

Bob Bullock

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When Texas governor George W. Bush delivered the eulogy for Bob Bullock in June 1999, he honored him as “the largest Texan of our time.” Although the state’s historical museum in Austin now bears his name, Bullock’s path to legendary status was neither steady nor straight. Bullock began his political career aligned with segregationists, transformed himself into a liberal Democrat, and then metamorphosed into one of Republican George W. Bush’s most important political allies. Bullock was very much like Sam Houston, a Texan who transcended personal failing to rise to greatness and become a state icon. As Bullock quipped when Hill Junior College put his name on a building, “I’m so happy that they named a gym after me instead of a prison.”ⁱ

Bullock grew up in Hillsboro, Texas, where it seemed to many that he was more likely to end up inside the walls of one of the state’s penal institutions than atop its political institutions. Some in Hillsboro attribute to a young Bob Bullock a prank right out of *American Graffiti*. One night someone

wrapped a chain around the rear axle of a police cruiser, tied it to a telephone pole, and then called the police to tell the officer on duty that evening about a big fight at a local cafe. When the officer leaped into his car, the car lurched as far as the end of the chain before its rear end was yanked clear off.

Bullock battled his way through Texas government as legislator, lobbyist, staffer for Governor Preston Smith, and secretary of state. Even as he worked his way up in Texas politics, he chain-smoked and drank a fifth of whiskey daily. In 1974, Bullock won statewide election to the position of comptroller of public accounts, and he modernized the office’s accounting practice by replacing paper and pencil account ledgers and mechanical adding machines with computers. Bullock won an expanded budget for his office by promising legislators that, with a few more million dollars provided for auditors and enforcers, he would find a few hundred million more in revenue that the legislature could appropriate. Bullock used these resources to stage dramatic, highly visible seizure raids at some businesses. The raids encouraged other delinquent businesses to settle their accounts. Bullock never shied from a battle, once forcing the Texas Council of Campfire Girls to pay \$13,284 for sales taxes on their fund-raising candy sales. He also used the comptroller’s ability to generate tax revenue estimates that effectively served as a cap on legislative spending as a tool for influencing state policy.

As much as Bullock mastered political office, he was unable to master his appetites. Bullock occasionally showed up at work drunk and traveled around the state on business accompanied by a companion selected from the secretarial pool. Once, after being caught using a state airplane for personal

use, Bullock proclaimed, “Yeah, I’m a crook, but I’m the best comptroller the state ever had.”ⁱⁱ While he could be blunt in his politics, he wasn’t interested in having too much truth reported. When pressed too insistently by reporters at a press conference, Bullock warned, “I keep files on reporters, too. I could name your girlfriends and where they live and what flowers you buy them... if I wanted to tell that to your wives.”ⁱⁱⁱ When the paper began reporting on his use of public funds for a new truck, Bullock mailed boxes of cow manure to the *Dallas Morning News*, a move his spokesman later defended by saying, “He did it on his own time, on his own money.”^{iv}

By the time he was elected lieutenant governor in 1990, Bullock had put most of his troubled past behind him, telling one person, “There is nothing left for me to do but what’s good for Texas.” When George W. Bush became governor, he immediately realized that Bullock’s years of experience, fund-raising skills, and legislative connections made him an indispensable partner, especially for a governor new to state government. Working closely with Bullock, Bush built the record of bipartisan legislative success that helped propel him to the White House. The endorsement of Bullock, a longtime Democrat, gave Bush an important boost. Known for closing his remarks with “God bless Texas,” Bullock found a way to move beyond the personal controversy that often swirled around him and help Texas forge ahead.

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- i. Dave McNeely and Jim Henderson, *Bob Bullock: God Bless Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 16.
 - ii. *Ibid.*, 7.
 - iii. *Ibid.*, 114.
 - iv. *Ibid.*, 141.