

Politics in the air - Seattle hosts GOP starring John Connally

Text and Photos
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Of the Emerald

SEATTLE—It must be one of the last really fantastic hotels left on the West Coast. The Place is filled with bars and barber shops and ballrooms and giant mirrors and bushy chandeliers and you go out of your mind. The lobby in the Olympic Hotel is so big that the assistant manager has a desk right in the middle of the floor. And it must be close to an army of waiters, clerks, maids, cooks, and managers that runs the hotel in perfect order. There's only one thing wrong with the Olympic—it has pay toilets.

They say up here that the Olympic, grandeur and all, might be torn down for an office building. The owner is the University of Washington, and it would evidently rather make money than keep memories alive. But the building leaks, people say, and it costs too much to run and mostly it just costs too much.

For the immediate future, however, the Olympic is doing good business. All the top Republicans from the western states are here now, all the state committee women and national chairmen and national committeemen; they're here to have a conference on winning elections, and maybe some of them are a little scared they won't. Most of the Republicans, though, are pretty confident that no matter what happens, they'll like it.

Panels, Flipping Charts Combine

The two-day conference is split into morning general sessions for speeches by party principles and afternoon panel discussions. The panels, filled with the appropriate experts, cover topics such as "the Value of Womanpower," "How to Deal Accurately and Factually with the Press," and "Winning Techniques." Robert Odell, the executive director of the party's finance committee and remembered principally for his dexterity in flipping the charts at the Watergate hearings, talks about "Broadening the Party Financial Base."

ANALYSIS

But the Republicans are serious about what they're doing here, and it would be a mistake to laugh at them. You don't laugh at the people who run the country.

The big story Friday morning is John Connally. He denies it, but a lot of people are saying he's running for president unannounced. Connally has been spending his time recently running around, that much is certain. The Texan has pulled into a dozen places or more just within the past month, telling everyone how good a Republican he is, despite his Democratic past. Now he's in Seattle saying the same thing.

Tall and handsome Connally is "good press." The Seattle papers like him and say so: "Big John Rides Into Town," the Post-Intelligencer tells its readers, and the outline under the photo describes the man as "a crowd-pleaser" and "charismatic." The night before, Connally held a reception in the hotel for the conference participants. All the local Republicans from Butte, Montana and Elko, Nevada got a good chance to see Big John up real close, the P-I says, and a lot of them liked what they saw.

"No."

Now, after a long night of being tall and handsome and aristocratic, Connally holds a press conference to tell everybody, once again:

"No."

But why do you go around and—

"I'm traveling around the country saying a lot of things I think should be said," Connally explains to the press.

Do you want to be president, Governor?

And Connally pauses, just for a second and says: "I'm not sure I do—I've given it that much thought." And a moment later he adds: "It's not a burning ambition with me."

Then Connally describes the job he has no burning ambition for: "I view it as a very difficult, hard task for any man to undertake."

Well, the press wants to know, what do you have ambition for?

Big John thinks that over once or twice and replies: "I would like to be a force in political life. I have a desire to be a well-respected, hard-working attorney. I have a desire to be a well-traveled man. And I want to be a good livestock breeder."

But, he concedes, many ambitions "will be unfulfilled."

By 1975, Connally says, he will decide—"pro or con"—whether he will make the run for the presidency. That will be "ample time," he feels.

Then there's the sticky problem of Vice-President Agnew. What if Agnew resigns or is impeached, the press asks, would you be willing to replace him?

Connally says he "wouldn't even want to speculate on that." He has detected "no groundswell" of support for the idea from high-ranking party leaders, although he allows as how "a number of them are kind enough to make that suggestion."

No sir, the man just wants to travel around and say what's on his mind, and in between, sit down at his big ranch south of Dallas and listen to the oil pump out of the ground and watch the cattle breed.

All the time Connally sits at the table and answers questions, press photographers from the papers and networks and local stations are going nuts immortalizing the man on film. A couple of them even go to the trouble of shooting into a large side mirror to catch Connally's profile. They never did that for Harold Stassen.

At a later luncheon for the party members, Connally defends the record of the Nixon administration in glowing terms. There are five million new jobs, he says, and higher wages and a stronger dollar. Inflation? Why, the U.S. is "doing better than anyone else" in the world. Listen, Connally says "you can't expect your elected officials to wave a magic wand and say there will be no more inflation." Besides, he adds, food prices are coming down.

And the world situation just delights the man. Think of it, Connally says, no draft, no fighting in Viet Nam, good relations with China. "This administration has made historic progress that can endure..."

Unfortunately, Connally says, there are a few problems. There's a "crisis of cynicism" in the country today and it's upsetting just about all the President's great plans. And the energy crisis, that's another bad one. Of course, Big John knew all about the oil shortage years ago: "A few of us tried to say there will be shortages but nobody listened."

Towards the end of his speech, Connally lets out some of his philosophy: "When you reduce everybody to a common denominator, you reduce them to the lowest denominator." Trying to figure out that one could make you miss the rest of his speech.

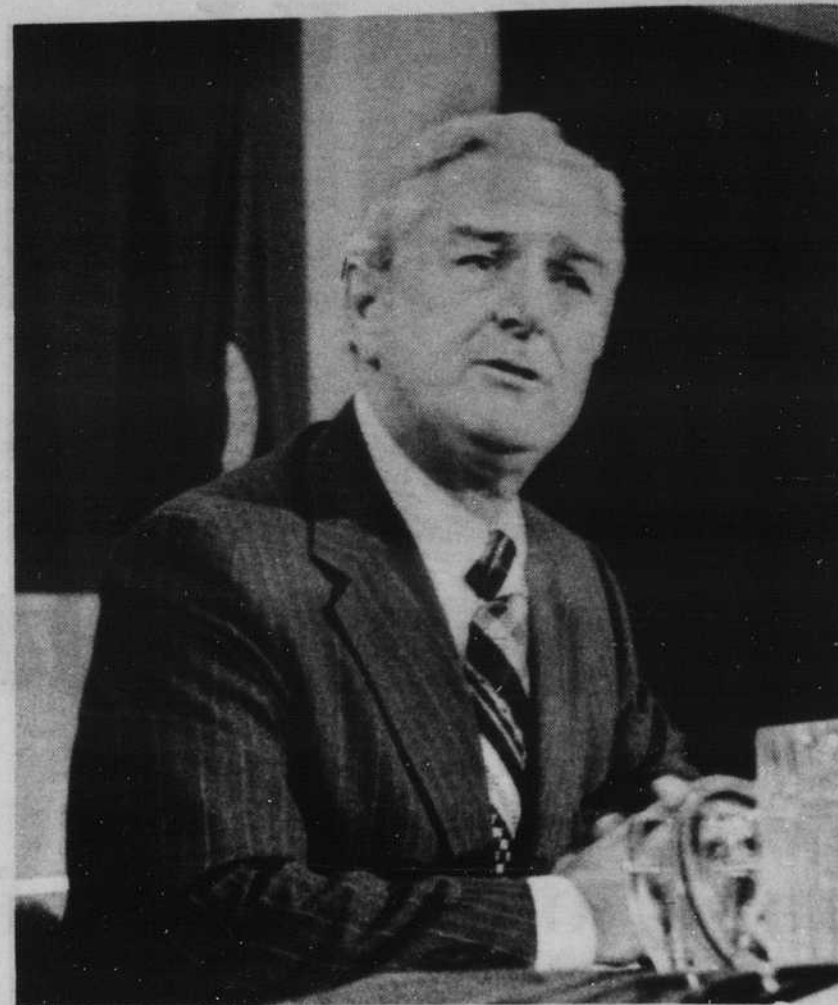
The evening hours are filled up with the usual routine of parties and hospitality meetings in various rooms throughout the hotel. In room 1025 of the Olympic, the Oregon delegation is holding a get-together for everyone from the State. You go in the door and two little old ladies greet you, just brimming over with excitement and cheer. No matter who you are, high or low, they let you know you're welcomed. And the national committeeman from Oregon comes over and smiles and shakes your hand firmly and lets you know how happy he is that you've come. The room is pretty crowded and there's not much room to move, but somebody tells you the drinks are over at the bar. Well, it turns out they're drinking cranberry juice. Oregon cranberry juice. And somebody comes by with some roses that look nice. Oregon roses, what else? Not much more than a drink or two later, you realize that not only is the cranberry juice from Oregon, but the vodka in it is also. Up on the walls are posters of Oregon, and for a while you gaze into the fir-studded hills and the rivers and mountains and finally believe that you are in Oregon.

Upstairs in 1125, a party for the press people is going full swing. Unlike the people one floor below, reporters don't care where they get their stuff from. All kinds of hard drinks and beer and soda are dispensed by a hired bartender, while over on the table sits a big spread of hors d'oeuvres. Goodies like crab legs and teriyaki steak and caviar grace the white linen. It's all left over from the previous night's reception for Connally. The turn-out was evidently less than expected.

Ronald Reagan's press secretary Ed Gray, is there and he tells you about how nice The Governor is. Gray says that Reagan doesn't have anything against long hair. The hair is okay, it's how you vote that counts. And The Governor does care about poor people! Why he's donated his own furniture to penniless families—and nobody knows about it because The Governor doesn't want it to get out. But no, The Governor doesn't like Chavez and the farm workers...

Next morning, the great throng of Republicans meets in the magnificent ballroom of the Olympic to hear from people like Pennsylvania's Senator Hugh Scott and Washington's Governor Dan Evans. All

(Continued on Page 11)



Charismatic Connally rides into town

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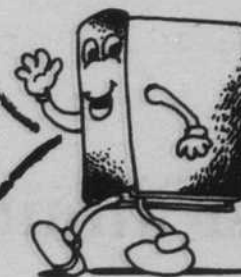
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