Almost nine years ago, the most storied Texas politician since Lyndon Johnson rode off to that big caucus in the sky and left behind a tangled legacy.

As presiding officer of the Texas Senate for eight years, Bob Bullock enjoyed the most powerful lieutenant governorship in the nation. He was often mean and nasty, yet incredibly effective. Lawmakers, lobbyists and other officials did things not necessarily because they wanted to, but because Bullock wanted them to. He left the Legislature in 1999 and died five months later at 69, but his power is legendary.

An example: In 1994, the University of Texas and Texas A&M University wanted to increase their sports team earnings by leaving the Southwest Conference in 1994 to join the Big 8. Bullock, a graduate of both Texas Tech and Baylor Universities, called in their top executives.

"You’re taking Tech and Baylor, or you’re not taking anything," Bullock said. "I’ll cut your money off, and you can join privately if you want, but you won’t get another nickel of state money."

The university representatives expressed hesitation. Bullock cut them off.

"If you want to try me, go ahead," he said. "Governor, we understand," said then-UT Chancellor Bill Cunningham.

At that moment, for all practical purposes, the Big 8 became the Big 12.

Was Bob Bullock, as one of the last governmental gunslingers, the most innovative and productive state government executive? Did he, by his animosity, help bring down fellow Democrat Ann Richards as governor, and promote a baseball team president and former First Son to succeed his father in the White House?

The answer may well be "yes." How it happened is a story little-known outside Texas, of two governors and a lieutenant governor powerful enough to control the reins of both their political futures and, ultimately, the course of history.

Democrat Ann Richards and Republican George W. Bush had at least two things in common. They both quit drinking in the 1980s, when they were in their 40s. They both served as governor of Texas while Democrat Bob Bullock was lieutenant governor.

Bullock and Richards had been drinking buddies in the 1970s until Richards checked in for alcoholism treatment—"drunk school," Bullock called it—in 1980. Bullock followed suit in 1981. In 1990, he was elected lieutenant governor and she was elected governor.

The late columnist Molly Ivins, who was close friends with both, thought it bothered Bullock that Richards had gotten the governor’s job he’d earlier said he wanted.

"Bullock was never fair to Ann, and treated her very badly, mostly out of intense envy," Ivins said in a 2005 interview. "She could get elected governor and he couldn’t."

And although he was one of the state’s pioneer practitioners of affirmative action with regard to hiring and promoting women and minorities, Bullock still suffered from more than a trace of male chauvinism, Ivins said.

Democrat Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock and Republican Governor George W. Bush became a bipartisan team in Texas.

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In Texas, the governor and lieutenant governor run independently of each other. After Bush upset Richards in the 1994 election, while Bullock was handily re-elected, Bullock and Bush got along famously. With a few exceptions, he treated the presidential son almost reverently. He predicted as early as 1996 that Bush would one day follow his father to the White House, and endorsed him for re-election as governor in 1998 over Bullock’s former deputy comptroller, Democratic Land Commissioner Garry Mauro, even though Bullock was the godfather of two of Mauro’s children.

Bullock didn’t get Bush elected president; he died of recurring lung cancer and congestive heart failure on June 17, 1999, almost a year before Bush won the Republican nomination. But he could have made Bush’s record as governor a shambles, had he so chosen.

A POWER CENTER

Most Americans and probably most Texans don’t know it, but the Texas lieutenant governor is the most powerful lieutenant governor position in the country. Texas is one of a handful of states that is ostensibly bipartisan; its legislature is not organized along party lines like the Congress and most other states. In that independent atmosphere, the presiding officer of the Senate has even more power. Some have argued that the lieutenant governor is more powerful than the governor, particularly on budget matters.

Bullock came to the job after 33 years in and around state government—as a state representative, lobbyist, appointments secretary to a governor, secretary of state and, most important, 16 years as the state comptroller.

It was in that position as the state’s tax collector that Bullock, whose role model was LBJ, developed enormous power. During the first half of his tenure, he was a bourbon-swilling, manic-depressive, a hard-driving taskmaster, who carried out raids on businesses that had not paid their taxes. Not only did he control some 2,500 state jobs, with well-trained alumni scattering to a host of other state agencies, the lobby, the Legislature, and even statewide office, Bullock also had the final say-so on how much the Legislature could spend every two years.

That power came from the balanced-budget amendment to the Texas Constitution, passed in 1942. That amendment requires that after legislators draw up the biennial budget (Texas meets only the first five months of each odd-numbered year, unless called into special session by the governor), the comptroller has to certify that his estimate of the revenue to be taken in during that period will cover the spending.

Bullock used the leverage of that power to wheedle money from the Legislature for things like out-of-state auditors, state-of-the-art computers, a crackerjack training program, and anything else he thought he needed. If legislators would pony up for his ambitious tax-colllecting approaches, he told them, he’d be able to collect more revenue for the state, and legislators would have more money to spend for their budget. Within four years, the comptroller’s budget had almost tripled.

Although Richards had been state treasurer for the eight years before she was elected governor, Bullock used to tell her that he could get her job done with a secretary and a phone. She had far fewer employees than the comptroller, and, a few years after she left office, the treasurer’s job was abolished and its functions scattered elsewhere, including some to the comptroller’s office.

The source of the lieutenant governor’s power comes not from the constitution, which merely says he will be president of the Senate. It comes from the rules passed by the senators themselves at the outset of each regular legislative session. For many years, they have given the lieutenant governor the power to name committee members and their chairmen, decide to which committees bills will go, and decide which senators will be recognized on the floor to present legislation.

Bullock was a sponge for information—on policy, politics, administration and plain old gossip.

The lieutenant governor is also a leader of the Legislative Budget Board, and gets to appoint the four senators who sit on it, who meet with the House speaker and four House members to draw up a rough-draft budget during the 19 months before each regular legislative session.

When Bullock was elected lieutenant governor, he had instant power over the Texas Senate, and an enviable information and power network scattered through state agencies and the lobby. Not only had 19 of the 31 senators and 63 of the 150 House members endorsed his candidacy for lieutenant governor, when his hand came off the Bible at his swearing-in, it was as though 5,000 Manchuian Candidates had been activated. He had loyalists everywhere.

Although he’d announced in the 1980s that he’d run for governor, he pulled down that flag, and eventually decided to run for lieutenant governor when it became known that the incumbent, Democrat Bill Hobby, wouldn’t seek re-election. Bullock, ever an early bird, announced for the job in September of 1987—more than three years before the election in 1990.

BULLOCK AND RICHARDS

When Richards came from behind and won the governorship, most who knew them both thought she and Bullock would be a natural fit. They agreed on most issues. But Bullock thought the lieutenant governor should handle the nuts and bolts of running the government, while the governor should make lofty speeches and clip ribbons. Richards, the first woman governor of Texas whose husband hadn’t held the job first, didn’t agree.

From her days as treasurer and before that as a county commissioner in Travis County, home of the state capital of Austin, Richards was a detail person. She wanted to be involved in everything.

Bullock was a sponge for information—on policy, politics, administration and plain old gossip. He loved to know who was sleeping with whom and where bodies were buried. He had an explosive temper that could melt a safe, and could go off with seemingly little or no reason. Within short order, the members of the Senate, and even some House members, began to realize that those stories of explosive, mercurial, abusive behavior in the comptroller’s office that had traveled the bar circuit for
the past several years weren’t exaggerated.

But Bullock and Richards “both made an effort to get along in the beginning,” said Mary Beth Rogers, Richards’ initial chief of staff. “By the end of the first year, Bullock decided he was king.”

Bullock increasingly turned his guns on Richards and her staff. He demanded, often in insulting and sometimes demeaning terms, that he know everything that was going on, and that Richards and her staffers feed him all the information he wanted. But Richards and her employees decided they wouldn’t honor that kind of nasty behavior by catering to it.

(Richards declined to talk about her relationship with Bullock, right up to her death in 2006.)

BULLOCK AND BUSH

By contrast, when Bush came in as governor, he was coached by key staff member Cliff Johnson, a former state representative and legislative liaison for former Governor Bill Clements, to court Bullock. And Bush did—beginning even before the election.

Bush, sensing he was winning, went to Bullock’s home three weeks before the election. As Bush had hoped, Bullock was impressed by the overture and how Bush handled himself. After Bush left, Bullock told his chief of staff, Chuck Bailey, “I think we can work with that boy.”

“Bush became a protégé, and he was asking for advice,” said Richards’ aide Rogers. “As long as you were subservient, things were okay.”

Yet both men were smart enough to know they needed each other. When Bush came in, with Democratic leaders and Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate, he knew that if he was to get any credit for passing anything, he would need their acquiescence, if not cooperation.

Bush had run for office on a modest platform of just four planks—limiting consumer lawsuits, reforming juvenile justice, overhauling welfare, and improving education. Three of the topics had been the subjects of interim committees, but nonetheless, when they passed, Bullock and House Speaker Pete Laney allowed Bush to claim some credit.

Some of Bullock’s old Democratic buddies weren’t too pleased with the cozy relationship he was beginning to develop with some Republicans, even before Bush’s election.

Carlton Carl said he and another former Bullock aide, Buck Wood and Molly Ivins, “used to talk about how we needed to do a Democratic intervention.”

On the other hand, Bullock and Laney knew that the number of Republicans in each of their chambers were growing with each election. If they were to be successful in hanging onto their leadership power, it didn’t hurt to have the ostensible leader of the Republican Party’s arm draped around them.

At Bullock’s request, Bush assigned staff member Dan Shelley to meet with Bullock and a few key staffers every morning at 6:30 a.m., as they mapped out the Senate’s order of business for the day. Shelley said he gave Bullock any information that he wanted.

And in that fashion, Bullock became the bipartisan talisman that Bush wanted and needed to run for president. He said he had demonstrated as Texas’ governor that he could get along with the other party, and after winning the GOP nomination, even asked Bullock’s widow Jan to introduce him at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia.

“We have seen firsthand what kind of genuine people George and Laura are,” Jan Bullock told the Republicans and the nation. “We have seen his intelligence, his integrity, his sense of humor, his bipartisan spirit and his dedication to public service. Texans of all political stripes are proud of Governor Bush and Laura Bush. And Americans will be proud of President George W. Bush and Laura Bush ...”

TEXAS VS. WASHINGTON, D.C.

Three months after his inauguration, President Bush was called upon to dedicate a Texas History Museum that had been named for Bullock. In his remarks, Bush said that in moving from the Texas governorship to the presidency, he’d tried to transport some of the bipartisan spirit that he and Bullock and Laney had enjoyed.

“There is a way yet to go, but I think we’re making some progress,” Bush said. “The tone is more civil, the respect is more widespread. I think Bob Bullock would be pleased.”

That civil tone wasn’t all that obvious in Washington, D.C. Part of the reason was that it’s just a bigger, tougher, meaner and more spread out than the Texas Capitol.

In Texas, there had existed a chauvinism, even among Democrats. If we’re likely to have a Republican president, why shouldn’t he be from Texas? And Bush had indeed acted in a relatively bipartisan fashion. There were just 181 legislators, all in the same building with the governor, and he courted them by popping into their offices in the afternoon and posing for pictures with them and staff members. Bush had a small agenda, and he used his affable personality to good advantage. And, because of the proximity, he could have a senator in his office smoking a cigar within half a minute.

In Washington, by contrast, there were 535 legislators, many un-awed by Bush, many of whom thought they were smarter, and some actually wanting his job. Hardball partisanship was so ingrained that despite the new president’s stated intentions, with Republicans in narrow control of the Congress, Bush had to go along with them to get along.

A visit to a senator’s office required a two-mile drive in a motorcade with enough manpower to invade Cuba. Add in that Bush was responsible for the national defense and the economy, and things got truly complex.

People may ponder what Bullock would have thought about Bush’s presidency. But in Texas, memory of Bullock lingers several years after his death. They remember that in his days as lieutenant governor, perhaps as recompense for his reckless earlier days, he always insisted to his staff, “Do what’s best for Texas.” In fact, he ended every speech with the sentence, “God Bless Texas.”

But his authoritative governmental style and megalomaniacal style, which had former staffers still jumping when their pager or cell phone buzzed, reverberated for years beyond his death.

A couple of years ago, a journalist visited the Texas State Cemetery, where Bullock was buried and whose restoration he had overseen during his last term as lieutenant governor.

Occasionally, when the reporter asked why something was the way it was at the cemetery, the caretaker replied, “That’s the way Mr. Bullock wanted it.”

Finally, the reporter said, “But Bullock’s dead.”

Smiling and arching an eyebrow, the caretaker said, “Are you sure?”

CHECK OUT how to order Bob Bullock: God Bless Texas at www.ncsl.org/magazine.