Charlie Wilson: More Than A War
### Who was Charlie Wilson?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born</td>
<td>June 1, 1933</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduated Trinity High School</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>Graduated Naval Academy</td>
<td>1956</td>
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<td>Married Jerri</td>
<td>1965</td>
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<td>U.S. Senator</td>
<td>1973</td>
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<td>Designation of Big Thicket</td>
<td>May 27, 1974</td>
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<td>Charlie Wilson's 1st Trip to Pakistan</td>
<td>1982</td>
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<td>Stinger Missiles Introduced into Soviet-Afghanistan War</td>
<td>1986</td>
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<td>Soviet Army Leaves Afghanistan</td>
<td>February 15, 1989</td>
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<td>Charlie Returns from Congress</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charlie Passes Away</td>
<td>February 10, 2010</td>
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Charles Wilson served as United States Representative for the Second Congressional District of Texas, which stretched from Nacogdoches to Beaumont, from 1973-1996. Today, many people only link Charlie to the Soviet-Afghanistan War because he appropriated American government funding to the Afghanistan Mujahedeen's (freedom fighters) fight against the Soviet Army in the 1980s. Charlie, however, had a much longer list of successes than this war, many of which greatly improved the lives of East Texans.

Charlie’s connections to East Texas ran deep. He was born and raised in the small East Texas town of Trinity. After graduation from Trinity High School, he briefly attended Sam Houston State University before going to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland in 1953. While he worked as a weapons specialist at the Pentagon, Charlie ran for and won his home district’s State Representative race in 1961. While representing East Texas as a State Representative from 1961 to 1966 and as a State Senator from 1966 to 1972, Charlie befriended Arthur Temple, Jr., the East Texas timber baron, moved to LeFevre, and managed the Big Tin Barn retail outlet for Temple Industries. In 1972, running on a platform of utility regulation and economic development for East Texas, he became the Second Congressional District’s representative in Washington. In Washington, Charlie served on the House Defense and Foreign Affairs Appropriations Subcommittees, and used this position to assign monetary aid to his constituents and Cold War Warriors around the globe.

Charlie did much more than help fund the Soviet-Afghanistan War however. He tirelessly labored to improve the lives of his constituents and “underdogs” all over the world.

This exhibit is the product of a graduate Public History Collections Management course in connection with Stephen F. Austin State University’s Charlie Wilson Oral History Project. Special thanks to SFASU’s History Department, East Texas Research Center, Information Technology Services, and Dr. Jerry Williams and the Center for Applied Social Research. All images, unless noted otherwise, are courtesy of the East Texas Research Center’s Charlie Wilson collection.

At the bottom of each exhibit panel is a phone number that visitors are encouraged to call to hear short segments of oral histories by Charlie’s friends and family. Visitors can also make use of their mobile devices if they have a barcode scanner application to scan QR codes to learn more.

> To hear a 2.35-minute oral history clip of Ray Hanson, Charlie’s long-time friend, supporter, and neighbor, describing Charlie’s early political activity following the killing of his dog Teddy, call 936-685-1502 and press 1 when prompted.
WAR: BEYOND WEAPONS

Most of what people know of Charlie Wilson and his role in the Soviet-Afghanistan War (1979-1989) is what they have learned from George Crile’s book Charlie Wilson’s War, first published in 2003 and the subsequent film version released in 2007 starring Tom Hanks. Charlie was instrumental in getting the Afghanis weapons, the most notable being the Stinger missile, necessary to shoot down lethal Soviet helicopters and to defeat the Soviets. All of his efforts to defeat the Soviet communists often overshadowed the compassion Charlie had for the Afghani people and the medical aid he helped supply the wounded.

From his very first visit to the Pakistan-Afghanistan region in the fall of 1982, Charlie formed an immediate affection for the Mujahedeen (Afghan freedom fighters), their courage, and their never-ending passion to defeat the Soviets at all costs. Charlie completely lost his heart to the Afghanistan when he visited the Red Cross hospital on the edge of Peshawar in Pakistan. He saw scores of young men laid out on cots. Charlie moved from bed to bed, listening to the fighters describe the carnage they had experienced. One young Afghani, who had stepped on a landmine, explained how proud he was of his sacrifice and regretted that his feet would not grow back “so that he could go kill Russians.”

The Mujahedeen direly needed medical assistance beyond what was available to them in the region. So Charlie arranged for medical support and the creation of at least 33 medical clinics inside Afghanistan. Charlie tried to organize a group of retired field medics to go to Afghanistan, but Mujahedeen leaders rejected them because they were westerners. Instead, Afghanistan were trained in about six weeks how to set broken bones, insert a catheter for an internal wound, and identify the twelve most common diseases.

Along with help from the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program and the Agency of International Development, Charlie provided continued medical support and assistance to the injured Afghani men, women, and children in the war zone.

In May 1986, nine young Afghani, ages 8 through 18, some of them rebel fighters against invading Soviet forces, arrived at the Houston Intercontinental Airport to receive medical treatment. Charlie Wilson was credited with initiating the arrival of the wounded Afghanistan. All of the children had complicated injuries to their limbs and many had to have reconstructive surgery. They were taken to the Devereux Center in Victoria, where they recovered from physical and emotional damage from the violence and trauma they had endured.

To listen to a 2:38 minute clip of an interview with Charles Schnabel, Wilson’s second Chief of Staff, discussing Charlie’s role in getting medical aid to the Afghans, please call 936-468-1500 and press the number 2 when prompted.
Good Time Charlie

Charlie Wilson had a reputation for hiring the most beautiful women to work for him in his office. These ladies were known as “Charlie’s Angels” (a name referencing the popular TV show [1976-1981] featuring the beautiful actresses Kate Jackson, Farrah Fawcett, and Jaclyn Smith). The women disliked the name at first, but they have since come to cherish it. Surrounding himself with women at the office certainly enhanced Charlie’s “Good Time” playboy image. But the label of “Charlie’s Angels” is a bit of a misnomer. The women he hired knew how to do their jobs and they did them very well. These were skilled and talented employees. Moreover, Wilson gave each “Angel” a job precisely because he was so devoted to women’s rights and helping advance the careers of talented women like the Angels, helping to break the glass ceiling in Washington, D.C. along the way.

“Good Time Charlie”
Charlie Wilson enjoyed the image as a playboy in Washington. His apartment had mirrors from floor to ceiling and a hot tub in his bedroom. He usually brought beautiful women on “junkets” (government trips to foreign countries) with him, including a trip to Egypt with a belly-dancer, and a trip to Morocco with a former Ms. World contestant. He even beat a special congressional investigation over alleged cocaine use. Unfortunately, Charlie’s lifestyle cost him. He inherited congenital heart disease from his father. This combined with his heavy drinking habits almost killed him in 1985 and later led to a heart transplant in 2007.

Good Time Charlie and Politics
Some of Charlie’s closest friends and family believe that he often perpetuated the party-animal image so that other members of Congress might overlook him. Whatever the case, Wilson did enjoy the Good Time Charlie lifestyle, to be sure, but he also did his job very well. The “Good Time” image certainly led others to underestimate him as he accomplished many of his political goals. The Good Time image, however, may have cost him from serving in higher positions in government, such as Defense Secretary or the Senate, though Charlie never said he desired such offices. Be that as it may, Charlie so effectively served his constituency that, in connection with his honesty about it all, even the noted conservative district of East Texas forgave Good Time Charlie for many of
Charlie Wilson and the Home Folk

His friends, employees, and family members all described Charlie as a rare politician who genuinely cared about East Texans. The legislation he supported demonstrates his unmistakable devotion to the people of East Texas and his extraordinary efforts to assist individual East Texans. Covering thirteen counties over an area larger than some states, Charlie reached many of his constituents through the use of his “mobile office” (a Recreational Vehicle). Before arriving in any East Texas town, Charlie’s office ran an ad in the local newspaper telling constituents when and where his mobile office would be. Constituents who usually would not have been able to speak to Charlie in person lined up to tell their Congressperson face-to-face about the issues that affected them the most.

Social Security and Medicare

Charlie believed in helping the “underdog,” people who were victims of social or political injustice. This belief unquestionably guided Charlie’s political career and personal life as he constantly supported legislation that worked to reform Social Security and Medicare programs. But Charlie went even further for his constituency than merely supporting legislation. He charged his regional staff to actually go out into East Texas and help his constituency in person. Numerous stories of how Charlie, or “Charlie’s Angels,” helped individual East Texans to get their Social Security or Medicare benefits attest to Charlie’s commitment to the “home folk.”

Equal and Civil Rights Advocacy

Charlie’s fervor to help the underdog also propelled him to advocate civil rights legislation. Not only did Charlie champion civil rights, he also hired minorities, even participating in “Juneteenth” festivities that celebrated the 1865 end of slavery in Texas throughout his career. These celebrations and other personal meetings with African Americans throughout his district gave Charlie a chance to reach out to African-American communities, which also extended his league of loyal voters.

Charlie also fearlessly advocated women’s rights and hired legions of qualified women that assisted in “taking care of the home folk.” “Charlie’s Angels” were on the front lines of East Texas and were charged with the task of helping East Texans any way they could.

>>> To listen to a 2:05 minute clip of an interview with Charles Simpson, Wilson’s first Chief of Staff, discussing Charlie and his staff’s role in taking care of the home folk, please call 906-468-1522 and press the number 4 when prompted.
CHARLIE WILSON AND THE VA

Charlie's Military Record

On July 5, 2008, the VA (Veterans Affairs) Outpatient Clinic of Lufkin was renamed in honor of Charlie Wilson. Charlie, who had devoted much of his life to aiding military veterans, felt particularly proud of the honor. Charlie’s dedication to American military veterans developed from his own years of service in the Navy. His military career began after his graduation from the prestigious Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1936 as a gunnery officer. After briefly working for the Pentagon as a weapon’s specialist, Charlie entered the race for Texas State Representative in 1961 and won at the young age of 27. From the capital halls of Texas or Washington, D.C., Charlie never stopped trying to help America’s service people.

About the VA

The Department of Veterans Affairs offers a wide range of benefits and services to American military veterans, including aiding veterans’ access to healthcare services, programs to eliminate homelessness, help receiving GI Bill benefits, and providing veterans with mental health services. More than 1,400 VA health clinics throughout the United States collectively provide health services to over 8.3 million American veterans.

Charlie's Role in Lufkin VA Clinic

Charlie’s affection for military veterans prompted him to masterfully reassign a VA clinic appropriation away from Tyler, TX. When a bill to create a VA clinic in Tyler appeared in Congress in the early 1990s, Charlie had no problem crossing out Tyler’s name and substituting Lufkin, which he called “a suburb of Tyler.” Charlie figured out that veterans in Tyler had more immediate and convenient access to the Dallas VA system only an hour-and-a-half or so away while veterans living in Lufkin and East Texas had to travel two to three hours to get to Houston. The Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic now stands in a new facility on West Frank Avenue in Lufkin and treats almost 80,000 patients each year. A 10-foot-tall statue of Charlie welcomes America’s veterans at the clinic’s main entrance.

>>> To listen to a 1:30-minute clip of an interview with Peyton Walters, Wilson’s third and last Chief of Staff, discussing Charlie’s role in getting the VA Clinic in Lufkin, please call 836-468-1522 and press the number 5 when prompted.
**Preserving Texas**

Charlie’s Conservation Record

Despite Charlie’s close ties with the timber industry throughout East Texas, he also believed in the conservation of natural resources for the benefit of his constituents. Charlie once said that through environmental protection he was “going to take care of his rednecks.” Throughout his time in Congress, he helped create one of the first National Preserves despite opposition from the timber industry. Throughout the 1960s numerous bills requesting the establishment of the Big Thicket National Preserve in Kountze, near Beaumont, were presented by members of the U.S. Senate and House. These bills all requested several hundred thousand acres of land, and despite National Park Service support, the bills could never pass both houses of congress.

Enter Charlie Wilson

When Charlie Wilson entered the U.S. Congress in 1973, he sought compromise and wasted no time introducing a bill that would dedicate a more acceptable (to lumber interests) 78,000 acres for the creation of the Big Thicket National Preserve. The following year, on October 11, 1974, President Gerald Ford signed the Big Thicket National Preserve Bill into law. This bill included 84,950 acres of land, more than Wilson’s original request.

This bill still omitted an important part of the Big Thicket ecosystem known as the Village Creek Sandylands. Property owners along Village Creek opposed this acquisition and believed it violated their property rights. Nevertheless, Wilson’s close friends, lumber barons, and East Texas philanthropists, the Temple family, donated 2,300 acres to the Nature Conservancy for preservation as the Roy E. Larsen Sandylands Sanctuary. 1,080 more acres of the Village Creek Sandylands became Village Creek State Park.

Wilson continued to push for larger additions to the Big Thicket National Preserve. In 1993, his Big Thicket Addition Act passed congress and added over 10,000 acres to the preserve.

Wilson is also responsible for five wilderness areas in Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, Angelina, and Sabine National Forests, which put him in direct opposition with his timber industry friends and colleagues. Wilson originally supported the construction of the Rockland Reservoir on the Neches River, but switched his stance following opposition from constituents and environmentalists and saved over 100,000 acres from inundation.
Charlie retired from Congress in 1996 after twenty-two years of service. He retired because of his declining health and because of the changing political landscape of the United States. In 1994, the Republican Party gained strength all across the nation with Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich as the figurehead. Wilson worked for a while as a lobbyist before returning to Lubbock with his wife Barbara. Wilson’s Good Time Charlie days finally caught up to him and he underwent a heart transplant in 2007. This new heart did not function properly and, on February 10, 2010, Charlie died in Lubbock at the age of seventy-seven. Charlie left many substantial legacies for East Texans and the world, including the Soviet-Afghanistan War, the Big Thicket, and his renowned ability to take care of the home folk.

Perhaps the Afghanistan War is Charlie’s most widely known legacy today. He doggedly pursued a vast amount of money to get the Mujahedeen whatever they needed to beat the Soviets, from mules to antelopes, weapons, and medical supplies. With Charlie’s aid, the Mujahedeen forced the Soviet Army out of Afghanistan by early 1989. Unfortunately, Charlie could not convince Congress to provide further aid to Afghanistan to help build schools, hospitals, and other valuable services following the war. A mistake that he and many others have said cost the United States ever since.

The Big Thicket became one of the first land preserves in the United States. Charlie’s efforts and ability to work with other members of Congress got the bill passed. Before Wilson, Senator Ralph Yarbrough from Texas fought hard to establish the preserve, but could not succeed because of his unwillingness to compromise, particularly over acreage. Charlie managed to get the Big Thicket established with more than 80,000 acres of land. The fact that Charlie got the preserve established in his first term in Congress demonstrated his ability to garner the necessary votes to get things for his constituents and his home state.

Any mention of Charlie Wilson’s legacy must include his incredible ability to take care of the home folk of East Texas. Wilson cared for his constituents deeply, and he went to any length to fulfill their needs. Wilson and his staff made sure elderly citizens received their Social Security benefits and gave the people of Lubbock a Veterans Affairs Clinic. Charlie’s ability to help his constituents got him elected year after year, and as some have put it, “there was not a better-served constituency in all of the House of Representatives.”

Charlie Wilson was more than a war in many ways. Charlie was a fighter. He fought not just for the people of Afghanistan, but also for his constituents in East Texas. He provided the people of his district with any assistance, be it addressing personal letters or helping elderly citizens get their benefits. Charlie did it all. Charlie’s personality, charisma, and his passionate fight for the underdog won him the respect and love of all the people he met and worked with.