

Column by Tom Braden

Superstar Connally, Nixon's idol, a good bet to replace Kissinger

Tom Braden, NO States-Item, 21 Dec. 1972

WASHINGTON—One of the major and under-reported realities of the Nixon Administration is the enormous admiration in which the President holds former Texas Governor John Connally. The story is under-reported because the betting in Washington is that before the year is out, the President's admiration for Connally will produce a major change in his administration, namely the departure of Henry Kissinger as Mr. Nixon's chief adviser on foreign affairs.

That is, of course, speculation. But it is speculation grounded upon some very hard facts, the first of which is the relationship suggested above. "Only a psychiatrist could do it justice," one of the President's aides has remarked apropos of the President's relationship to Connally. The remark suggests the contrast between the two men.

Here is Connally, tall, handsome, rich, tough, confident, self-confident. And here is Mr. Nixon, small, nervous, unsure, unsure. Mr. Nixon is the boy who sat on the bench for 90 minutes; Connally is the boy who played.

The contrast was visible during the recent campaign season; on television was a smash. He rose from his desk, looked at the camera, lions with easy sureness and never uttered a line. Mr. Nixon, in his own appearance, was, as usual, in a case, wearing, wearing a lot of makeup to hide the beard, trying too hard.

In short, fact No. 1 is that Connally is everything that Mr. Nixon wishes he could be. When such a man becomes your loyal liege lord, willing to fight for you, obey your summons, leave the cause of a lifetime to adopt your cause—as Connally left the Democrats to adopt the cause of Mr. Nixon—you are likely to heed his advice.

Fact No. 2 is the advice. "The biggest mistake Lyndon Johnson made," Connally once told the President, "was to keep all those Kennedy men in office. Bundy, McNamara and the rest. He never put his own men in power until it was too late."

Quite clearly, the President has taken

this advice. The great decisions of Camp David—the adjective is Mr. Nixon's—have ousted from appointive office every member of the administration who was a holdover from the Johnson era down to doctors at the National Institute of Health. They have also ousted every member of the administration who was appointed by Mr. Nixon but who are not really Nixon men in that they hold opinions of their own. Thus Secretary Peter Peterson is leaving Commerce; the Departments of Labor and Interior have been swept of the independent-minded; William Safire, who has been known to laugh about politics, is leaving the speechwriting staff; Sen. Robert Dole is out as national chairman of the Republican National Committee; Richard Helms is no longer director of the CIA.

Which leaves Kissinger, now in difficulty, whether because he exceeded his authority in announcing that "peace is at hand" or because the President undercut him after telling him to say "peace is at hand."

In either event, relations between the two cannot but be strained and there is Connally in the wings, who doesn't think much of Kissinger and who advocates a more direct and blunt diplomacy. That is, who is sure, at least a fair bet that during the next year Kissinger will go and Connally will come, probably as secretary of State, to succeed the unhappy William Rogers.

Odds, where people are concerned, as the late Damon Runyan once pointed out, "are always 3-to-1 against." Mr. Nixon is one of the most unpredictable Presidents in history. But the fact is that Henry Kissinger was never Mr. Nixon's man; he was Nelson Rockefeller's man; he did some work for the Kennedy Administration, too. True, that he is the brightest and the ablest man on the White House staff; true that he gives the President his last tie with the academic world, the intellectual world, the Eastern Establishment world. But also true that he doesn't fit into John Connally's advice, and Connally is the most important reality in Washington.