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Two Old Friends, in Bronze

By MANNY FERNANDEZ

HOUSTON — Those who stand in a downtown park and stare into the eyes of a statue of James A. Baker III might wonder what has caught the former secretary of state's gaze. Upon turning around, they squint and realize that it is his friend and former boss, George Bush, the 41st president of the United States.

In a unique display of sculptural synergy, the bronze statues of the two men stand about 100 yards apart in the same park, looking out at each other across a bayou as joggers and office workers pass between them. Stepping in front of either one feels vaguely intrusive, as if you have interrupted their conversation. Mr. Bush has one hand in his pocket; Mr. Baker has both in his pockets. Mr. Bush faces east and has a view of the skyline; Mr. Baker faces northwest and has a view of a Miller Lite billboard. Each eight-foot-tall statue was designed by the same sculptor, Chas Fagan.

Mr. Bush, 87, and Mr. Baker, 81, have known each other for more than half a century. Long before they played politics together they played tennis, winning doubles championships at the Houston Country Club in the mid-1960s. When Mr. Bush's statue was unveiled in 2004, the parkland across the bayou was monument-free. Years later, when plans to honor Mr. Baker and his family started taking shape, the corner of the park opposite Mr. Bush's sculpture soon emerged as the best location, said Charles C. Foster, a Houston lawyer who helped lead the development of both statues. "The intent was to line it up so that he is directly looking at Bush," Mr. Foster said of the Baker monument.

Both Mr. Bush and Mr. Baker said they were proud to be sharing the same grassy stage, though both feel it is necessary to point out that although an 800-pound statue often suggests otherwise, they are still very much alive.

"It's a weird feeling to look at yourself cast in eight feet of bronze," Mr. Baker said. "One thing it does is bring your own mortality home to you pretty vividly."

In a statement, Mr. Bush said he was touched that his fellow Houstonians had honored him and his friend in this way. "All I can do now," the former president said, "is hope that the pigeons will be kind and gentle."