

Story of Political Resurrection

How Connally Won Over

By James Sterba
Special to the Chronicle

Houston

In the final days of July, as united and ebullient Democrats ordered their inaugural gowns and divided and embattled Republicans staggered toward Kansas City, John Connally's wife, Nellie, laid down the law at their Picoso Ranch near Floresville. He could clean out tool sheds, fix squeaky doors, tend his luxuriant herd of Santa Gertrudis cattle, help his son, Mark, the ranch manager, plan the fall breeding program, but: no politics for three weeks. After all, politics had consumed her husband's life and kept him on the road for the entire past year.

Doing what? John Connally had not appeared in any of the preferential primaries. He had not been on the front lines helping the candidates capture TV time and newspaper headlines. He had steadfastly refused to endorse either President Ford or Ronald Reagan as his party's presidential nominee, though he did eventually endorse Mr. Ford. And besides, hadn't his political career ended abruptly in the Nixon administration debacle at Watergate?

No, Nellie was perfectly right. John Bowden Connally is alive and has been campaigning actively, if quietly, in Republican parlors and at party fund-raisers across the nation.

Indeed, in the year since he was acquitted on charges of bribery, he has assigned himself the task — Connally has never been accused of thinking small — of saving the party, the country, the free-enterprise system and the free world. And, in the process, he has been so successful at saving his own political fortunes that he is now considered a leading candidate to run with Mr. Ford as the Republican's vice-presidential candidate.

It must be added, however, that there are people who argue that Connally's resurrection had less to do with his own merit than what they regard as a vacuum of leadership in the Republican party, but all agree that he remains one of the country's most intriguing and beguiling of politicians.

Using the "irresponsible" and "bloated" Democratic-controlled Congress as his whipping boy, he set off, usually alone, without any staff, methodically to woo the Republican leaders he had joined

when he bolted the Democratic party two years before. While Mr. Ford and Reagan were running themselves and their party ragged he was efficiently paying his dues at one local gathering after another. It became apparent to many prominent Republicans that he was the most powerful and articulate speaker they had, and he quickly emerged as their biggest fundraiser.

Last March, in what New York Republican chairman Richard M. Rosenbaum then regarded as an outrage of untimely arrogance (Ro-

the GOP

senbaum was also an ardent supporter of Nelson A. Rockefeller for the vice-presidential nomination), Connally invited Republican state chairmen down to the Picoso for a pep talk. Twenty-two chairmen and vice chairmen showed up and were exposed to the vintage Connally magic. He stood in front of the livingroom fireplace in cowboy boots, Westerncut suit and string tie, and told them they were in deep trouble.

"We just can't talk about being Republicans and get elected. We represent just 21 per cent of the people, and unless we appeal to those who call themselves Inde-

pendents and Democrats, we're not going to get elected to anything. It's not enough for you to sit in smoke-filled rooms and plan a little strategy. It's hard work that wins elections."

He was making them feel small and guilty. Didn't they see what the people wanted? They did not want promises. They wanted the simple truth and were prepared to accept it. What was the truth?

"Things have changed in the United States and we, least of all, in the Republican party, want to be the advocates of the status quo. That is going to kill us and kill everybody else because we're involved in one of the profound transitional changes in this or any other society in all of history." To wit: The racial revolution, social, youth, sex, women's and religious revolutions, the crisis in international trading and monetary markets. Almost every tenet had been cast aside.

What to do? They were all ears: Limit the President to one six-year term, senators to two six-year terms, congressmen to three four-year terms; retire federal judges at 70, and before they reach that age, reconfirm them every ten years; prohibit deficit spending except in emergency; prohibit legislators from running for President unless they resigned a year ahead of the campaign so that they couldn't sit up there and "demagogue" like Senator Henry Jackson.

They were clapping now. The absolute villains were the Democrats in Congress, he told them, beginning to shout. Short-ranged, shortsighted, selfish little demagogues. Take energy. They kept promising cheap gasoline.

"What they're really doing is saying we're going to deliver this great industrial nation, the most powerful nation in the world, into the continuing hands of a small number of nations who can shut off this industrial base any time, any day, they want to. The day of cheap fuel is over. It is over. There's no point in trying to kid the American people. They know it's over."

The history lesson came next and you hear a pin drop. After World War II, we were the strongest nation on earth. We could have destroyed or conquered everyone else but we did the opposite. We gave and we gave: "No other conquering nation in the world in all the pages of history has ever

shown such magnanimity, never such generosity, never such compassion, never such concern... We gave more and we produce more than any society ever created in the world. Yet it is so grossly misunderstood that we assume success to be its own advocate. But it is not. Success today is viewed almost as a stain of greed."

You could feel their pride swelling as he told them he'd gladly defend free enterprise, business big and small, corporations, even oil companies. College students think they all make 40 per cent profits. The truth was about 4.5 per cent, but how could those students be so misinformed, so naive about the world? It's dangerous and increasingly threatening out there, if they only knew: "We're going to see, in my judgment, the most aggressive Soviet moves we've seen since the cold war, because they perceive the weakness of the United States." But Congress has stripped the President of the power to conduct foreign policy, and foreign policy is the big issue in this election.

"You cannot run a foreign policy through Congressional committees and the responsible members of the Congress know it. We ought to be saying just that on every street corner every day from now until the general elections this fall. Because nothing could be more important. If the United States is not the leader of the free world, then it has no leader. No one can assume the mantle of leadership, not even a combination of countries."

It was alarming, but then he offered the redemption and the challenge: "I'm an optimist, but I think you have to get out and lay it on the line to the people. I think that's what they want and I don't

think either party has been doing it." Why, oh why not, he challenged. His voice was softening, as if they were in church or a pregame locker room. The responsibility, the burdens, were theirs.

The whole performance took about 20 minutes, and when it was over, two women were in tears and more than one man was close to being so. "I was invited down to discuss Republican strategy," said Walter Kennedy, the Vermont Republican chairman. "But I would have gladly paid my own way to discuss the vice-presidential nomination of John Connally because he's that impressive."

His success elsewhere seemed to match his success at the ranch. Ray Hutchison, one of the people who helped him get back to the position he is in today, said, for example, "The most pride I had with the guy was in Suffolk county, N.Y. These were Northeasterners, about 2500 of them, and they were a bit cold at first. They had a little doubt about him, I'm sure. But when he got finished, they were stunned.

I mean the people were literally stunned. They were quiet, then there was this sudden burst of reaction. They all stood up and the applause was just sustained... I think the reason is that they had not heard or seen anyone who projects hope and vision for the future as he does." (Even Rosenbaum was saying nice things about Connally after that.)

Jeremiah Milbank, the Republican national finance chairman, began relying heavily on Connally. He would turn him loose for 15 minutes of ad-libbing — and harvest \$20,000 in contributions. While Reagan was having to buy time on TV to plead for donations, Connally was raising \$750,000 for the Republican National Committee in six weeks merely by signing his name to fund-raising letters. And the money from those letters is still rolling in. "It's very, very unusual," Buckley Byers, the committee's deputy finance director, said. "It's more than we've ever gotten from those kinds of letters."

By early summer some seasoned Republican veterans were expressing high praise for Connally. Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, the GOP convention chairman, was leaning toward the Texan. Rogers C.B. Morton was said to be "pushing hard" at the White House for a Ford-Connally ticket. Senator Barry Goldwater, a man who makes his pungent characterizations seriously, endorsed him for the vice-presidency: "John Connally is a man that to me knows more about American business, American foreign policy, American defense, and how to get it across to the people, than probably any other man in America, including the President."

The feeling was far from universal, however. Donald Rumsfeld and others were reported to have urged Mr. Ford to handle John Connally at arm's length. They were said to believe that the stain of Watergate would hurt the ticket, and that many voters would perceive Connally as arrogant, opportunistic and untrustworthy. There were those in the Reagan camp who were expressing similar views, even before Reagan announced, for reasons designed to help himself obtain the presidential nomination, that he would choose the liberal Senator Richard S. Schweiker as his choice of running mate.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, even if Connally is not on the Republican national ticket in 1976, he's again one of its major stars and will play a prominent role in the fall campaign.