

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Connally, Texas And Watergate

Part 2/73

DALLAS—The lethal side effects of Watergate are undercutting the six-month-old political marriage between John B. Connally and the Texas Republican Party, further dimming Connally's presidential prospects for 1976.

Thanks largely to the Watergate scandal, Connally has been unable to lead either his personal organization or the state's conservative businessmen into the Republican Party. Moreover, relations between Connally and state leaders of his new party, while cordial, are at arm's length.

Connally, his presidential possibilities declining since being passed over by President Nixon for Vice President, must have solid home-state support. But prominent Texas Republicans say privately Connally must earn such support, by either leading the state party to some 1974 victories or significantly expanding its ranks.

Unfortunately for Connally, the reason behind such demands is the same reason why he probably cannot satisfy them: The Texas Republican Party is at its lowest ebb since 1964. Although President Nixon overwhelmingly carried Dallas County in 1972, for example, Nixon supporters are in short supply here today. In post-Watergate Dal-

las, Republican fundraising and candidate recruitment have dried up.

It no longer seems inevitable that conservative Texas Democrats will one day become Republicans. Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, a moderate Democrat, is today the state's most prestigious politician. Gov. Dolph Briscoe, another moderate Democrat, is highly popular running a dull, caretaker administration. Businessmen here thank Democratic National Chairman Robert Strauss, still another Texas moderate, for making his party more acceptable to them now that the Republican Party is so unappetizing.

Connally is thus the principal Republican asset in Texas. But Republicans grow impatient. "I heard all about Big John bringing his friends along with him," a Republican legislator told us, "but I haven't seen anybody yet."

Indeed, Connally's closest political associates, though personally devoted to him, are not becoming Republicans—not after Watergate certainly. On the contrary, conservative ex-Rep. Joe Kilgore, a longtime Connally ally, has moved into the Democratic mainstream as a member of Briscoe's kitchen cabinet. Connally intimates George Christian and Larry Temple, both White House aides in LBJ days,



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remain Democrats.

Nor do these Tory Democrats mix well with Texas Republicans. One old Connally lieutenant who attended the Republican fundraiser in Dallas Dec. 13 honoring Connally confides he felt out of place. When his wife told him, "these aren't our kind of people," he replied that this was probably his last Republican function. Such Tory Democrats were displeased that night by Connally's fulsome praise of Mr. Nixon and, more galling, Republican Sen. John Tower.

Connally's relations with the Texas Republican apparatus are brittle. Although the state party schedules Connally's out-of-state appearances, Republican Executive Director Brad O'Leary has failed to get the absolute control over Connally's schedule that the California Republican Party has over Gov. Ronald Reagan's (though Texas Republicans are certainly not offering Connally authority over them to match Reagan's).

All such quibbling would cease if Connally could engineer Republican victories here in 1974. But when Connally emissaries discreetly asked his old political lieutenants whether they would back Republican National Chairman George Bush (who since has

bowed out) against Briscoe for governor, they received this reply: "We will back John Connally any time for any office under any party label, but we support Briscoe for governor against any Republican."

Their attitude might be shaped by the feeling that chances for Connally winning the Republican presidential nomination, once considered inevitable here, are now remote. Intimates say Connally himself considers this pessimism exaggerated but is not unhappy being an underdog for now.

Some politicians who know Connally well feel he is committed to a serious bid for President in 1976. Those closest to him, however, report he blows hot and cold. When Republican audiences greet him with enthusiasm, he is ready to run; when the Senate Watergate Committee tries (unsuccessfully, so far) to implicate him in the milk-fund scandal, he grumbles that politics just isn't worth the ordeal these days. In the meantime, he does nothing about building an embryonic campaign staff.

For all these difficulties, Connally is still unsurpassed as a platform spell-binder and backroom persuader. He will need those talents, considering his wobbly political base here.

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