

Big John

Hits

The Road

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 14 — John Connally of Texas will be touring the country for the next sixty days, and to hear him tell it, this is sort of a meditative journey to ponder the great issues of the nation and educate the people on his ways of thinking.

If you believe this, you may also believe that the Boston Red Sox and the Cincinnati Reds are shuttling back and forth merely to celebrate the glories of physical fitness.

The truth is, of course, that Big John has the four-year itch, and is criticizing President Ford and building up Ronald Reagan in the vague hope that a scramble for the Presidential nomination might leave room at the top for, guess who?

He tipped his mitt the other day on the "Face the Nation" TV program. He was "a supporter" of President Ford, he said. He liked him, he was very fond of him, thinks the President is "a fine human being," and "I may actually wind up being extremely active in behalf of President Ford."

But on the other hand, he added, the President "still has to convince the American people that he can provide leadership for the nation.... I think it's a pure question of whether or not he has the capacity of leadership to challenge and inspire the nation.... I think he should be much bolder, much more forceful. I think he ought to be discussing a great many issues that he's not discussing."

This is not a bad argument. Gerald Ford is not an elected President and has agreed himself that competition for the Presidential nomination is a good thing. Also Mr. Connally is the right age, 58; has experience as former Governor of Texas, Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of the Treasury, and probably has more vitality and platform eloquence than any man in the race; but he thinks the shortest distance between two points is around the barn.

He thought he could get to the top quicker by leaving the Democratic

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party and joining the Republicans, but he merely joined Richard Nixon. He thought he had a deal with Nixon for the Vice Presidency when Spiro Agnew went over the side, but it was all too sudden and too contrived and both parties turned to Mr. Ford instead.

Now Mr. Connally is starting out again on another twisting course. A few days ago, he says, he thought Governor Reagan would not challenge the President for the nomination. Now he thinks Reagan will challenge him, because the President's trips around the country have been a "political mistake," encouraging Reagan rather than discouraging him.

Mr. Connally was asked whether a challenge by Mr. Reagan would be a good thing or a bad thing for the Republican party that now commands the allegiance of only about 20 per cent of the voters.

"Oh, I think it's a good thing," he replied. "I think one of the problems of the Republican party, very frankly, is that we haven't had enough excitement and enough debate.... A stout discussion within the party will be a very good thing, for the simple reason that I don't think this election is going to be won on the basis of personalities. I don't think it should be...."

Again Connally says one thing and does another. There is every reason why he should challenge the President himself, but he merely snipes at him, urges Reagan on, and stands aside. He doesn't face the nation but circles it. Wasn't he just waiting to see how the people feel before jumping to Ford's side or Reagan's side?

"No, no, no, not at all," he insisted. "I'm not indecisive. I don't mind taking a stand. I might wind up supporting neither of them." He might enter the Texas primary, he added, and again he might not. He didn't see any public role for himself at the moment, nor did he want any, particularly.

"The only interest I have at this moment is trying to bring into focus some of the issues that I think are important in this country, and I'm going to do it regardless of personalities, regardless of party."

This is the sort of thing that gives politics a bad name, and is precisely the quality of excessive cleverness that has kept Mr. Connally from bringing his talents and his energy to the very top of the Government.

Having lost the confidence of the Democrats, he is now in the process of irritating and provoking both Ford and Reagan and losing the confidence of the Republicans.

What is surprising about this is that he had such a good chance to reach the top in either party if he had played the game straight, but even after all his experience with Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and maybe because of it, he couldn't change his style.