

Connally Set To Join GOP, Back Nixon

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Former Gov. John B. Connally of Texas called a press conference in Houston for today to announce his long-expected switch to the Republican Party.

The 56-year-old Connally, who served as Secretary of Treasury for part of President Nixon's first term and then headed the Democrats for Nixon organization in the 1972 campaign, was reliably reported to be planning to combine his change of affiliation announcement with a ringing defense of the embattled President.

There was no confirmation of rumors that Connally might accept a temporary assignment on the White House staff, riddled by the resignations of three top presidential aides.

Several sources at the White House said they were very skeptical that the Texan, a dominant figure in the administration during his year-and-a-half as Treasury Secretary, would leave his Houston law

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firm again and formally rejoin the President.

But both White House and Democratic sources said Connally's expected switch and strong endorsement of the President's leadership would bolster Mr. Nixon's battered post-Watergate political position and earn him gratitude from both the President and rank-and-file Republicans, which could stand him in good stead in the battle for the 1976 presidential nomination.

The President, at a Jan. 31 press conference, had expressed his "very high respect" for Connally, adding that "he could handle any job that I can think of in this country, or in the world for that matter."

Connally, who has been

practicing law in Houston since leaving the Treasury in mid-1972, scheduled the press conference for mid-day in the lobby of the First City National Bank building, where his office is located.

He said nothing of the subject matter, but Nancy Palm, Harris County (Houston) Republican chairman, told reporters, "I am not going to deny that I have inside information that he will switch to the Republican Party and that he will assist Mr. Nixon in this particular crisis."

Mrs. Palm predicted that the conversion of Connally, the leader of the state's conservative Democratic "establishment," would "mean a

complete realignment of the parties" in Texas.

There were unconfirmed reports that Houston Mayor Louie Welch, former Ambassador Ed Clark and as many as two dozen Democratic members of the Texas legislature were ready to follow Connally's lead in switching to the GOP.

In national terms, however, interest centered on the possibility that Connally would now be in the middle of the race to succeed Mr. Nixon.

That speculation has been building since 1971, when Connally, a lifelong Democrat and close associate of Lyndon B. Johnson, surprised his friends by accepting Mr. Nixon's invitation to head the Treasury Department. As architect of the administration's "New Economic Policy," Connally reaped plaudits from the President, and his face was seen more often on television, speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon in the 1972 campaign, than that of any of the

President's Republican supporters.

A Gallup Poll earlier this week showed that despite his nominal Democratic affiliation, rank-and-file Republicans rated Connally their third choice for the 1976 nomination. He had 15 per cent of the vote, compared to 35 per cent for Vice President Agnew and 20 per cent for Gov. Ronald Reagan of California.

Ironically, just about the time Connally's press conference was announced yesterday, Agnew was in a lengthy conference with the President, reportedly discussing new responsibilities for himself in the White House staff shakeup.

Connally's switch had been expected two months ago, but he withheld his announcement, reportedly because of his anxiety over the developments in the Watergate case and the possible involvement of White House staff members in the political espionage charges.

Never a fan of resigned presidential aides H.R. (Bob) Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman during his Treasury days, Connally was reported to have been one of those urging Mr. Nixon to seek their resignations.

As it has turned out, observers in both parties said the Watergate case has given Connally a perfect setting for his switch.

One White House aide said last night that by joining the GOP at this moment, in the midst of a political crisis for the President, "Connally

comes on like the U.S. cavalry, riding to the rescue in the last scene."

A Texas Democrat with a long acquaintance with the ex-Governor commented in similar vein. "It's pure Connally," he said. "A friend is in trouble, and he comes in to help out."

"The Republicans will surely remember that he jumped on the ship when it looked like it was in trouble," this Democrat noted.