October Surprise
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In politics the calendar controls everything--when candidates must file, when voters must register, when elections are held--and when political surprises will occur.

October is that calendar-determined time for electoral surprises--because it's both late in the campaign and it's when voters are paying most attention. And the classic campaign stunner is the "October Surprise," conventionally understood as any last minute issue or event that can alter the outcome of an election.

Belief in the October Surprise is vintage American political lore. Within campaigns neophytes are warned gravely to beware impending treachery as October wears on--while veterans can always produce a chilling anecdote or two about this campaign or that one losing in the final days after a late bushwhacking. Anticipations of an October surprise grow, as Election Day looms ever closer.

Much of this suspense is generated by campaigns themselves, especially campaigns running behind in the polls. Lagging candidates tend to see surprises as likely good for them and so they might hint mysteriously about ominous events to come, while candidates ahead tend to see surprises as likely bad for them and so they become more anxious about a late October shock.

For all this angst, however, most campaigns end without any big surprises. In fact, a standard post campaign rejoinder is this one liner: "The October Surprise in this campaign was that there was no October Surprise."

Still, sometimes there are October Surprises that fit the classic definition of an event that can sway the outcome. The 2000 Presidential campaign featured one such instance in the late revelations about Bush's drunk driving. The 1992 presidential controversy over Clinton's marital problems is another example. More recently, the current political year has produced a couple of classic examples of the genre.

The first one occurred earlier this month in the now infamous California gubernatorial recall election featuring incumbent Gray Davis struggling to fight the recall and challenger Arnold Schwarzenegger trying to replace him. There, The Los Angeles Times published in the final days of the campaign a sensational series of charges against Schwarzenegger--charges that in the main painted him as a womanizer and a sexual harasser. His major opponent picked up and repeated the charges in his TV advertising and other campaigning. The LA Times articles were widely described by Schwarzenegger supporters as scurrilous "late hits.” Gray supporters conversely tended to see them as appropriate and necessary. Schwarzenegger went on to win comfortably.

The most recent example of an October surprise is occurring in Pennsylvania during another always-vitiolic Philadelphia mayoralty election. And this one we will dwell on for a moment.

In this campaign, a "bug" was discovered in the office of Philadelphia Mayor John Street who's running hard for reelection. Subsequently, federal law enforcement authorities have confirmed that they planted the listening device and that Street is the "subject "of a widespread but unidentified probe.
Now, no one who follows Philadelphia politics, even from the remote regions of Tibet, would be shocked to learn that the feds have someone or some group under investigation in the city. Journalists and historians for more than a hundred years have chronicled graft and corruption in the city. Nothing-new here!

Nevertheless, the discovery of electronic eavesdropping devices in the mayor's office has thrown the Philadelphia mayoral campaign into a cocked hat.

The ever-expanding federal investigation has pushed to the sidelines any normal discussion of the policy issues confronting the city. It has become easily the most talked about subject in the city, a major topic statewide, and a regular feature of national media coverage.

But will it have any effect on the election? Ultimately does this or any other October Surprise really matter? These questions are important to answer.

At first blush, Sam Katz, the Republican candidate would seem to get some clear benefit. Having your opponent publicly identified as the subject of a criminal investigation is never a setback.

Moreover, the Katz strategy has always been about localizing the campaign, and making Street the issue. Katz has consistently argued that Street is a failed leader and that the city has moved backwards. Without saying the mayor is guilty of anything specific, Katz has continually cited an atmosphere of cronyism and sleaze, and the federal investigation lends credence to his allegations.

But Katz's advantage from the federal probe may prove to be illusory. In the end, Street might have his candidacy strengthened. There are two main reasons for the suggestions.

First, Street has been consistently, albeit narrowly, ahead in public polling to date. That is significant because October Surprises--nasty or not--typically do not work to defeat candidates already ahead. Schwarzenegger is only the most recent example. Bush in 2000 and Clinton in 1992 are two others. In fact, the biggest myth about October Surprises is that they often derail frontrunners. They rarely do.

A second reason for suggesting Street may benefit is the salutary effect of the federal investigation on Democratic campaign strategy. Now, Philadelphia Democrats can argue the investigation is politically motivated to defeat Street--a Republican Justice Department getting payback against a Democratic mayor who helped his city go for Gore in 2000. Charges that the investigation is racially motivated--Street is black and his opponent Katz is white--will also be heard.

In the end, the hoopla about the bug and the ongoing investigation may nationalize the campaign--something Democrats struggled to do earlier but could not do--and make it more a fight between Democrats and Republicans than between two guys named Street and Katz. In a city where three quarters of the voters are Democrats, energizing the party base is a critical advantage.

What seems certain is that the bugging of the Mayor's office and the enlarged federal investigation are now the defining moments of the campaign and the focus on the motive and rationale behind the investigation have added a new and murky dimension to the final stages of the campaign.

The surprises in this surprising campaign may not be over.
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