

15th annual Texas Independence Day Dinner
Bullock Texas State History Museum
February 28, 2019

Remarks Presented by Mr. Karl Rove
Historical Perspective on the Bullock Museum

Good evening. Tonight we celebrate not only two History-Making Texans, but also mark the installation of the *La Belle* exhibit and in doing so, honor the role that many in this room played in giving this world-class artifact the setting it deserves. Twenty-five years after the remarkable discovery of the *La Belle*, Texans can see in this great cathedral of our heritage the visible remnants of a history-changing moment that made Texas what she is today.

Though it took place in a distant, largely unknown corner of the world, the arrival of *La Belle* in Matagorda Bay in 1686 was part of a global conflict between two of the world's greatest powers. Both France and Spain were seeking dominance in the New World, France in the fertile lands along the Mississippi and Spain in Mexico's rich silver and gold mountains.

For Spain, this modest boat with its small contingent of French sailors, soldiers and settlers was an existential threat. Whispers of a foreign colony in Texas raised fears that France would soon threaten Spain's hold on Mexico. Shortly after *La Belle* sank into the mud that preserved its boards and beams for 310 years, Mexico City dispatched expeditions to build a string of missions to block what Spanish colonial officials called the "French thorn." This effort began with the construction in 1690 of San Francisco de los Tejas in present-day Houston County, followed by other missions in East Texas, and then in San Antonio and other sites in central Texas, and near the Gulf Coast at Refugio and Goliad. In turn, these missions drew Mexican colonists to Texas.

If the ship that lies within these walls had not sunk...

If La Salle's mission to wrest control of the Gulf of Mexico, then called "the Spanish Sea," had not failed...

If those Mexican colonists had not followed the mission builders...

... then we might now be eating baguettes for breakfast rather than migas and saying "une bière de plus" rather than "una cerveza mas, por favor."

After its discovery in 1995, *La Belle* needed a home. Fortunately, Bob Bullock got sick. Not one to waste time, even while convalescing, the Lt. Governor summoned aides to his hospital room to discuss an idea he had. Troubled there was no central place for Texans, especially young people, to learn the Lone Star State's story, Bullock had decided Texas needed a world-class state history museum, "something" he said "that Texas can be proud of."

Gov. George W. Bush and Speaker Pete Laney immediately agreed, though it's not clear it was because they initially agreed with the Lt. Governor's idea or simply understood that Bullock – a force of nature – was going to get his way no matter what they thought. With the big three united, this magnificent institution was approved.

Three people oversaw the planning of this museum. Two are here tonight – Dealey Herndon and John Nau. I want you to stand for a moment. The final member of the trio – Clay Johnson – could not be with us. Consider these leaders: the nine million visitors to this building, every Texan who will come in years ahead, every non-Texan who gets a glimpse of what it means to be a Texan by coming through this museum’s doors – all of us – owe an enormous debt for the extraordinary energy and vision of three gifted Texans.

Bullock was the guest of honor when ground was broken for the museum, but we lost this great Texan before it opened in 2001. Then-President George W. Bush came to the opening, partly to see the fulfillment of an effort begun on his watch, but more to honor a man he loved whose vision created such wonderful gift for our state’s people.

By what all of you in this room have done to help make the Bullock Museum a treasure for Texas and *La Belle* its centerpiece, the board of trustees and leadership of the Bullock thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Karl Rove
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