

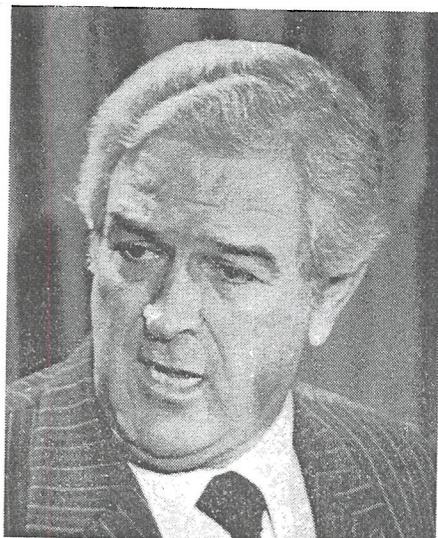
Connally: A Friend in Need

For John Connally last week, the deepening Watergate crisis looked like a rare opportunity. The hard-driving Texas Democrat—three-time governor, John F. Kennedy's Secretary of the Navy and Mr. Nixon's surprise choice as Treasury Secretary in 1971—chose the President's darkest hour to announce his long-expected conversion to the Republican Party. By his timing, Connally thus provided the President and his party with a much-needed morale boost—and gained enough solid friend-in-need credits to win a place among the early front runners in the 1976 Republican Presidential sweepstakes.

Connally's increasing affinity for the GOP has been an open secret for several years—along with his Presidential aspirations. His major problem was to make the switch without picking up the Johnny-come-lately stigma that crippled the 1972 Presidential campaign of New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay, a much-publicized Republican-turned-Democrat. Last week's announcement, most politicians thought, came early enough to avoid charges of arrant opportunism. And while it hardly guaranteed him the nomination, Connally's leap to the deck of a sinking ship could put him on an equal basis with the party's established contenders: Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, California Gov. Ronald Reagan and Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York.

Until last week, the Connally strategy had been to lie low—putting off any party change until the Watergate cloud blew over. But with the sudden resignations of H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman—never his biggest boosters at the White House—the silver-haired protégé of Lyndon Johnson apparently decided that the scandal would undoubtedly linger for some time and that there were new power vacuums to be filled. After clearing his plan with the President, Connally announced his switch at a crowded press conference in Houston. "The Democratic Party," he drawled, "has moved so far left that it has left behind the majority of Americans who occupy the great middle ground of this country . . . The Republican Party best represents the broad views of most Americans, whatever their former political affiliation."

Ajar: As for Watergate, Connally dismissed it as a "silly, stupid, illegal act performed by individuals—the Republican Party didn't do it." And he predicted that it would not play as great a role in upcoming elections as might now be expected. Connally maintained that he himself sought "no office, political or appointive," but he left the door artfully ajar. "They also serve who only stand and wait," he joked. "Hopefully that's a role I can play for a while . . . It may be that my services will not be too much sought."



Hugh Aynesworth—Newsweek

Republican Connally: Timely switch?

That hardly seemed likely. In Washington, Republicans were talking up Connally's charisma and capability (especially his solid success in the economic sphere) as well as the timing of his gesture to the GOP just now. "He picked a moment when they needed him, and it's the fastest way to establish Republican credentials," said one Presidential political adviser, and Sen. Barry Goldwater added: "He immediately becomes a very strong contender." Democrats, predictably, made light of the loss. Said House Majority Leader Thomas P. (Tip)