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Sticking to His Guns

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Charlie Wilson: The Wild Card Image Was The Real Deal

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"Charlie did *not* drink in the office," said Elaine Lang Cornett. "At least not until the end of the day."

"He did drink a good bit, though," said Carol Simons Huddleston. "Hence the heart transplant."

"I think they over-exaggerated his drug use -- but don't quote me on that," said another of Charlie's Angels.

Charlie Wilson couldn't make it to the Washington premiere of the movie "Charlie Wilson's War" last week -- he got that heart transplant in September, at age 74, and isn't traveling much. But about 20 of Charlie's Angels were on hand, decked out in cocktail dresses and eager to see what Hollywood did with the story of their legendary ex-boss.

Charlie's Angels were the women who worked in Wilson's office during his gloriously colorful 24-year career in Congress, and they were famous on Capitol Hill for their pulchritude and general foxiness. Now a decade or two older, they were amused to see themselves portrayed on screen wearing sexy, low-cut dresses in the office.

"We did not show cleavage in the office," said Huddleston. "I had no cleavage to show."

Sure, the Angels loved the movie and thought Tom Hanks made a terrific Charlie, but they grumbled when the film took liberties with their Charlie.

"His apartment didn't really look like it did in the movie," said Amy Maccarone.

"No, it was much cheesier in real life," said D'Anna Tindal, laughing. "It was floor-to-ceiling mirrors."

"The movie made it seem like he called us all *jailbait*," said Maccarone. "He never called us jailbait."

Well, actually, Charlie really *did* call a fetching 17-year-old intern "jailbait," Cornett recalled.

And what about that scene where Charlie takes a sexy Texas belly dancer to Cairo and she does a sultry dance for the Egyptian defense minister while Charlie and an Israeli arms dealer try to convince the Egyptian to sell them weapons for the Afghan rebels -- that's gotta be a Hollywood fabrication, right?

Wrong. Wilson really *did* bring a belly dancer to Cairo. And he really *was* an outrageous womanizer investigated for allegedly using cocaine with Vegas showgirls. And he really did wheel and deal to get the House Appropriations Committee to spend several billion dollars on covert CIA support for the Afghan rebels, who drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The movie is pretty accurate, as movies go. The problem is that director Mike Nichols had to leave out so much good stuff. If truth be told, the life of "Good Time Charlie" Wilson is way too wild and crazy to be captured in any movie shorter than the "Godfather" trilogy.

Mr. Wilson's Washington

Tall, thin and ridiculously handsome, Charlie Wilson came to Washington in 1973, a liberal Democrat who managed to get elected in conservative East Texas in the midst of the Nixon landslide of 1972 -- perhaps because he ran against the wife of the previous congressman, who'd been sent to prison for bribery.

An Annapolis graduate, former Navy officer and Texas legislator, Wilson arrived in Congress with his cowboy boots and his big booming laugh. He soon met another freshman Democrat -- Colorado feminist Patricia Schroeder -- and he sent her a gift. She opened it and found a picture in a pink frame. It showed a tombstone that read "Wife of Davy Crockett." There was also a note from Wilson: "In Texas, we don't even let women use their first name on their tombstones."

"I thought, 'Who *is* this Neanderthal?' and I stormed into his office," Schroeder recalls. "He burst out laughing. He has spent his whole life figuring out how to pull people's chains -- and he was pulling mine."

When he started laughing, she did, too, and they became fast friends. After that he called her "Babycakes" -- except on formal occasions, when he addressed her as "Congressman Babycakes."

"Everybody loves Charlie," she says. "He's one of those wonderful characters you don't see in politics anymore."

Recuperating back in Texas, Wilson did not respond to requests for an interview for this story, which is unfortunate, because the man has uttered some of the greatest quotes to come out of Congress since Huey Long left. Here, for instance, is how he explained why he never sought a leadership post in the House: "I just don't give a [bleep] who the assistant deputy whip is."

Politically, he was a moderate -- liberal on social issues like abortion and civil rights, but a vehement hawk on defense, voting for the B-1 bomber, the MX missile and the neutron bomb. He might have remained an obscure backbencher if not for two prominent personality traits -- a mischievous wit and an overactive libido.

He was married when he arrived in Congress, but that didn't last long. The '70s was the age of disco, and Wilson became part-owner of a flashy K Street dance club called Elan, which was not known as a hotbed of monogamy. "He had a love of whiskey and a love of the ladies," says his friend Larry L. King, author of "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas." In 1978, Wilson's lifestyle inspired a Washington Post profile headlined "Charles Wilson: Every Day's a Party for Him."

"My constituents know they're not electing a constipated monk," Wilson said.

"He was quite the ladies' man," recalls Rep. Norman Dicks (D-Wash.). "He had an amazing apartment, a real bachelor pad with a hot tub and mirrors, and he loved to throw parties."

Says Cornett: "He specialized in dating lovely women." She was Wilson's press secretary from 1982 until he left office in 1996, and she remembers when a New York gossip columnist reported that Wilson was dating actress Farrah Fawcett. "He'd never met Farrah in his life, but he reads that and says, 'You think if I call her, she'll go out with me?'"

On Capitol Hill, Wilson became famous not only for *dating* beautiful women but for *hiring* them. "His office was filled with absolutely gorgeous, striking women," recalls lobbyist Roselee Roberts. When Wilson was asked about them, he would respond with a line that is quoted in the movie but which can't quite make it unscathed into this family newspaper.

"You can teach 'em to type," he'd say, "but you can't teach 'em to grow [breasts]."

"Charlie just likes saying things like that," says Tindal, who was Wilson's staffer on the Defense

Appropriations subcommittee in the 1980s. "He used to drive us crazy because he was such a chauvinist, but he also gave us so many opportunities. For heaven's sakes, I was a woman on *Defense Appropriations*, where there weren't very many of us." Then she adds this: "I'm a big fan."

Beating the Rap

In the summer of 1980, Wilson traveled to Las Vegas with a girlfriend, who happened to be a Playboy cover girl, and he somehow ended up in a hot tub at Caesars Palace with two naked showgirls.

"The girls had cocaine, and the music was loud," Wilson told the late George Crile, author of the 2003 book "Charlie Wilson's War," which inspired the movie. "It was total happiness. And both of them had 10 long, red fingernails with an endless supply of beautiful white powder. . . . The feds spent a million bucks trying to figure out whether, when those fingernails passed under my nose, did I inhale or exhale, and I ain't telling."

Those "feds" were led by Rudolph Giuliani, then a young Justice Department attorney, heading an investigation into drug use on Capitol Hill. When news of the probe leaked, Wilson denied that he'd used cocaine. Then he added a promise that was pure Wilson: "I won't blame booze and I won't suddenly find Jesus."

Giuliani never got the goods on Wilson, and in July 1983 the feds announced that they had "insufficient admissible, credible evidence to support criminal charges." Charlie was off the hook! He celebrated with a "Beat the Rap Party."

But his troubles weren't over. A month later, driving in a condition he later described as "drunker than [bleep]," Wilson lost control of his Lincoln Continental on the Key Bridge, smacked into a Mazda, then drove away. A witness reported his license number to the police, and he was busted for hit-and-run driving.

Divorce, dope, drunk driving: As the 1984 election approached, the experts figured the voters of East Texas might decide to replace Wilson with someone a bit less, um, colorful.

A Mover and Shaker

But the experts were wrong, as they often are, and the God-fearing people of East Texas reelected Wilson in 1984 -- and five times after that.

"He was their Charlie," says Tindal, "and whatever he did, they'd say, 'Well, that's our Charlie.' "

In a 1988 interview, Wilson explained his victories in his own inimitable style: "You have to bring home the bacon, convince 'em you don't want to take no [bleep] off them Russkies, and you can't think of anything more obscene than gun control."

Of course, there was more to Wilson's popularity than that. Joe Christie, who served in the Texas legislature with Wilson, remembers the lawmaker's "mobile office" -- a trailer that traveled his district to help people with problems with Social Security checks or veterans benefits. And, says Christie, "He's an incredible campaigner."

"One time," says Schroeder, laughing, "he didn't hand out literature, he handed out gun rags -- rags for cleaning your gun -- with his name on them. . . . And his ads were hysterical. His ads were like: '*I eat raw meat for breakfast and then I tie the tail of a bobcat and then I fight commies.*' "

His AK-47 ad became legendary. "He's standing in a boat in the Trinity River in East Texas," says Tindal, "and he has this AK-47, and he says something like, 'We're never gonna have *these* on the banks of the Trinity River.' And then he throws it in the river. We figured everybody would be swimming

around the river looking for it, so we fished it out."

Wilson projected a cartoonish macho image but, says Schroeder, "it's all a big Texas act." Actually, he was smart, well-read and an extremely effective legislator. "He was very skilled," she says, "at pushing the right buttons on the Appropriations Committee."

"He was one of the best at maneuvering in committee," says Dicks, who served on the Appropriations Committee with Wilson.

Wilson used that skill -- pure political horse-trading -- to win ever-increasing funding for the Afghan rebels, which is, of course, the subject of "Charlie Wilson's War."

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to save its failing puppet government. President Jimmy Carter protested by canceling grain sales to the Soviets and boycotting the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Wilson thought the United States should go beyond protest and aid the Afghan rebels who were fighting the Soviets.

"Charlie absolutely detested the communists, and when Afghanistan hit, Charlie was really almost obsessed with the idea of making the Russians pay for this," says Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.), who is now chairman of the Appropriations Committee. "He was hellbent on doing what we could for the Afghans."

"Charlie got Washington behind it," remembers Milt Bearden, who was the CIA station chief who helped run the Afghan war. "The irrepressible Charlie Wilson was pushing to get the money."

Using all his skills at backroom politics, Wilson maneuvered to get funding for the Afghan rebels -- overt funding for humanitarian aid and covert funding for weapons. "It's the only place in the world where we are killing Russians," he said in the early 1980s. "I don't know anybody who wants to be against backing religious freedom fighters against the atheistic horde from the north."

Wilson made more than a dozen trips to Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, where he was deeply moved by the courage and tenacity of the Afghans. Being Charlie, he also managed to have some fun. On one trip, he brought along his girlfriend, Annelise Ilschenko, a former Miss World USA. On another trip, he strapped on a gun, saddled up a horse and rode into Afghanistan with a group of rebels.

"He loved that whole Kipling scene," says Bearden, laughing.

For all his antics, Wilson was deadly serious about the Afghan war, and he lobbied behind the scenes to win authorization to arm the rebels with shoulder-fired Stinger missiles that could shoot down Soviet aircraft. In 1986, the Stingers reached the rebels and proved very effective.

"After that, it was just a nightmare for the Soviets," says Bearden.

In 1989, after a decade of war, the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan. On "60 Minutes," when Pakistani dictator Zia ul-Haq was asked how the Afghan war was won, he simply said, "Charlie did it."

"Every once in a while, you have somebody who changes history, says Bearden, "and Charlie did that."

But history does not stop, it keeps on going, sometimes producing unintended consequences. In Afghanistan, the rebel groups who beat the Soviets started fighting each other. Wilson lobbied for money to help rebuild Afghanistan, but Congress wasn't much interested. The United States slowly disengaged.

After years of sectarian war, a group of brutal Islamic militants called the Taliban took over Afghanistan. They invited a Saudi named Osama bin Laden, who had aided the Afghan rebels during

the war, to set up training camps in their country. And then . . .

But Wilson does not regret his actions in the Afghan war. "We were fighting the evil empire," he told Time magazine in a recent interview. "It would have been like not supplying the Soviets against Hitler in World War II. Anyway, who the hell had ever heard of the Taliban then?"

A Change of Heart

In 1993, Charlie Wilson celebrated his 60th birthday with a big party at the Kennedy Center. His ex-wife showed up and so did at least seven ex-girlfriends, which speaks well for the man.

"He asked me to dance," recalls Schroeder, "and somebody took a picture of us dancing and published it in The Washington Post and Charlie said, 'I've never been seen dancing with a woman that old! Those damn liberals printed it on purpose, showing me dancing with an old lady!' " She bursts out laughing.

Even at 60, Charlie was still Charlie, cracking jokes, chasing young women and winning easy reelection. But in 1996, after Newt Gingrich's Republicans took over the House, Wilson decided to retire after 24 years in the House.

"The good human juices don't flow there anymore," he grumbled to Larry L. King. "There's all this goddamned rigidity and two-bit hypocrisy."

Out of office, he became a lobbyist, representing the government of Pakistan, among other clients, and then the old bachelor settled down, marrying Barbara Alberstadt, a former ballerina whom he'd dated back in the '80s. In 2005, suffering from heart disease, he shut down his lobbying shop and moved back to East Texas, to a country house surrounded by dozens of bird feeders.

"I like my bird feeders and I like to read books," he told his hometown paper, the Lufkin Daily News. "I like spending time with my wife and visiting with my old friends."

Last summer, his doctors told him that his heart was so bad he'd die unless he got a new one. They put him on a waiting list for a transplant. On the night of Sept. 24, he was awakened by a phone call informing him that a donor heart was ready. Rushed to Houston's Methodist Hospital, he got a new heart -- a 35-year-old model that seems to be working well.

"He was up and around in two days," says his friend Joe Christie.

He wanted to live long enough to see the movie about himself, and he did. On Dec. 10, he flew to Hollywood in a private plane with his wife and his cardiologist, to attend the official premiere with the movie's stars, Hanks and Julia Roberts.

Two of Charlie's Angels -- Janet Ginsburg and Leslie Dawson -- managed to finagle tickets to the premiere, and they watched their old boss walk down the red carpet at Universal Studios.

"Charlie looked great," Ginsberg said a couple days later. "For the last few years, he didn't look healthy, but now he looks better than ever."

To prove her point, she pulled out a picture she took at the Hollywood premiere. It showed Charlie standing between two beautiful women and grinning like . . . well, like Charlie Wilson standing between two beautiful women.

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