

John Connally: Slipping on the Road to

Part 10/2/73

From his position of seeming unsailability as President Nixon's choice to succeed Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President, John B. Connally now confronts growing hostility from the conservative regulars who dominate the Republican Party and outright threats of retaliation from his former Democratic brothers who would control his vice presidential confirmation.

That was not the way Mr. Nixon and neophyte Republican Connally had planned it when Agnew suddenly found himself in trouble 8 weeks ago.

Republican strategists are convinced that the President and Connally made a deal under which Connally's nationwide tour would expose the Connally charm to Republican audiences. The purpose: to show that the former Texas Democrat could be as politically attractive a Republican campaigner as he had been as Mr. Nixon's Secretary of the Treasury.

The coast-to-coast exposure, which started in San Diego Sept. 8, would climax in an outpouring of pro-Connally sentiment among Republican pros

looking for a winner at the moment Agnew—according to the script—handed in his resignation. Connally's name would then be whisked to Capitol Hill for routine confirmation.

Agnew's stubborn refusal to play out that script has now brought Connally under sharply critical political focus. Although still a leading prospect to succeed, if Agnew is finally forced out, these blemishes show:

(1) Agnew followers, in the phrase of one, are affronted by Connally's "obvious enthusiasm for Agnew's departure." They grumble that Connally has not hesitated to comment publicly on the Agnew case and even speculate on the vice presidential vacancy (in contrast to silence from the probable new favorite of the Republican right wing, Gov. Ronald Reagan of California). When Connally commented recently that the thought of being president would "terrify" him, one Republican senator called it improper speculation on Connally's part as well as palpable nonsense.

(2) Despite Connally's stellar debut

at the California Republican convention on Sept. 8 in San Diego, his appearances elsewhere have left some political pros cold. In New York, Connally went to Westchester County's exclusive Blindbrook Club for an evening with top-drawer leaders of the old Eastern social and financial establishment. One wise party pro told us: "That was a mistake. That is one club that politicians are never allowed into." In other words, Connally's visit excited jealousy rather than admiration.

Connally's coattail appeal moreover, is not universally appreciated. National committee operatives here reveal they notified party leaders in New Jersey that Connally would be available for a speech to help the underdog Republican nominee for governor, Rep. Charles Sandman. Sandman has not asked him in.

(3) Potentially worse for Connally was his notorious outburst three weeks ago that the Supreme Court is not necessarily the "ultimate arbiter" of constitutional disputes and his less widely

the White House

noticed attack on congressional Democrats last week for playing "partisan politics" with the President's right to fill a vacant vice presidency.

Asked by CBS about Democratic fears that Agnew's successor would be given an unfair advantage in the 1976 presidential campaign and that only a "caretaker" should be named Connally said: "It seems to me to put the Democrats in a position where they care nothing about the country, nothing about its future. All they're concerned about is their own partisan politics."

Some top Republicans fear that that attack on his old party cooked Connally's goose for any vice presidency-by-appointment. They believe, along with highly-placed Democrats in both House and Senate, that the Democratic Congress now is tilted sharply against Connally.

In addition, the new and strange terrain through which Connally is now moving—a Democrat-turned-Republican running for the first time for President—has caused embarrassing politi-

cal slips for one of the nation's shrewdest politicians. All Washington spent last weekend chuckling over Connally's hope to the National Federation of Republican Women that Agnew would be found "guilty" (he meant innocent).

It has not been fatal. With the continued full support of President Nixon, Connally can afford a slip now and then. Nevertheless, politicians are amazed by bloopers from Connally, widely regarded as the politician who never makes stupid mistakes.

One top presidential aide explained Connally's uncharacteristic blundering since Mr. Nixon apparently tapped him as Agnew's successor this way: "I think he's looking a little too anxious." Connally emerged from virtual seclusion, following an unhappy stint as White House consultant in the early Watergate crisis, when Agnew suddenly found himself in deep trouble. Now Connally himself is in some trouble for the first time in his charismatic, all-victorious political career.