Connally on statehood: you'll be Americans first

By HAROLD J. LIDIN

Republic presidential hopeful John B. Connally, campaigning here Wednesday, said that if the island becomes a state, Puerto Ricans must think of themselves first as Americans.

Connally expressed that opinion in reply to a question from a Coamo municipal official during a noon-time visit to Town Hall. Antonio Molina, community action director for Coamo, asked Connally if Puerto Rico could continue to participate in the Olympics as a separate team if the island were a state.

Connally replied that Puerto Ricans would have to participate in the Olympic Games as Americans, and cautioned his listeners about entertaining “illusions” with respect to the meaning of statehood.

“You will be a 51st state,” Connally said. “That doesn’t mean you will lose your identity...it does mean...that first you have to be an American. Secondly, you have to be a Puerto Rican.”

The visitor, a three-time governor of Texas, drew a parallel between what happened to that state and what he foresees for Puerto Rico.

“We in Texas, when we joined the nation, were an independent nation. When we came in, we became Americans first,” he said. “We’re Texans second.”

“We have been in the union since 1845, and we don’t think this in any way has destroyed our identity,” he said.

Connally said primary allegiance to the United States would not imply surrender of the island’s cultural heritage.

“The south part of Texas has a rich Spanish background, just as you have here,” he said. “The language is still spoken here, the religion is there, the mores are there, the family ties, the family culture, everything is still there.”

During a campaign swing through Caguas Wednesday, Republican presidential hopeful John Connally stops to test his luck by purchasing lottery tickets from a sidewalk vendor. (STAR photo by Jose Garcia)

“I’d be extremely disappointed if you did not retain your cultural heritage,” he said.

Connally’s remarks about U.S. allegiance taking precedence for Islanders, if Puerto Rico becomes a state, prompted a pithy response from Ruben Berrios, president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party.

“Connally has just buried all the myths,” Berrios said. “It’s a pity that in this society one has to wait for a North American to come here to state what we, the independentistas, have always said.”

Connally’s exchange with Molina in Coamo was his second salvo of the day into the touchy area of Puerto Rican political status.

Earlier, in a curbstone address to 150 persons clustered in front of the Caguas City Hall, the Texan urged his listeners to take part in the Republican primary on Feb. 17.

“Say to Senator Kennedy, who’s not for statehood, and to the Popular Party, which is not for statehood, that they are making a very big mistake,” he said.

Connally, repeatedly stressed that he favors statehood.

At City Hall, Mayor Miguel Hernandez greeted Connally with his personal endorsement.

Hernandez has been identified with the Democratic Party rather than the GOP. He later told a reporter, “I wish you wouldn’t say anything about that” when the newsmen asked the mayor to verify his endorsement of Connally.

A highlight of Connally’s one-hour visit to Caguas came when he boosted himself onto a black paso fino horse named “Guerrero,” and stepped off briskly along the wet street in front of City Hall.

Chatting later with the horse’s owner, Antonio Rodriguez Nazario, the Texan spoke admiringly of the horse’s smooth gait.

But he confessed he was worried that, with “steel shoes on this wet pavement,” the horse would slip.

“They have strong legs,” Rodriguez Nazario assured him.

Sen. Miguel “Mickey” Miranda, NPP-at-large, a declared Connally supporter, offered the information that as chairman of the Senate Sports and Public Recreation Committee, he had fathered a resolution honoring the paso fino as the “autochthonous” Puerto Rican horse.

In a walking tour of the Caguas business district, the candidate and his local representative, former Fomento chief Manuel Casiano, scanned the shelves of half-a-dozen shoe stores. As the men turned over shoes after shoe, and found only Italian and Spanish labels, Casiano said, mournfully, “The U.S. just isn’t competitive.”

In Coamo, a less commercially intense town, Connally spent more time visiting health units, a day-care center where he was hailed by the manager of the food stamp center. Connally, a conservative who is regarded as a skeptic on welfare programs, congratulated the manager of the food stamp center for a “fine-looking office.” Coamo reportedly has 87 percent of the populace on food stamps.

The candidate’s day began with a breakfast at San Juan City Hall with Mayor Herman Padilla, executive vice-president of the local Republican Party. At a news conference following the breakfast, Connally confessed he had been unsuccessful in winning an endorsement from Padilla.

Connally, who scored a weak 9.7 percent in Monday’s Iowa caucuses, seemed undisturbed by the results.

The triumph of George Bush in the Iowa competition was “the best thing that could have happened to me,” Connally asserted.

According to Connally’s interpretation, the Bush win shows that Ronald Reagan is not unbeatable. This will trigger a move away from Reagan by party leaders, Connally predicted.

The shift, he added, will not be to Bush but to him.

Connally said GOP leaders see Bush as “too liberals.”