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The Dangers of Political Defection

On all sides it is now said that the indictment of former Treasury Secretary John Connally on charges of bribery, perjury and obstruction of justice has wrecked his chances of being the next Republican presidential nominee, but in fact it was all over long before that.

For all practical purposes, Connally started writing his ultimate political obituary when he organized and led the Democrats for Nixon presidential drive in 1972 and then openly became a Republican convert in 1973. Never in modern U.S. political history has any figure switched party and then gone on to the White House, or seldom anywhere else for that matter.

Even serving in the administration of the opposition party has ended some careers and the fate of defectors is worse. Republican John Lindsay, at the height of his fame as New York's mayor, defected to the Democrats in an effort to win that party's presidential nomination two years ago, but it was a dismal failure. Ogden Reid, an able New York congressman, also switched from the GOP to the Democrats, but his campaign this year to win the Democratic gubernatorial nomination recently collapsed. And so it goes. Apostates are never fully trusted by their new party and, of course, they are scorned by the party they deserted.

With the presumed support of a supposedly grateful President, John Connally thought, however, he could be the exception. So, in all candor, did some of the best political observers. One described the Texan as the ablest man in American public life. Another, reporting on Connally's California debut as a Republican presidential prospect, said he showed "how thoroughly and spectacularly he can sell himself to the most inbred and insular Republican true believers."

It was all a mirage. The former governor's standing with the President quickly collapsed when he started giving Mr. Nixon advice about Watergate he didn't want to hear, such as recommending that the Chief Executive tell



John Connally

all, which was like urging him to jump off the Washington Monument.

Connally made a temporary White House comeback by giving the President new counsel which the boss did like, but which turned out to be worse than the original advice. This time around the former Secretary of the Treasury, who is a lawyer, discovered justification for presidential defiance of the Supreme Court. Specifically, he said:

"We're leading ourselves into believing the Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter of all disputes, and I don't believe it. I think there are times when the President of the United States would be right in not obeying a decision of the Supreme Court."

That line of thought did not help the Texan's public image, but it went over so well in the White House that soon thereafter many thought Mr. Nixon would appoint Connally to be Vice President when Spiro Agnew had to resign in disgrace. If that was the

President's intention, he thought better of it when members of both parties on Capitol Hill made it clear that Connally was not persona grata with them.

The former governor's best chance at the presidency actually came in 1972 when Mr. Nixon, shortly before the GOP National Convention, was toying with the idea of dropping Agnew, as he later undoubtedly wished he had. Mr. Nixon, then at the peak of his power, unquestionably could have put Connally on the ticket even if the party was not keen about it. But the moment came and went as the President temporized.

Even after a second great disappointment the following year, when Ford not Connally was made Vice President, the Texan continued to push his candidacy through speeches around the country. "The more exposure he gets, the stronger he will be," said Gov. James Holshouser Jr. of North Carolina after a Connally appearance in that state.

It turned out that just the opposite was true, and so without publicly abandoning his aspirations Connally went back to Texas, where as a three-time governor he had for years been the No. 1 kingpin almost as much with Republicans as Democrats. Today, however, he is no longer a leader of either party in his own state.

The old-fashioned moral of this saga is that opportunism doesn't always pay. Connally, for example, has never been a genuine national Democrat. He backed the party in 1960 and 1964 because his great patron, the late Lyndon Johnson, was running for President. He did very little for Hubert Humphrey in 1968, and then only at the last minute. For Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and 1956 he did even less. Stevenson lost the state both times.

Connally is reputed to have made millions as an oil lawyer. For him now to be charged with accepting a mere \$10,000 bribe is a sad state for a man endowed with so much intelligence and personal charm.