

The Lonely Star Candidate

In John Connally's interesting, score-settling autobiography, the former governor says he didn't yearn for more power. But there's thwarted ambition on every page

BY JOHN SHELTON REED

In History's Shadow: An American Odyssey
John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz
Hyperion, \$24.95

John Connally died last June 15 from pneumonia, complicated by a lung condition believed to be related to the wound he received from Lee Harvey Oswald. His 76 years in many ways recapitulated the history of the South in this century: from humble agrarian origins, early New Deal loyalties and military valor, to political and economic success (with an occasional whiff of corruption), finally switching political allegiance to an ambivalent Republican party, but always with the nagging sense that he never got his just deserts from the Eastern Establishment.

Like most Southerners of his generation, Connally was not born to prosperity. His father was successively a tenant farmer, a bricklayer, a barber, a butcher, and finally a bus owner/driver and local politician. The young Connally wore kneepads cut from old tires to pick cotton. (Later he did not talk much about these inelegant origins—not that he was ashamed of them, he says.) At 16, he went off to the state university, where he was active in a drama club that during the 1930s produced Eli Wallach, Zachary Scott, Allen Ludden, and the television actress Betty White. (Walter Cronkite was on the publicity committee.) In Austin he was elected president of the student assembly and made friends that lasted him for life: future businessmen, politicians, and political lawyers, among them Robert Strauss and Congressman Jake Pickle. He acquired a law degree and got his first taste of statewide politics working for a business-backed gubernatorial candidate who lost to the inimitable W. Lee (“Pass the biscuits, Pappy”) O’Daniel of the musical *Light Crust Doughboys*. Fatefully, he came to the notice of an ambitious young New Dealer named Lyndon Johnson, whom he served as factotum and advisor off and on for the next 30 years.

After Navy service in World War II—which gave him a Bronze Star, the Legion of Merit, and a taste for the recordings of Enrico Caruso—his fortunes rose with those of his patron and his state. As he moved back and forth between Washington and Texas, from government to business and back again, his talents and connections made

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him a wealthy man by non-Texas standards, a prominent figure in the conservative wing of the Texas Democratic party, and eventually a popular and successful three-term governor, elected to his last term with 72 percent of the vote.

When Johnson became president, he often sought Connally's advice—according to Connally—but he didn't always take it. Connally says that he disagreed with his mentor about three things: He wanted to threaten Hanoi with nuclear attack, he disapproved of the volume and speed (but not the aims) of Johnson's social legislation, and he thought Johnson suffered a "failure of nerve" in not replacing John Kennedy's cabinet—including Robert Kennedy—with his own men.

After 1968, the McGovernite handwriting was on the wall for conservative Democrats, and Connally, like many other Southerners, changed first his vote and then his party. Approached by Billy Graham (of all people) about Gergenizing the Nixon cabinet as secretary of Defense or of the Treasury, Connally took Treasury. "State has the glamour, Defense has the toys, but Treasury is and always has been the most powerful job in the cabinet," he observes. He says he was always "a conservative who believed in an active government," and he certainly backed a good many statist measures as secretary of the Treasury, notably a 10 percent import "surcharge" to "correct unfair trade balances," the Lockheed loan guarantee, and Nixon's wage and price controls. (This last is one of the two

things in his career Connally regards as mistakes, the other being the real estate investments that bankrupted him in 1987.) He left Treasury, just in time to avoid Watergate, over a dispute about his prerogatives as secretary (an undersecretary was reporting directly to the White House staff).

After that the story is all anticlimax: a trial and acquittal on bribery charges; a humiliating, unsuccessful run for president; a Republican White House that seemed happy to leave him practicing law in Texas; and personal bankruptcy. Of course,

Alexander Hamilton's career topped out at secretary of the Treasury, too, but Connally was no Alexander Hamilton nor, apparently, did he ever aspire to be.

Patricia Raine



He says things like, "I never planned or sought, or wanted a long career in politics," or "I never felt afflicted with Potomac fever," or "I could have spent my whole life happily as a pretty fair cattleman, or even as a corporate lawyer." But he was obviously consumed by what-ifs. He believed he could have had the Democratic nomination for president in 1968, if Kennedy hadn't been shot. Nixon would have delivered him the Republican nomination in 1976, if it hadn't been for Watergate. And then there was his actual, if short-lived, presidential campaign in 1980. Clearly this was a man who very much wanted the brass ring of American politics, and it plainly grieved him that bad luck and other people's blunders and malice kept him from getting it.

This book's last chapters are largely about those blunders and that malice. But what's an autobiography for if not to settle old scores and give your side of ancient disputes? Connally was a good hater, and he is charmingly forthright in his self-service. His book is full

of innuendo, hints of plots, and implied skullduggery on the part of everyone from the young man who eloped with his daughter (who subsequently killed herself) to every politician who ever crossed him, of whom there were many. As for giving the author's side of things—well, Connally does have a lot of explaining to do.

Start with the 1948 Senate election that gave LBJ the nickname (which he hated) "Landslide Lyndon." According to Connally, who was Johnson's campaign manager, "There has been so much pure drivel written about the Senate election of '48 that it has driven out the impure drivel." Connally says that he was determined to avoid a repeat of 1941, when Johnson had a Senate seat stolen from him by a group of operators that included Coke Stevenson, his 1948 opponent. So Johnson's workers were told to report low vote totals initially so the other side would underestimate how many votes they had to steal to win.

The Last Ride

This is then-Texas Governor John Connally's recollection of the motorcade that was to take him, his wife Nellie, and President and Mrs. Kennedy from a wildly enthusiastic reception at Dallas' Love Field to a luncheon at the city's Trade Mart on November 22, 1963.

We saw only one negative sign. I believe it said, simply, "KENNEDY, GO HOME." He nudged my shoulder and motioned with his thumb. "See that sign, John?" I said that I had, and hoped he had not. He smiled and said, "I see them everywhere I go." With an edge of sarcasm, he added, "He's probably a nice guy."

At a point where the crowds and the noise slackened momentarily, he asked how I thought things were looking in Texas. He had been pumped up by the reception and his political interest was quickening.

"There will be a Houston *Chronicle* poll out tomorrow," I said, "which should give us some ideas."

From *In History's Shadow*, by John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz. To be published by Hyperion in November. Copyright 1993 by John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz.

"What is it going to show?" he asked.

"I think it will show that you carry the state, but that it will be a close election."

"Oh? How will it show you running?"

"Mr. President," I said, "I think it will show me running a little ahead of you."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said, and those were the last words we exchanged. By now, Mrs. Kennedy had managed to slip on her sunglasses; when the President noticed, he said, in a low voice, "Take off your glasses, Jackie." She had not campaigned with him since 1960, and was making her second appearance in public since the death of their infant son, Patrick, in August. She may not have realized it, but you might as well put on a mask as dark sunglasses, which have the same effect of hiding one's face and emotions and making it useless to take part in a parade like this one. Several minutes later, in perhaps a forgetful moment, she had slipped them back on, and I heard him say in exactly the same tone: "Take off the glasses, Jackie."

He was watching the crowd, waving at them steadily with a stiff forearm, his right hand moving

Then, when Johnson's totals mysteriously increased, see, it just *looked* as if new votes were being generated. It was really just that the actual totals were being reported for the first time. "There may have been invalid votes that were cast for Lyndon Johnson," Connally allows. "But they were not bought and they were not stolen."

Or consider the 1955 bill to end natural gas price controls that was derailed when Senator Case of South Dakota rose to report on the Senate floor that he had been given an envelope full of hundred dollar bills by a lobbyist. "My personal conviction," says Connally, "was that no attempt had been made to bribe anyone. A contribution that would have been given routinely was handled clumsily, with atrocious timing."

And of course there's the Kennedy assassination. Connally reports that the Kennedy visit was forced on him by the president, who wanted to meet and mend fences with big-money Texans. Ticket sales for the fundraisers were weak,

Connally says, until he worked the phones for two nights and personally sold \$50,000 worth (a lot of money in those days). He tried to talk the president out of having a motorcade, but the president's advance men insisted on it. They're the ones who released the route to the press, too. Connally even repeats Marina Oswald's speculation that Oswald was actually gunning for him, not the president; he is convinced, he says, that at the very least Oswald wanted to kill them both. His account of the assassination makes you want to refurbish the old joke to make the punchline read: "Who's the man with Governor Connally?" (Other than believing that a separate bullet was intended for him, however, Connally accepted the Warren Commission report. He quotes Earl Warren: "What possible set of circumstances could get me and Dick Russell to conspire on *anything*?")

The longest explanation—it gets a full chapter—has to do with Connally's indictment and trial in the 1974 Milk Fund scandal. Jake

"You can't say now that Dallas doesn't love you, Mr. President."

only a few inches out from his face and back. It was a small movement and struck me as curiously formal, but I could see it was effective. I kept hearing a rumble behind me—I was on the right side of the jump seat, in front of the President, and Nellie on the left side, in front of Jackie. It sounded like a low monotone, and then I realized he was responding to the crowd, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Over and over, he repeated himself to people who could not possibly hear him, but who could sense that he was answering them, and who knew that a contact had been made.

And then he turned his head slightly and said, "Jackie, take off your gloves."

The crowds were going wild, swelling larger and larger. We passed a school and the children poured into the street, so excited they were shaking my hand, too. As we neared the center of town, people were packing the sidewalks clear back to the buildings. They were hanging out of the windows ten stories up, waving banners and signs. They were smiling, laughing, pointing, waving, shrieking. Some of

the schools had let out early and the girls were jumping in front of the limousine, creating pandemonium for the Secret Service agents. It was an incredible show, directed as much at Mrs. Kennedy as the President. I had the distinct feeling she was unbending, relaxing, learning to accept and enjoy this outpouring of affection.

... I felt exuberant. The people on the street were his. The business community, whose help he would need in 1964, had found him sincere and unthreatening. He would charm more of them at the luncheon—for which we were already late—and at the dinner that night in Austin. The President looked hearty and confident. Nellie leaned sideways between the jump seats and said proudly, over the roar of the crowd: "You can't say now that Dallas doesn't love you, Mr. President."

He smiled and nodded. At that instant, the big dark blue car turned off Main Street and slowly negotiated the turn under the looming School Book Depository building, and dipped down the hill in the bright sunshine.

Jacobsen, an Austin lawyer and lobbyist for the milk producers, a man with "the personality of an eel, but a friendly eel," plea-bargained his way out of a prison term by agreeing to testify that he had delivered \$10,000 to Connally in 1971 for advising President Nixon to raise milk price supports. Then and later, Connally denied the charge indignantly: "I would not have condoned for one minute anything of questionable character, much less anything illegal." While he denies that he could be bought, he also adduces what could be called the Rostenkowski defense: It's ridiculous to think that he could be bought for a lousy ten grand. Connally claims his prosecution was politically inspired, and among the conspirators he names Jim Wright and Watergate special prosecutor Leon Jaworski (who worked for a rival Houston law firm), as well as Dick Cheney and most of Gerald Ford's cabinet, who wanted to keep him off the 1976 Republican ticket. At the trial, Connally's character witnesses included Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Barbara Jordan, Lady Bird Johnson, and the ubiquitous Billy Graham. In the end, he was acquitted, but the episode haunted his political career thereafter.

But there was more to Connally's stalled career than the incompetence and conniving of others. The political skills he picked up from mentors like Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson served him well in the intrigues of state government, and they made him an effective power broker, advisor, and confidant to presidents. But the style that served him so well in Texas was like a rare wine that doesn't travel well. Elsewhere, this can-do wheeler-dealer came across as something like J.R. Ewing of "Dallas," a Huey Long in tailored suits, a suaver version of Lyndon Johnson. And it wasn't just the Eastern Establishment that didn't cotton to the Connally style. In the 1980 South Carolina Republican primary, Ronald Reagan cleaned his clock: A \$12 million campaign netted Connally exactly one delegate to the Republican National Convention.

But Connally had the virtues as well as the defects of his type. Reagan's election left him free to pursue a short, disastrous career in Texas real estate development, and his ensuing bankruptcy showed him at his best. Al-

though he claims that "the failure of the loan was not the result of mismanagement but of circumstances in the general economy" and argues that the government should have intervened to tide embarrassed real estate investors over (it did it for Lockheed, after all), when his fortunes finally collapsed he took it like a man. He and his wife could have sold their belongings privately, to a dealer, but they decided that a public auction, however painful, would bring a higher price and let him do better by his creditors. And the Connallys were there, at the sale, to explain to buyers the history and provenance of their art and other effects. The scene is actually moving, lessened only slightly by the fact that Connally knew that it was.

A first person account like this is probably not the best way to get the flavor of the politics Connally practiced. The tendency to straighten one's tie and pose for posterity seems to be irresistible. Still, Connally tells some nice stories. Some of the best are about his big-oil friends. When oil millionaire Sid Richardson (Connally's sometime employer) bought the New York Central railroad, for instance, he discovered that his part of the price was \$5 million more than he had thought. His only question was, "What was the name of that railroad again?" Another oil man, Oscar Wyatt, went with Connally on a mission to Baghdad just before the Gulf War—unapproved and in fact discouraged by the Bush administration—to meet with Saddam Hussein and bring out some of the American hostages. Like Wyatt, Connally opposed the war, partly because he saw it as a gimmick to restore Bush's popularity, partly because (as Wyatt put it), "In 19 years of trading with the Arabs, the one and only thing I've learned is to stay out of their chickenshit conflicts."

Not surprisingly, many of Connally's best stories are about Lyndon Johnson. For example, Johnson was given to calling people at 5:30 a.m. and asking, "What are you doing?"—to which Rep. Wayne Hays once replied, "Well, Mr. President, I've been lying here hoping you would call." Connally shared Bill Moyers' admiration for LBJ's "moral imagination" and he seems to have been gen-

uinely fond of the man, but he had few illusions about Johnson's devious intelligence and bulldozer tactics. He applauds the few—among them, Sheldon Cohen of the Internal Revenue Service and Joe Barr, undersecretary of the Treasury—who stood up to Johnson successfully.

Two of the stories in this book are about the unlikely subject of Russian women. One concerns Lyndon Johnson's first meeting with Franklin Roosevelt. The young congressman went to the White House to seek a favor for his district. After listening patiently for a few minutes, Roosevelt asked him, out of the blue, "Did you ever see a Russian woman naked?" It seems that Harry Hopkins had visited the USSR and brought back the intelligence that heavy labor had made the New Soviet Woman differently constructed from the American model, information FDR apparently found intriguing.

It's possible that Hopkins didn't meet a representative sample. Forty years later, Richard Nixon told Connally about the parade of Aeroflot stewardesses to the bedroom of the visiting Leonid Brezhnev. According to the president, those Russian women were quite fetching.

Connally's book concludes with a hodgepodge of policy recommendations—national service, a value added tax, term limits, a \$10-a-barrel tax on imported oil, federal standards for public school curricula, and (this one piquant, given the source) the restriction or elimination of plea-bargaining—that, if nothing else, suggest why neither major party was ever really comfortable with this it's-broke-let's-fix-it Texan.

Sound familiar?

Let me refresh your memory. Picture John Connally, not as a bitter has-been offering advice no one wants, but in his prime, in 1972, a 53-year-old mover and shaker bringing President Nixon to his ranch to eat barbecue and corn on the cob with other movers and shakers of Texas. Here he is, tall and handsome, laughing and shaking hands, the gracious host. Here's Alan Shivers, a former governor, and Miss Ima Hogg, daughter of another. There's Anne Armstrong, over yonder Bunker Hunt, Perry Bass, the Murchison brothers. . . and an interesting young newcomer named H. Ross Perot. □

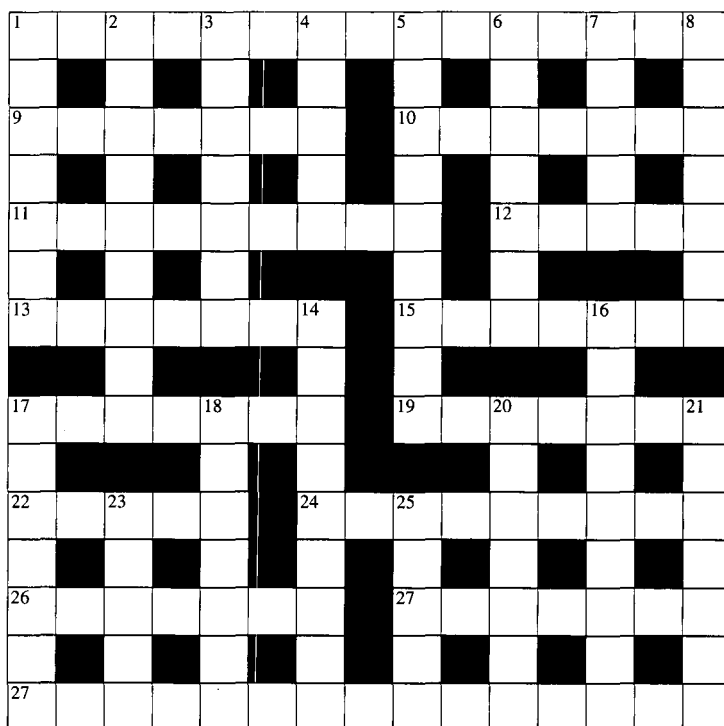
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Political Puzzle

BY JOHN BARCLAY

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.



Across

1. Zoo titan, his pail upset, is expensive problem. (15)
9. Reels wildly about the queen and avid witness. (7)
10. Locale for bizarre tinges surrounding Far West. (7)
11. Greek loiters at assembly. (9)
12. Clean up degree article. (5)
13. Leader peculiarly in style. (7)
15. Teachers at times reroute streets. (7)
17. New spy Smart is sensitive to the supernatural. (7)
19. Pay heed to the damaged scepter. (7)
22. Florida athlete to rag unmercifully. (5)
24. Start to make it a region. (9)
26. Physicians swallow tossed rice for us. (7)
27. Trim pin carefully to make a mark. (7)
28. Slyly hail nun's teacher for 1 Down's current subject. (6,9)

Down

1. Moving rally follows greeting for Washington figure. (7)
2. Clay piles overturned with particular objective. (9)
3. Envisions sea tide swirling. (7)
4. Something of value like part of a tennis match. (5)
5. Cotter pins assembled missing end point for officer. (9)
6. Possibly best in a Mediterranean resort. (7)
7. Do it wrong following one foolish person. (5)
8. Crazy about rising egg and valuable little pieces. (7)
14. Former Russian leader oils chain erratically. (8,1)
16. Aline vote differently for architectural aspect. (9)
17. Boxer clean after conference. (7)

18. Musician playing his part. (7)
20. Boss who neglects detail? (7)
21. Compose letters for highway construction. . . (7)
23. . . . with new letter at the construction. (5)
25. Contest is around certain colleges. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

