

Connally Attacks Critics

On Speaking Tour

By Jules Witcover

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Former Texas Gov. John B. Connally yesterday charged that critics are trying to keep him off the Republican ticket as President Ford's running mate by resurrecting his 1975 trial on Watergate-related bribery charges, of which he was eventually acquitted.

Connally, launching a frontal counter-attack of his own, accused the critics of "a vicious, malicious distortion of the truth" and warned that he intends to carry the argument to them between now and the convention.

While saying his availability for the GOP vice presidential nomination was still "highly questionable," Connally said the Republican ticket must go on the attack against the Democrats to win, and that he plans to be part of that attack "on or off the ticket."

The former Secretary of the Treasury said he was "offended and outraged" at references to his legal difficulties, in which he was charged with accepting a dairy industry bribe for persuading Presi-

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dent Nixon to increase milk price supports.

"I think I went through enough," Connally said in a telephone interview with The Washington Post. "My family, my children suffered enough." He said he believed he could turn the attacks to his advantage because they are unfair.

"I'm going to talk about that trial all day long," he said as he embarked on a speaking tour that took him to Cleveland last night and on to Detroit today and Washington Friday for a taping of ABC News' "Issues and Answers" for airing Sunday.

"You better believe I'm going on the attack about it," Connally said. "I've been waiting for them," he said of his critics. "They've gotten out on a limb now."

Connally specifically named columnist Jack Anderson and Rep. Paul Findley (R-Ill.) as targets of his counterattack. Reference by Anderson on ABC's "AM America" television show of "a mysterious missing two minutes of tape" in the bribery case is "a total distortion of the facts," he said.

The tape in question was played at the close of his trial, Connally noted, but was of poor quality. Rather than discussing with Nixon a Connally recommendation that milk price supports be raised, as has been alleged, he said he was talking about revenue sharing—an argument Connally made at the trial.

As for Findley, who has sent a letter to all Republican colleagues in the House opposing Connally as Mr. Ford's running mate, Connally said he intends to go personally into Findley's Southern Illinois district to raise questions about the congressman's voting record on campaign reform for congressional candidates.

Connally offered as evidence of his support among Republicans the fact that two fund-raising letters sent out by the Republican National Committee over his signature have brought in record sums. The party's deputy finance chairman, Buckley Byers, confirmed that the two mailed appeals have grossed about \$850,000.

As Connally launched the attack

on his critics, two Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee, which heard Watergate evidence in the Nixon impeachment hearings, confirmed they have urged that President Ford review all Watergate testimony and tapes regarding Connally before choosing a running mate.

Reps. Tom Railsback (R-Ill.) and William S. Cohen (R-Maine) said they have told White House aides tapes concerning conversations leading to the raising of milk price supports and subsequent campaign contributions by the dairy industry should be carefully checked.

Railsback said he was "not trying to submarine John Connally" but that "the Democrats are trying by innuendo and labeling to make Watergate an issue." It was the prudent course, he said, for the President to be aware of everything in the Watergate investigation in considering Connally.

Cohen said his caution to the White House "has nothing to do with Connally's trial. He was acquitted and he's absolutely right on that. I don't think we should go back and question the judgement of his jury. He has been vindicated under our system. But we don't want to see a McGovern situation where the President picks a running mate and facts come out that would be detrimental to his chances. The justification for the pardon (of Nixon) was to put Watergate behind us. If you put Connally on the ticket, it seems to me you just bring it back."

Connally, in the interview, insisted he was doing nothing to seek the vice presidential nomination or encourage others to seek it in his behalf. But the decision to go on the attack against his critics had all the earmarks of an indirect campaign to improve his position in Mr. Ford's eyes.

Connally also confirmed that he will go to the Republican National Convention in mid-August and speak to a number of state delegation caucuses. He said he will discuss with congressmen and other state party leaders how he can help in congressional and senatorial races this fall. But the activity will give him convention exposure at a critical time in the vice presidential sweepstakes.