riddance. He's where he belongs. He's no good anyway.' My friends in the Democratic Party hopefully will be remorseful and will say kind things about me."

Some Democrats, he acknowledged, tried to talk him out of becoming a Republican but "I'm really embarrassed to try to name them because they've been so few."