

October Almost Done, And Yet No Surprise!

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October Almost Done, And Yet the Surprise!

It's been touted for months; the infamous 'October Surprise,' the last minute revelation(s) that turn rear-runners into winners, favourites into also rans, is yet to materialize in campaign '04. But, there's a few days to go.

Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!

Your guide to the October Surprise

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In these last few days of the Presidential campaign the press, the campaigns, and other shadowy partisan operatives are o-n alert for ? or concocting ? an October Surprise, the late leak of a scandalous story that torpedoes a candidate in a close race.

The strategy behind an October Surprise centers o-n the fact that the press won't be able to restrain themselves from reporting o-n a salacious story, but won't have time to verify its accuracy. Hence, an election could turn o-n a story that turns out to be bogus.

Sensitive to this, the mainstream media get conservative in the final days of a campaign about running potentially inflammatory stories. They don't want to be seen as playing a role in the outcome of the election. Better to just run copious quantities of safe but unenlightening horse

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race stories that no one can accuse of being biased.

There are two different types of October Surprise stories: leaks from partisans, of which the press is particularly skeptical; and stories a news organization gets itself that might seem too explosive to run in the final days. The difference between the two is that the former are usually offered up too late to be verified whereas the latter typically involve a good deal of reporting.

An example of the first came the Thursday before the 2000 presidential election, when WPXT, the local FOX affiliate (of all things) in Portland, Maine, reported that George W. Bush had been arrested for driving while intoxicated near his family estate in Kennebunkport in 1976. At first the source of the story was unclear, but it soon came out that it stemmed from a somewhat quirky Democratic activist named Tom Connolly.

The day WPXT broke the story, there was much teeth-gnashing behind the scenes in the newsrooms of the national media about whether to run it since it smacked so clearly of an October Surprise. But once it was out there, well, hey, what the hell. The press is always willing to go second with a story, after all.

In my mind, the story that actually ran and dominated the news that weekend (especially in hotly contested Maine and New Hampshire) should have never run. By this I mean that a class D misdemeanor 24 years in the past is simply not newsworthy, especially when the person in question has been candid about their past drinking problems. This makes having an affair with an intern look downright impeachable.

What raised eyebrows ? after the story broke ? was Bush's excuse for not making the DUI public: He wanted to protect his daughters. But of course, Bush made his recovery from alcoholism a major part of his campaign biography, so it's hard to imagine his daughters would have been shocked to hear the story. When politicians lie needlessly, there's usually a reason, and that reason is usually newsworthy.

But unless you have that story, you have no business running the other un-newsworthy one five days before an election.

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The classic case of the second type of October Surprise came in 1992 when the Washington Post held a story about Oregon Senator Bob Packwood's decades-long sexual harassment and borderline assault of various staffers, lobbyists, and other women until just after his reelection. Post editors couldn't get the story ready to go until late in the campaign and didn't want to influence its outcome. Afterward, the paper came under fire for not giving Oregonians thoroughly-reported information that many would have felt relevant to their vote. Packwood resigned under pressure in 1995.

This is a good example of how the justifiable fear of being used for partisan ends in the waning days of an election, coupled with the press' natural embrace of detachment, can lead to an unwarranted hesitancy that deprives voters of necessary information. Taken to its extreme, it would mean that candidates must be truthful and ethical until the last week of a campaign, at which point anything goes because the Sheriff's on break.

This week we've already seen accusations of several possible October Surprises of both varieties. Many conservatives are convinced, for example, that the New York Times waited until Monday of this week to break the story of missing Iraqi explosives in order to damage Bush. In fact, the story came from leaked reports that were first revealed in The Nelson Report hours before the Times story, as reported on Josh Marshall's blog, Talking Points Memo. And the story comes from official documents leaked just a couple of weeks ago, not partisan sources.

On the other hand, CBS' 60 Minutes reportedly planned on running the same story on Halloween night, two days before the election. This may just be a case of competitive infighting between that show, its weekday counterpart, and the evening news. But to air a story that important and potentially damaging to one candidate 36 hours before polls open on Election Day would be inexcusable. Certainly, it would invite accusations from the Right of a media-orchestrated October Surprise, and feed conservatives' persecution complex regarding the mythological liberal media, especially since we're talking about Republican bogeyman CBS.

Many news organizations would have been hesitant to run the explosives story this close to the election, and the Times, which I generally think has been weak-kneed in holding the administration to account since Bill Keller came in as editor following the Jayson Blair scandal, should be commended for going with it.

But on the same day that story ran, the Moonie-owned White House publicists at the Washington Times had their own alleged blockbuster: John Kerry lied when he said he met with

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the entire U.N. Security Council before voting to authorize the Iraq war. The Times reported that representatives from Mexico, Bulgaria, Colombia (hmmm, what an interesting list...) and a fourth nation that didn't want to be named said no one from their offices had met with Kerry.

This falls closer to an October Surprise story because this one really does seem to have been timed to run at the opening of the campaign's final week. Nowhere in the story is there any reason given why it took two weeks (since Kerry made the claim in the second debate) to verify the story. Unless Times sleuth-scribe Joel Mowbray corresponded with the relevant ambassadors by carrier pigeon, more likely the delay is because the White House didn't choose to fix Mowbray up with pliant U.N. delegates until now.

Despite right-wing bloggers being all atwitter over the weekend about the Times' Monday bombshell, the story? if one can call it that? got swamped by the truly important explosives story, the triumphant return of Bill Clinton to the political stage, and Chief Justice William Rehnquist's cancer. The die-hards at the Times tried gamely to keep the story alive on Tuesday by running a follow-up by resident Bush acolyte Bill Sammon at the top of Page 1, but by Wednesday they had given up the ghost.

Not that the Right is done trying. On Wednesday the ever-reliable Drudge Report "reported" that ABC was sitting on a story about a terror-tape warning of a coming 9/11-style attack planned by an American jihadist. Of course Drudge charged that they were doing so for partisan reasons. Apparently they were trying to help John Kerry get elected by not, um..., not pointing out that the President can't keep us safe and Attorney General John Ashcroft doesn't have a single high profile terrorism-related conviction in the U.S. since 9/11?

Never mind the tortured logic: Within an hour, NBC had debunked the whole thing.

Strap yourself in, folks, because there's more where that came from. October Surprises are certainly not the sole province of the GOP. But we can bet that a party already working overtime to suppress minority votes, scare voters into thinking Kerry and Democrats are going to legalize gay marriage (oh no!) and ban the Bible, and who already proved once they are willing to break the law to get their man elected, is not going to go down with anything left in their bag of dirty tricks.

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By next Tuesday John Kerry will be a gay Communist baby killer whose first act as President will be to give Osama Bin Laden the keys to the White House and nuke St. Patrick's Cathedral. In an era of Fox and Drudge, someone will run with it first.

The question is, will the rest of the pack be able to resist going second?