

BIG JOHN MEETS THE GOLDEN STATE

"... John Connally, not quite a Republican, is one of the dozen most adroit politicians in America..."

Gee, what a great-looking president he'd make.

—HARRY DAUGHERTY
on Warren Harding

JOHAN CONNALLY, not exactly an oil man, has, at this early moment, one big thing and a few little things standing between him and the Republican nomination for president of the United States—which is to say he has a pretty good shot at it. And one of the little things is that he is going to have the devil's own time trying to dodge being identified as an oil man from Texas, which he really isn't.

The big thing is Ronald Reagan.

There is no answer, really, to the problem of Reagan. The Republican party, which lately includes Big John Connally, has been in a Reaganoid spasm for years, and these things just have to be worked out, survived, lived with, enjoyed. Reagan is what we like to call the front-runner, and he has the loyalty of tens of thousands of people who would tomorrow, if he suggested it, rise from their living rooms and march into the sea.

Reagan fell just 60 delegate votes short of being nominated in 1976, and now, approaching 70 years of age, he will go for it again. If politics were a normal business, we could assume that Reagan would be the 1980 Republican nominee. As it is, there might still be some crazed guy out there on a plane someplace, this year's Jimmy Carter, who will surprise and make fools of us all. That has happened in the last three Democratic campaigns, after all; four years ago at this point Carter was still virtually unknown. To be front-runner is to be a battleship in enemy-infested, unmapped oceans: You have incredible firepower, absolutely amazing resources, but you can't maneuver. For these purposes John Connally, not exactly an oil man, not quite a Republican, one of the dozen most adroit politicians in America, is a fast cruiser. Given the right moves and good luck, a fast cruiser can sink a battleship, literally and metaphorically.

That's the big problem. As for the questions about his history and associations, well... He was and is tight with Nixon. He was a first-string player in an administration of heavyweights: Haig,

Kissinger, Burns, Haldeman. Jesus, do you remember? "If I were you," Ron Ziegler, Nixon's spokesman, said while Connally was treasury secretary, "when the secretary speaks, I would accept what he says as the word from the administration." Connally formed and ran Democrats for Nixon against McGovern. He is said to have advised him on the mining of the North Vietnamese ports in the spring of 1972 and to have helped him plan strategy during Watergate.

Like Kissinger, Connally seems to have walked away from a political disaster in which he was, without doubt, a participant. Kissinger ordered illegal telephone taps and ungodly bombing campaigns, but hardly anybody cares. Connally is on record as having said Nixon should have built a bonfire in the Rose Garden and burned the White House tapes, and as having announced that the president might be justified in defying the Supreme Court, but nobody holds him to it.

It is evidence that we have indeed put Watergate and Nixon behind us. Connally was indicted in 1974 for receiving \$10,000 in bribes from the Associated Milk Producers, Inc. He was tried and acquitted and now gets a laugh when he says, "I am the only certified not-guilty candidate running for president in either party."

THE SWIMMING POOL had flower arrangements floating in it, there was a 45-foot-long buffet table catered by Richard Nixon's favorite Mexican joint in Capistrano, and the people around were just swell, too. I forgot the strolling Mexican strings. They had those and they had an unstoppable maker of frozen margaritas someplace. They had American flags every few feet on both sides of the long curving driveway and they had perfect weather on the hilltop in Orange County where, that evening, it cost \$250 a couple to be. Governor John Connally of Texas finally meets the Golden State.

Now, of course he is not a governor and hasn't been for ten years. He is a private citizen, a lawyer, a rancher and a candidate, but he looks like a senator—at the very least. What he really looks like, all six-foot-two, silver-haired, sun-tanned, broad-shouldered bit of him, is



president. Of something.

A pair of fund-raising events—this one in Orange and one the night before in La Jolla—raised nearly \$60,000 for the Connally for President committee. The expenses for these California fund raisers, his staff guessed, were \$4,000, maybe \$5,000. Republicans in Ronald Reagan's home territory don't give that kind of money to a good-looking Texan because he's a friend of Richard Nixon or because he used to be a Democrat or because he was acquitted of accepting bribes. They give it because they think he might win. John Connally encourages that kind of thinking.

These are the kinds of things he says to people who give him money:

■ "Nothing in your life, except your own family, is as important as the political atmosphere. It sets the economic atmosphere, the moral atmosphere; everything else is determined by the political atmosphere... I wanna ask you to spend 10 percent of your time working on politics, and if you don't wanna work for me, work for somebody."

■ "I want ya to know a little something about me and Nellie [his wife]. There are gonna be a lot of questions that come up over the next four to eight years while I'm serving ya." [Chuckles from the \$250 couples.] "I don't like to hear those titters. Listen, I meant that in all seriousness. I wasn't jokin' with a straight face. You know, I'm too old to be practicing. I'm runnin' to win." [Applause.]

■ "I was raised in a family of seven children in very modest or what today would be considered very poor circumstances. My father never graduated from eighth grade... He was a barber, a bricklayer, a butcher, a tenant farmer, he was a bus driver... I studied my last



Pressing the flesh: "I'm runnin' to win," says Connally.

where John Connally was unless you chose to take his staff's word. Traveling the Golden State with president-elect Connally was very much like traveling with the president; we sat in rooms at the appointed times and he appeared, punctually, did whatever, and left. The rest of the time we dealt with one of the four staff that accompanied him. "Where is he?" we would ask one of them. "Right here," they would say and gesture vaguely. "In this very building?" we might ask. A smile. He does not sit around bars at night and gossip. He does not chat in the hall-

way. He does not slump into the next seat and swap stories between Orange County airport and Fresno. There are no loose-tie moments shared between the press and the governor.

DO YOU KNOW what it's like to talk to Moonies? They are so extra neat and clean and so unswerving. They're very much like the people from the U.S. Labor party, who are also well dressed, nicely mannered, short-haired and absolutely maniacal about their politics—which is fanatical right-wing Marxist, nearly as I can tell. They find their way into this story because they appeared at nearly every public event in Connally's five-day California swing, handing out leaflets and asking questions at his press conferences.

The U.S. Labor party is an offshoot of the National Caucus of Labor Committees, which is itself a one-time faction of SDS gone completely nutty. It is really almost too much to understand (the members devote their lives to it), but suffice it to say that these folks believe that Nelson Rockefeller planned the imposition of a police state on Amerika, and in their resistance to him they formed political alliances with the Republican radical right wing, which hated Rockefeller at least as much as they did. It must have been a blow when Nelson died.

Anyway, at press conferences the U.S. Labor party representative would rise and question Connally laboriously about his connections with the New York Council on Foreign Relations. Their always-available handout explained that, "In fact, Mr. Connally is being run by his New York Council on Foreign Relations and Zionist Lobby controllers as a stalking horse to

prepare the ground for CFR darling Alexander M. Haig." Connally's job is to destroy the Reagan campaign and then "humbly trot off the stage when 'Mr. It,' the Idi Amin of America [Haig], is advanced into the limelight."

A press conference dialogue:

LABOR PARTY: What about Mr. Haig's campaign?

CONNALLY: Who?

LABOR PARTY: Mr. Haig.

CONNALLY: I didn't know he had one.

LABOR PARTY (laughing shrilly): Mr. Connally, your naïveté is just a little. . . .

CONNALLY: I'm just a country boy from Texas.

LABOR PARTY (still chuckling bitterly): Right. Just a country boy. That's what Jimmy Carter said before he was picked up by the New York Council on Foreign Relations.

CONNALLY (continuing): I'm not as sophisticated as you.

BECAUSE it was diverting, the reporters tended to let this kind of exchange go on for a while, finally looking forward to each stop to see if they would appear. When a U.S. Labor party leafleter met our chartered plane at 10:30 Wednesday night in the Fresno airport there was a small cheer from the press and a Connally staffer tried unsuccessfully to get the woman to autograph the handout.

"I spent my whole life, in a sense, preparing for this opportunity," Big John Connally said to a stuffy roomful of supporters in Newport Beach. Nobody smiled. It is not the kind of statement that can be fact-checked, but if it were, it would probably turn up true. Beginning in 1964, he has been considered as a possible candidate for president or vice-president in one party or the other every time there has been an election. Billy Graham suggested that he be the Democratic nominee as early as 1965, and in 1968, when his mentor, Lyndon Johnson, dropped out, he was considered as a running mate for both Gene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey.

More than ten years later, he's up for it again, and this time, a Republican since 1973, he thinks it will be against Ted Kennedy. "I think," he says, "it'll be a classic confrontation, and I think I can beat him."

Maybe we'll find out. It's not likely we'll see any other two political operators go at it balls-out the way those two would. Watergate scandals versus Chappaquiddick. The brother of John Kennedy against the man who almost died with him in Dallas. Nice people versus weird people; decaying northeastern cities or Sun Belt. The millionaire liberal crown prince toe-to-toe with the millionaire Tory spokesman for American capitalism.

It'd be some kind of show. ■

year of high school by kerosene lamp and Coleman lantern. . . . We had no electricity, we had no running water, we had no indoor plumbing. We had no heat in the house outside of the wood stove in the kitchen and a fireplace. . . . I know something about rural life. I know something about people who are poverty-stricken."

■ "I know it's not to my personal benefit to go up there and be president. I don't do it for the glory and the glamour that's attached to that office. I've been in that Oval Office and, uh, you all got whole lot nicer ones right here. . . . The only challenge, the only possible compensation is to feel yur doing something for yur country. I think we're making a sacrifice."

EACH DAY of the week, Monday through Friday, Connally appeared three times in a more or less public way. There would be a press conference (for which the modern term is "media availability"), a meeting with a few dozen supporters (either a fund-raising event or a little conference) and a speech in sort of neutral territory (a businessmen's luncheon or convention banquet, for example). Between those appearances he vanished. He traveled privately in a borrowed Falcon Ten jet, rode in a separate car and stayed to himself and a few aides in hotel suites. If his reputation holds, he spent a whale of a lot of time on the telephone. He is a politician of the verbal tradition, learning by listening and talking rather than from briefing books. He did talk to Nixon on the phone, we know that, and he did not talk to Jerry Ford, they said.

Generally, outside the public events, you would not have known for certain