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'It wasn't supposed to happen this way, you know. But now my husband has died, Jackie won't talk, and Lady Bird isn't giving interviews. I'm all there is. I'm it.'

— Nellie Connally, widow of former Texas Gov. John B. Connally



Special to The Dallas Morning News: Adrees Lattif

The Next Chapter

*Nellie
Connally,
once the
consummate*

By Maryln Schwartz
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

HOUSTON — Nellie Connally can tell you exactly how horrifying it was to be in the same car where President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and her husband gravely wounded. Part of her hair almost instantly turned white. Thirty years later she's

*political
wife who
stayed in the
background,
is now
thrust in
the spotlight*

talking about that fatal day, this time safely tucked away in her elegant Houston high-rise. Although, after Nov. 22, 1963, Nellie Connally wasn't sure she would ever feel totally safe again.

Today she is dressed in a chic yellow suit, looking much younger than her almost 75 years. Her husband, former Texas governor and former U.S. secretary of the Treasury, died just last June.

Now, Nellie Connally finds herself in the somewhat bewildering position of being in the total spotlight for the first time in her life. Rather awesome, for a woman who once was so protected that she never even had to worry about

handling a checkbook and who says her husband always spoke for both of them, "sometimes even finishing my sentences because I would stammer if I had to talk publicly."

But don't discount this woman as fluff. Her very public life, both in and out of the political arena, has never been easy.

She has stood tough through fame and fortune, a daughter's suicide, breast cancer, political scandal and even public humiliation. Only this is the first time she's had to do it all alone.

"This wasn't supposed to happen this way," she says. "But now my husband is dead, Jackie won't talk, and Lady Bird isn't giving interviews. I'm all there is. I'm it."

The phone keeps ringing with calls from *Good Morning America*, *Today* and lesser-known shows from around the world. Everyone wants to hear Nellie Connally's remembrances of the assassination.

She takes a deep sigh and Please see NOV. 22 on Page 3C.

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once more starts to remember.

Immediately after the shooting, she says, she was stoic. She was going to hold herself together for her husband and her children. They needed her. It wasn't until she got back to Austin a few weeks later that she saw a vivid sign of the personal toll the assassination horrors had taken.

"When John got out of the hospital," she says, "and we returned home, I went to have my hair done. The hairdresser looked at me in amazement.

"She said, 'Mrs. Connally, you've got a 2-inch streak of white hair in your head that wasn't there when you left here.'

"I asked my doctor to explain this," she says. "He said if I had yelled and screamed I would have gotten some of that anxiety and terror out. But I didn't. The body reacts. I got that streak of white hair."

Her husband, too, was haunted for months afterward.

"John had constant nightmares — someone was chasing him, someone was trying to rob him. The nightmares just wouldn't stop. They kept coming again and again. Someone was out to get him."

"They got through this together, a pattern for their lives.

The Connallys were married for almost 53 years. She says her husband never thought he would die.

"It's been so difficult," she says. "I spend half the day crying, half the day not crying. But I'm crying less every day."

But no one who knows Mrs. Connally ever doubted that she's tough and strong.

"Nellie has always been a class act," a friend says. "John Connally would have never been what he

was if it wasn't for Nellie. She doesn't even know how tough she is. She would be angry with me for saying this, so don't use my name, but she was every bit as important to John as Hillary is to Bill.

"Only Nellie came up through a different generation. She didn't go to Cabinet meetings, and she didn't take on Cabinet positions. But she had a strength that kept her man going."

The former Idanell Brill of Austin has always been the consummate political wife. She is still out



Declaring bankruptcy and holding an auction in the late '80s were the most humiliating moments of their lives, Mrs. Connally says.

there supporting and backing up her husband. Before his death, he wrote *In History's Shadow* (Hyperion, \$24.95). She is doing his book tour and answering all the tough questions she just used to sit and watch the governor tackle.

But now, for the first time, she's speaking in her own voice. A voice that's surprisingly strong and candid.

■ On Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis:

"I have never seen her or heard from her after the funeral. John was still ill. We sent our 17-year-old son John to represent us at the funeral for President Kennedy. My son insisted that I write a note to Mrs. Kennedy. I didn't think I could do that. My husband was alive; her husband was dead. I told my son I didn't know what to say. But Johnny was determined. He insisted I do it. He told us later, Mrs. Kennedy

took his hand and said, 'John, the only good thing to come out of this was that your father is alive.' She was very warm and kind. She sent me a note. It was very warm also. I've never made it public."

But years later, Mrs. Connally read an interview that Mrs. Kennedy had given to William Manchester.

"She said I was behaving badly in that car," says Mrs. Connally, "that I was screaming. That's not

true. There were few words said in that car. She said, 'What have they done to Jack?' After I could hear the third bullet fired, she said, 'I have part of his brain in my hand.' I leaned over to my husband after he had been hit and said, 'Hush, it's going to be all right.' Other than those words, there was absolute silence. I think Jackie's early warm response was what she really felt. Later, I think some people were managing her and telling her what to say."

■ On John Connally's becoming a Republican after being a Democrat:

"Our leanings were more with the Republican philosophy, but the Republicans never really accepted us. They didn't treat us well. You have to be born a Republican to be accepted. A lot of our Democratic friends would have turned Republican, too, if they had treated John and I better, but they didn't."

■ On George Bush:

"We were never close to the Bushes. I think George never forgave John for supporting Lloyd Bentsen when Lloyd was running against George for Congress. We helped beat George Bush. He never forgot, even though we were Democrats at the time. The Bushes were never warm to us. During the last election and Republican convention, John wanted to help out. We made many overtures to the Bush

people. They never responded. What a waste. John could have really helped."

A humiliating moment

Mrs. Connally says a very public bankruptcy was the most humiliating point of a very public life. The former governor had debts of \$93 million and assets of \$13 million in 1987. The couple held a public bankruptcy auction that was even covered on TV.

"I was the one who said we should do the auction," she said. "It was wrenching. We were right there. When they brought a couch by to take on the auction stage, I would reach over and fluff the pillows. When they weren't explaining the background of some of our things correctly, John would call up the information from the audience."

She admits that many friends bought the items and saved them to return to the Connallys later.

This and the fact that the Connallys left the bankruptcy proceedings in a chauffeur-driven limousine caused talk and criticism.

"I don't recall that we did leave in a chauffeur-driven limousine," she says. "But if we did, I can assure you it wasn't ours."

Fortunes have since reversed. Her lifestyle in Houston is cushioned and comfortable. But she does not soften her account of how brutal the life of a political wife can be.

"I remember at the beginning, the first time John stepped off a plane with his briefcase, striding confidently ahead. I was behind with all the bundles. No one noticed me. Finally someone said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm the live-in.' "

She says political wives have to get used to being in the background

"I remember at the beginning, the first time John stepped off a plane with his briefcase, striding confidently ahead. I was behind with all the bundles. No one noticed me. Finally someone said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm the live-in.' "

She says political wives have to get used to being in the background and never really knowing if there's going to be someone to take them home.

Then there are women who flock around handsome, charismatic and powerful men like her husband.

"Yes, they were always there. It's irritating. It's not nice. But you have to make peace with it. You have to trust. I just said I could handle it if John came home at night — and John always came home."

She also says these groupies weren't always so appealing.

"They were always spilling drinks on John or dropping their cigarette ashes. John was a very

fastidious man. That didn't appeal to him."

She now says she was wrong not to know their business affairs.

"I know John wanted to protect me," she says. "But it's not right."

Her son John is now a lawyer who helps with her legal matters. Son Mark and daughter Sharon live in Austin and help with her business affairs. Another daughter, Kathleen, committed suicide at age 16. It's a tragedy neither parent ever recovered from. There are still no answers. She does not discuss it publicly. Her husband talked of it for the first time in his book. He said it would be the last he would ever speak of it.

Mrs. Connally says this book was just meant to be her husband's first book. In the next one he would "really take the gloves off."

Now she is the only one who can do it.

Would this excite or frighten her?

"You know," she smiles, "I really just might do it."