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John Connally and Republican Strategy for '76

John Connally's switch to the GOP, now so widely saluted for the touch of solace it brings to a party so bruised over Watergate, is incomparably more important for quite other reasons.

The net of it is that circumstances have enabled this newest recruit—and this third man of a troika of candidates for the 1976 presidential nomination—to lay down the basic Republican strategy for the election of four years hence.

Connally proposes that the Republican Party unsparringly denounce and then insist upon forgetting the new and ugly issue of the Watergate scandal by running strictly on the oldest of all issues—jobs, wages, profits, prices. Personally untouched by Watergate (which he roundly condemned last year during the campaign while other pro-Nixon leaders were silent) Connally will not find such a posture too difficult.

Personally untouched, too, is one of Connally's prospective rivals for 1976, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York. The other potential adversary, Vice President Agnew, is not so fortunate. Though personally uninvolved, he cannot be entirely free of the burden of

Watergate, if only because he is in the Nixon administration.

In any event, Watergate or no Watergate, Rockefeller and Agnew will follow the Connally line. In the first place, no other course would really be possible. In the second place, this line is exactly what President Nixon himself, who for all his troubles will be no negligible force at the Republican convention, has in mind for the party.

Connally, in short, has got there first with the mostest in terms of critical influence over the tone of the coming Republican campaign. And nominated or not he will be a very powerful figure right up to election day.

A great personal favorite of Mr. Nixon, John Connally is, however, not home free with any wholly exclusive GOP writ to push the economic issue. For in order to make sure that at least one alternative horse clearly identified with economic conservatism will be available, Mr. Nixon has just moved to build up Agnew in that area. The President has given the Vice President an upgraded place in the formulation of the administration's economic policies.

Such a role, parenthetically, had long been effectively denied to Agnew by

White house palace guardists who are there no longer.

This, then, is how the three sets of legs in the troika stand at what amounts to the onset of the contest for the 1976 nomination.

Connally in some senses has the better of it if only because he was strongly identified, as Mr. Nixon's Secretary of the Treasury, with original anti-inflation programs that clearly worked far more than do those of today. Agnew is inevitably involved with the later and less successful policies—though in fact he had nothing to do with making them.

Rockefeller, for his part, is not in the best of shape on this point if only because the essentially midwestern types who control Republican conventions look upon him as so immensely rich as to have no need to know anything much about money anyway.

Connally, too, has some weakness, particularly among those who fear and distrust what is called "Texas oil." But as the most downright politician in the country, with the possible exception of Agnew, the Texan has made a kind of virtue of his situation by not merely conceding but by laconically proclaiming on every possible occasion his total belief in the profit system.

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