

Nixon And Connally

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20—Two leading Democrats are now on record as saying that if Vice President Agnew resigns or is shoved, President Nixon should have no trouble in choosing Mr. Agnew's successor and getting the Democratic-controlled Congress to approve the President's personal choice.

Gov. Wendell Ford of Kentucky, chairman of the Democratic Governors' Caucus, has said that "the Congress, of course, should scrutinize the selection, but on balance, the President should have the choice."

Democratic National Chairman Robert Strauss agreed, saying, "I believe the people would see this as the President's responsibility."

If it is true, and it may very well be, we may be at the beginning of a process in which former Gov. John Connally of Texas could replace Agnew as Vice President and emerge as the leading candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination, with a good chance of beating the divided Democrats in 1976.

From the President's point of view, the replacement of Mr. Agnew by Mr. Connally would be cynical but logical. He admires Connally for his brassy confidence, good looks, political cunning and emotional eloquence. Both were poor boys who made good, but Connally has the courage of Nixon's convictions, shares Nixon's conservative philosophy and love of power, and is more comfortable than Nixon in the worlds of business and politics.

All this has convinced men close to the President, and other Republican leaders such as Gov. Nelson Rockefeller,

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ler, that Connally will be the President's choice if Mr. Agnew steps aside. And while the Vice President may not choose to accommodate the President by doing so, the fact is that nobody knows what the courts may do in Agnew's case, and the leading politicians here are now analyzing the political consequences of a Connally nomination, while of course denying that they are doing anything of the sort.

The White House says the President has no contingency plan for the replacement of Mr. Agnew. The Democrats claim they have not been discussing the problem. Almost everybody defends the principle of presumed innocence. Mr. Connally says he's not running for anything and wants only to be the best cattle breeder in America. And there is about as much truth in each of these statements as in all the others.

The truth is that Mr. Agnew has not only been gravely weakened but virtually destroyed by leaks and premature publicity even before the evidence against him could be weighed by the Baltimore grand jury.

At least some of the President's supporters think Agnew's resignation would help the President by avoiding a test on whether the Vice President can be tried before impeachment, an awkward constitutional problem in the President's own case. And politically, it would give the President the chance to put Connally in the forefront of Presidential politics only a few months after he joined the G.O.P.

From the point of view of the Democrats, however, it is hard to see why, with their majorities in both houses of Congress, they would casually go along with Governor Ford and Chairman Strauss.

For confirming Mr. Connally as Vice President would increase the chances that they would have to run against him in 1976, and this could be the most critical decision of that campaign, for while the Big Texan may be one of the worst diplomats around these days, he is probably the best politician and the best public speaker in the whole crowd.

More seriously, from the public's point of view, after almost a decade of wheeler-dealer politics under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, one has to wonder where the public interest lies in giving a big edge to John Connally, who has all Lyndon Johnson's bad qualities and few of his qualities.

There is no doubt that he is a formidable candidate in a field of aging losers, and has every right to make his run through the primaries and try to take over control of the Republican party and challenge his former Democratic buddies.

But this is not the same as allowing the President, who still faces grave constitutional questions himself in the courts, to choose a new Vice President without the expressed will of the party, and shove him ahead of Governors Rockefeller, Reagan and other hopefuls.

This not only seems a little sudden and unfair to many Republicans, who want Agnew to stay on, and other Republicans who prefer Rockefeller or Reagan to Connally, but it is arousing many Democrats to challenge the Ford-Strauss thesis and insist that if Congress must vote on a new Vice President, it should be an interim appointment like Chief Justice Burger, who would not be a Presidential candidate in 1976.

Getting the Democrats together on anything these days, however, is a problem if not an impossibility, which is why they've now been out of the White House for two terms. But even so, it's not clear why they should reward the Republicans for their blunders, or help elevate Connally, who might just keep them out for two more terms and perpetuate the politics of power and division in the process.