

Washington merry-go-round *FPoul*

5-3-75

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with Les Whitten

WASHINGTON — Richard Nixon's private presidential preference, according to friends who have talked politics with him at San Clemente, is Big John Connally.

This doesn't mean the former President would endorse Connally for the Republican nomination in 1976. On the contrary, Nixon more likely would support the man he put in the White House, Gerald Ford.

At private political bull sessions, Nixon has praised both Ford and Connally. But it is Connally whom the ex-President singles out as best qualified to run the nation.

Nixon is pleased over Connally's acquittal in a bribery case and apparently feels this frees the former Treasury secretary to run for president.

But the acquittal was a bit less than complete exoneration. Jury foreman Dennis O'Toole was quoted as saying after the trial: "Our verdict meant not that we had found necessarily that John Connally was innocent, but rather not guilty based on the case presented to us."

The fact that Nixon is discussing current events with old friends is itself newsworthy. It means the former President has snapped out of his deep melancholy.

Our sources say he still has a hollow, haunted look. He hasn't regained his lost weight, and there are circles under his eyes. But his mental outlook, they say, is healthy.

He is contrite about his Watergate mistakes and concerned about what the American people think of him, according to friends. He desperately hopes he can regain enough stature so that he will be permitted "to make a contribution to the country." It isn't public office but an advisory role that he would like, say his friends.

Because of his experience in foreign affairs, he believes he could offer some useful suggestions on foreign policy. He has reminded visitors that he and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger "made a good team." They reduced tensions in the world and at least prolonged the peace in the Middle East, Nixon contends.

He is dismayed over the collapse of the anti-Communist governments in Cambodia and South Vietnam. He suggests that the failure of Congress to

back up the Saigon regime with military aid precipitated the crisis.

But to close friends, Richard Nixon's views are less important than the fact that he is beginning to emerge at last from his shell.

Footnote: The former President takes a long walk every day but doesn't venture far from his lonely exile in San Clemente. He doesn't want to risk ugly public confrontations, according to friends. He occupies his time working on his memoirs. He is most worried about raising enough income to maintain his lifestyle. He can't bring himself, however, to accept lucrative TV offers. The highest is a \$500,000 offer to appear with interviewer David Frost.