

Nixon Favors a Connally Presidency

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

Richard M. 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 John B. Connally for the Republican nomination in 1976. On the contrary, Nixon more likely would support the man he put in the White House, Gerald R. Ford.

At private political bull sessions, Nixon has praised both Mr. Ford and Connally. But it is Connally whom the former 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 that he will be permitted "to make a contribution to the country." It isn't public office but an advisory role he would like, his friends say.

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 A. 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 jack up the Saigon regime with military aid precipitated the crisis.

But to close friends, 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 at San Clemente. He doesn't want to risk ugly public confrontations, according to friends. He occupies his time working on his memories. He is most worried about raising enough income to maintain his lifestyle. He can't bring him-

self, however, to accept lucrative television offers. The highest is a \$500,000 offer to appear with interviewer David Frost.

The 18½-Minute Gap—The Watergate prosecutors, after exhausting every lead, have given up hope of getting any indictments in the celebrated case of the 18½-minute gap.

This was the mysterious break in the June 20, 1972, tape of President Nixon's White House conversations. Subpoenaed papers showed that Nixon had discussed the Watergate break-in with his most trusted aide, chief of staff H. R. Haldeman.

But at precisely the point that the subject of Watergate came up, the conversation abruptly broke off, and the tape emitted a mysterious hum for 18½ minutes.

A team of experts appointed by U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica found that the missing section was not caused by a malfunction but by human hands. This left the big question of whose human hands.

We have learned that the special prosecutors have narrowed the suspects down to four persons: Rose Mary Woods, the former President's loyal, long-time secretary; Nixon aide Stephen B. Bull, White House lawyer J. Fred Buzhardt and Nixon himself.

There is also a fifth, less likely possibility that the Sirica experts were wrong and that the buzzing gap was caused by the famous Uher 5000 recorder itself.

The four suspects have pro-

tested their innocence, and none has implicated anyone else. The prosecutors simply don't have enough evidence, therefore, to make a case. If the culprit should turn out to be Nixon himself, he couldn't be prosecuted anyway because of President Ford's pardon.

Footnote: At the special prosecutor's office, which is expected to be tying up loose ends until late fall, a spokesman responded with a predictable "no comment."