

Big John Connally In the Dock

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 10—Watching Big John Connally of Texas in the dock here on charges of bribery, you have to remember him when he was Governor of Texas, Secretary of the Navy, a power in the Democratic party, wounded partner of Jack Kennedy in the Dallas assassination, and finally converted Republican, Secretary of the Treasury and adviser to President Nixon.

Of all the people who rose and fell with Mr. Nixon, Big John is probably the most interesting. With both parties in desperation for an exciting Presidential candidate of the right age in 1976, he was the most confident, handsome, eloquent and experienced politician on the American scene; but somehow, despite everything he had going for him, he threw it all away.

Mr. Connally has always used this town like a swinging door: a rush of wind, a whirling sense of something important about to happen, a big smile, and there he is or there he goes, always in a hell of a hurry. He is almost a symbol of our present troubles: all fast ball and no control, and you have to wonder where he'd be now if he had played it easy.

His legal problems are not the most intriguing part of the story and can be left to the courts. The larger question is why this consummate politician, who was supposed to know every card in the political deck, played his cards so badly, misjudged his own Democratic party, switched to the Republican party, and managed to lose the confidence of both.

The explanation, or at least part of the explanation, is that he broke the first rule of Texas politics, which is party loyalty. He couldn't wait for events to unfold, or hold his temper. Some would say he was merely impatient, others that he was an arrogant opportunist, but anyway, as seen from Washington, he was a jumper.

He first blew in here as administrative assistant to Lyndon Johnson in 1949, with all Johnson's cunning, with none of L.B.J.'s insecurity, and all of Johnson's ambition, but he chucked it after a few months and went home to prove himself in Texas, which is to say, to make money.

A few million dollars later, he suddenly reappeared again through the swinging door as John Kennedy's Secretary of the Navy, but even before he had figured out his way around the Pentagon, he resigned to run for Governor of Texas. Even his enemies, who are not scarce, agree he was a good Governor.

But he fussed with Mr. Johnson and Hubert Humphrey at the 1968 Democratic convention, and finally broke with his party, campaigned against George McGovern and for Richard Nixon in 1972, and thought Mr. Nixon could make him Vice President and

maybe even President after the resignation of Spiro Agnew.

If Mr. Connally had stuck with his party in 1968, or so many leading Democrats believe, Humphrey might have edged out Nixon; but when Connally switched to the Republicans and campaigned for Nixon in 1972 against McGovern, he infuriated the Democrats and bet everything on Nixon, who destroyed him in the end.

"If" is the shortest and saddest word in the political dictionary. Mr. Connally's judgment about the Democratic move to the left proved to be right. If he had opposed Mr. McGovern but stuck to his party, he might now be in a better position than anybody else to win the Democratic nomination of 1976 and the Presidency.

He is not, of course, unique but merely a symbol of the irony of political life. All the leading figures on the Washington stage these days find themselves in a strange and unexpected situation. Not so long ago, Gerald Ford did not expect to be lecturing the Congress as President or presiding over the tragedy of Vietnam.

Nelson Rockefeller, until recently, never imagined he would be presiding over the Senate as Vice President—a

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job he rejected for twenty years. And Henry Kissinger, while he longed to be Secretary of State, didn't think, if he made it, that he would be abandoned and condemned by many he most admired in the universities.

But John Connally is different in an important way. He might have made it all the way to the White House, but he was pinched for political speeding, and had to turn to Edward Bennett Williams, the most hated Democrat on Mr. Nixon's "enemies list," to defend him in the courts.

All this would be funny if it weren't so sad. If Mr. Connally had hired Ed Williams to be his political campaign manager for the Presidency, instead of his defense lawyer, he might have made it. The candidates who have stayed the course are not the men of Connally's age, but the old geezers in their sixties: Ford, Rockefeller and Reagan on the Republican side, and Humphrey, Muskie and Jackson on the Democratic side—a durable but not an inspiring lot.

There are younger men on the side who have a chance, for the country is obviously longing for something new—among them Howard Baker of Tennessee, Mo Udall of Arizona and a few young governors—yet John Connally probably had a better chance than most of them, but he blew it.

America, we are told, is a nation of laws and not of men or women, but the accidents of personality and character often make a big difference, and Mr. Connally is only the latest illustration of the point.