

Rockefeller And Connally

By James Reston

The pro football exhibition season is over, but the political exhibition season has just started. It's an appalling, almost an unbearable thought, but the practice sessions for the 1976 Presidential election have already started.

In the last few days, both Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York and former Gov. John Connally of Texas have been in California, trying out their arguments. Just before that, Rockefeller was in New Orleans talking philosophy to a political science convention, and just after it, Big John was in Washington at a meeting of the Republican National Committee proclaiming President Nixon's theory that the Supreme Court is not necessarily supreme.

It could be that Rockefeller and Connally are merely looking for a better way to see the U.S.A., but Connally is just at the beginning of a long cross-country tour of political meetings, to be followed by trips to the Soviet Union, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which should help both his political business and his oil business. And Rockefeller is also hitting the road.

Rockefeller is not only putting together study groups on the major problems of the nation, as he has done with the help of Henry Kissinger in the past, but in the next month he will be making public speeches in Ohio, Arizona, Michigan and Iowa. This is not exactly part of New York's business.

Nothing is admitted but the main thing is fairly clear. Even before President Nixon has been able to restore order in his own party, and before the divided Democrats have turned their minds beyond Watergate, a major struggle is already shaping up between Rockefeller and Connally for the 1976 Republican nomination.

Vice President Agnew has other problems to worry about, and Gov. Ronald Reagan of California apparently feels confident enough to invite Connally to San Diego to address the Republican faithful, but Connally and Rockefeller are not waiting. They are moving early. Connally is talking,

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counting on his pugnacious optimism, his Chautauqua eloquence, and his support in the White House. Rockefeller is studying, organizing, and counting on his long record within the Republican party.

All this must seem premature and even silly to sensible people, who are more interested in the present rather than the future problems of the Presidency. But nominations and elections are won by early organization and hard work years before the conventions, as John Kennedy proved by his long and arduous efforts in 1956-57-58-59, leading to his nomination and election in 1960.

Connally has set a quicker pace than most people expected, probably quicker than he originally planned. Not so long ago, he was supposed to be leaving his brief service as a White House adviser because he longed for privacy at home and a long leisurely trip around the world.

But suddenly it is discovered that he is going to spend weeks talking to Republican political rallies, and when reporters ask why the switch, and what is he doing, he pretends he is just being courteous to old friends, and is going around and talking.

Well, maybe, even after Watergate, he can persuade some people that he is just out on an educational and philosophical tour, but he's not persuading or fooling Rockefeller, Reagan, Percy, Baker or any other possible Republican Presidential candidates.

Rockefeller, particularly, has got the message, and is acting on it. His assumption is that the battle for the Republican Presidential nomination in 1976 has started, sensible or not, whether people want it or not, but that Connally is going for it, and Rockefeller is clearly going to challenge him.

The Governor of New York has a problem. He has won four terms as Governor of New York. He has to decide whether to go for a fifth next year, but like Connally, his aim is the Presidency, and for both of them, this is the last chance. Would a fifth term help him or should he concentrate on the Presidency? This he hasn't decided.

Rockefeller thought this problem would come much later, but Vice President Agnew is in trouble, and the scene has changed. It has changed mainly because Connally, like Kennedy in 1956, has begun to make his bid for the support of the Republican establishment in California and the other big states, and Rockefeller is picking up the challenge.

Connally, the old Democrat, the new boy in the Republican party, is a formidable character, so formidable in fact, that he is not only bringing Rockefeller into the race to oppose him, but creating new and surprising alliances against him.

Franklin Roosevelt Jr., watching all this, observed the other day that his own Democratic party was counting too much on Watergate to win in 1976. The Republicans, he said, despite Connally, and despite the problem of age, might nominate Rockefeller and Reagan in 1976, carry both New York and California, and sweep the country. All this seems vague and even silly now, but Connally and Rockefeller are not vague and they are not silly. They are dead serious and they know that elections are won long before most people know they have started.