

# President Ford's Private Chat With Connally

President Ford's unscheduled chat with John B. Connally in Houston resulted from mindlessness at the White House that failed to consider either political damage to the President or interference with federal prosecution of Connally.

Contrary to claims by Connally's friends and implications by the President himself, the meeting was not a conscious effort by Mr. Ford to pick the former Treasury Secretary's brain on energy-economic problems. Rather, the meeting grew out of the White House desire not to snub Connally at home in Houston. Whatever the motive, the meeting gave Connally's lawyers ammunition in their basic defense that he is a great statesman incapable of accepting a paltry \$10,000 bribe.

That Mr. Ford should end up playing this role shows that his White House, though much tighter than earlier, is still a pretty slack ship. But it also reflects the President's self-destructive loyalty to the ruined Nixon administration and its symbols who today represent a political liability.

The apparently innocent origin of the Connally chat was the customary presidential visit with local Republican politicians during his Feb. 10 trip to Houston. Contrary to the impression given reporters by presidential counselor Robert T. Hartmann, the White House did not accept without amendment the list of politicians submitted from Texas. Rather, a long list sent by Republican state chairman Jack Warren was reduced to 16 by presidential

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political aides — Hartmann, Jack Calkins and Gwen Anderson. John B. Connally, under federal indictment for bribery and perjury, survived the cut.

There seems to have been no protracted debate in the White House. The political aides determined that Connally, innocent until proven guilty, should be treated as a former Cabinet member and friend of Mr. Ford. "To have the President come to Connally's hometown and not see him would be poor public relations," one presidential adviser told us. No request for guidance was made of the Special Prosecutor's office, which might well have counseled caution. Shown the final 16 names, the President did not remove Connally's.

Connally, in Canada on business, rushed back to Houston. But he was late arriving on the 17th floor of the Shamrock Hilton Hotel, toward the end of Mr. Ford's 70-minute meeting with the Texas politicians. Kept in an adjoining room by a military aide, Connally was later brought in for his private 40-minute chat with Mr. Ford. No matter what Connally friends say,

the meeting was not on the President's schedule.

But both Mr. Ford (at his Topoka, Kan., press conference) and Connally's friends indicated Connally was being tapped for expert advice. In fact, throughout the drafting of the Ford energy program, Connally's view was never sought.

The Special Prosecutor's office refuses comment, but legal experts elsewhere feel the chat in Houston will help Connally's lawyers portray him as an adviser of Presidents high above the tawdry charges brought against him. That conceivably is what brought Connally racing back to Houston Feb. 10.

Had he kept Connally off the lists, would Mr. Ford have suffered politically among Texas Republicans, who universally feel an innocent man is being railroaded? "Not at all," one key state party official told us. "Connally is in political limbo for now."

One Ford aide says the decision to see Connally has a basis "not political or legal but mostly personal." As such it falls in the same category with continuing Nixon loyalists in the Cabinet

long beyond their time, the visit to Richard Nixon's sickbed just before the 1974 election and, most crucially, the premature Nixon pardon.

Whether or not drastic reform, democratization and modernization will improve the House Ways and Means, one impact is certain: An extra cost to taxpayers of over \$3 million a year. Furthermore, the total is expected to rise each year.

The committee's Democratic majority led by chairman Al Ullman of Oregon, without consulting Republicans, has approved an eye-popping \$3.5 million budget compared with \$520,000 last year. But in 1974 then chairman Wilbur D. Mills of Arkansas, using free help from other committees and government agencies, actually spent only \$195,000 for a staff of 35.

The new subcommittee system adds 41 extra staffers, and the overall staff will probably reach 100 (although there is no office space today on increasingly crowded Capitol Hill for this population explosion). What's more, the committee is setting up its own computer operation.

Mushrooming of professional staffers and exotic electronic equipment, common all over Capitol Hill in the new Congress, distorts the congressional function, say conservative critics. Instead of representing interests of constituents in dealing with the executive branch, Congress is well on its way toward establishing a dual government bureaucracy in Washington.