

# John B. Connally; 3-Term Governor of Texas Served in 2 U.S. Cabinets

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HOUSTON—John B. Connally, the embodiment of the larger-than-life Texas politician who first came to national prominence 30 years ago when he was wounded during the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, died Tuesday. He was 76.

He was admitted to Houston's Methodist Hospital on May 17, complaining of a breathing obstruction. His condition was complicated by infection and pneumonia and he had been in critical condition for most of his hospital stay.

Connally, whose wavy white hair and imposing presence were a fixture on both the Texas and national political scene, served three terms as governor. Over the course of a public career that spanned four decades, he also was secretary of the Navy, secretary of the Treasury and a failed candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.

In the twilight of his career, Connally was staggered by personal financial problems which led to bankruptcy and the humiliation of having to auction off most of the belongings that he and his wife, Nellie, had accumulated over a lifetime. But he did so with a dignity that brought plaudits even from those who had been his political adversaries.

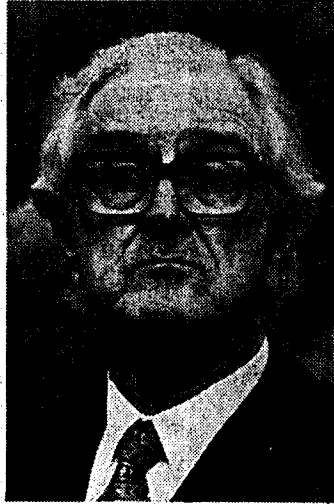
When he filed for bankruptcy, noted Texas historian T.R. Fehrenbach likened it to "a lion being brought down."

President Clinton said Tuesday that Connally's life "was one of service to his country and of dedication to the principles in which he so passionately believed."

"He will be remembered fondly by his state and his country for the work that he did and the person that he was," Clinton said.

In Austin, Gov. Ann Richards said, "I lost a real good friend. I'll miss his phone calls. I'll miss his extraordinary good humor. I'll miss his optimism and his encouragement."

Along with his successes, there also were some low points, errors in timing, and at least the scent of malfeasance during Connally's long public career: his financial



John B. Connally

Associated Press

losses; switching to the Republican Party just as the Watergate investigation was beginning; being indicted, and acquitted, on charges that he took a \$10,000 bribe from milk producers; and spending \$12 million in a futile run for the Presidency in 1980 that garnered him only one convention delegate.

Despite that, and in part because he was shot while riding next to Kennedy in 1963, Connally retained his almost mythic stature in Texas long after he had bowed out of the public arena. The nickname of "Big John" stayed with him through a lifetime.

John Bowden Connally was born in the tiny South Texas town of Floresville, in the peanut-growing region of the state. His family was of Irish stock and had come to the United States in the 19th Century to escape the potato famine.

The third of seven children, Connally was named after his father. The younger Connally attended public schools in Floresville and San Antonio.

At the University of Texas, Con-

nally distinguished himself as a thespian and orator and was elected president of the student assembly. In 1937, he went to work as a volunteer for a young man making his first bid for the U.S. House of Representatives—Lyndon Baines Johnson. In 1939, a 22-year-old Connally went to Washington as Johnson's secretary.

Connally enlisted in the Navy in World War II and rose to the rank of lieutenant commander. Back in his native Texas after the war, he managed Johnson's 87-vote victory over Gov. Coke Stevenson and for years afterward the stories lingered on about ballot box stuffing in South Texas and Connally's possible involvement in it. Connally always denied any wrongdoing. He practiced law in Texas, and in 1960 helped in Johnson's losing effort for the Democratic presidential nomination.

When John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960, he appointed Connally secretary of the Navy. After a year, Connally resigned to return to Texas and run for governor, narrowly defeating liberal Democrat Don Yarborough in a primary.

Appearing with Kennedy in a parade in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, he was struck by a bullet that left scars on his back, chest, wrist and thigh.

Connally always went along with the Warren Commission finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin, working alone. One theory, brought forward five years ago by author James Reston Jr., was that Connally might actually have been Oswald's target. The hypothesis: that Oswald was angry at Connally for not helping restore his honorable discharge from the Marine Corps.

In any event, Connally became something of a national celebrity in the aftermath of the assassination. He was overwhelmingly reelected governor in 1964.

In 1971, Connally—still a Democrat—was appointed by President Richard M. Nixon to be secretary of the Treasury, a post he held for a year and a half. And in 1973, he shocked the Democratic communi-

ty by switching to the Republican Party.

**A**fter his acquittal in the milk pricing scandal and his embarrassing showing in the 1980 presidential primary, Connally settled into private life, this time bent on turning his millions into many

millions.

At one point, Connally had dozens of projects going at once, most of them in real estate and energy. When the oil market collapsed, bringing the real estate market with it, Connally was ruined. He was forced to sell virtually everything except his homestead in Floresville, telling the bankruptcy court that he had amassed debts of \$93 million against assets of only \$13 million.

In 1990, on the eve of the Gulf War, Connally and Texas millionaire Oscar Wyatt traveled to Iraq and negotiated the release of 21 hostages held by Saddam Hussein.

Even after his bankruptcy, Connally continued to pursue business opportunities. In early April, Connally and Houston financier Charles Hurwitz announced they were steering a drive to build a \$75-million horse track in the Houston area.

Connally is survived by his wife, Nellie, two sons and a daughter. Funeral services will be Thursday in Austin. The body will lie in state in the Texas House chambers from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Thursday.