



Covering the 2026 Campaigns (Part 6)

Beware the October Surprise

By

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Defining October Surprise

“a significant revelation or event in the month prior to an election that has the potential to shift public opinion about an election candidate and that is often orchestrated to influence the election's outcome .. NOTE: October surprise usually relates to U.S. presidential elections that occur in the month of November.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The history of political surprises that occurs within days or weeks of an election dates back to at least the 19th century:

“While regarded as a feature of modern politics, the history of the October surprise dates to the late 19th century. Then, as now, embarrassing revelations, last-minute disclosures, or ill-chosen rhetoric threatened to alter the outcome of a closely fought presidential campaign. A letter published in October 1880 over the forged signature of Republican candidate James A. Garfield appeared to endorse the use of immigrant

Chinese labor. Republicans exposed the letter as a fraud and Garfield hung on to win in the fall.

In 1884, the surprise emerged when a group of religious leaders endorsed Republican candidate James G. Blaine in late October. Overshadowing the endorsement was a foolhardy rhetorical flourish that insulted key voting blocs courted by the Republican nominee in his campaign against the Democratic nominee, New York Governor Grover Cleveland.” Time Magazine

October Surprise Memories

I started covering political campaigns in 1968. That's when I came to understand the meaning of 'October Surprise:'

“In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson chose not to run for reelection, but he was committed to helping his Democratic vice president, Hubert Humphrey, defeat the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon. On October 31, 1968, LBJ ordered a halt to all U.S. bombing campaigns in Vietnam, announcing “a major step toward a firm and an honorable peace in Southeast Asia.”

But just days later, the peace talks in Vietnam fell apart and Humphrey lost to Nixon. Democrats alleged that Nixon secretly scuttled the talks by promising the South Vietnamese stronger support if he were elected president. (Casey, who later coined “October surprise,” was a Nixon aide in 1968.)

Four years later, the Vietnam War was still raging and Nixon was adamant about securing peace before Election Day 1972. In early October, there appeared to be a breakthrough in the peace talks with the North Vietnamese accepting America's terms for an end to the conflict. Behind the scenes, though, the South Vietnamese strongly objected to the arrangement.

That didn't stop Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, from attending a press conference on October 26 and proclaiming that "peace is at hand." In reality, the war would continue for another three years.

"It was big news," says Greenberg. "Today we would definitely call it an 'October surprise,' even though they weren't using that phrase back then.'" [History Article](#)

Candidate Ronald Reagan's campaign manager coined the term 'October Surprise' in 1980. He was referring to what he and others in the campaign thought was a scheme by then President Jimmy Carter concerning the Americans taken hostage by the Iranians. The name has been used ever since for a political campaign trying to shift public opinion toward their candidate just days before an election.

This can happen with local and state elections just as well as federal elections. If a candidate or his or her campaign releases last-minute information that could potentially damage another candidate, journalists need to be ready to find, confirm, and report the truth. That's where 'curiosity, skepticism, objectivity, and accuracy' come into play for 'real journalism.'

The closer journalists cover all sides of elections honestly and without bias the better they will be able to respond to an 'October Surprise' and help the public know the truth of the matter.

Campaign officials and staffers can be very good at ‘disinformation’ and planting ‘false’ information, so don’t be fooled by their tactics. Stay focused on discovering the truth. Stay skeptical about what people in campaigns ‘claim.’ If you don’t think candidates and their campaign staff will stoop to lying to win an election, then I suggest you reconsider the history of politics in our country and across the world.

I wrote a newsletter about the history of ‘politician lying’ more than a year ago and invite you to [read it again](#).

Lessening the Impact of the Surprise

Early voting has affected some of the ‘impact’ of October surprises because many ballots are cast prior to October or at least during the last weeks of October. That’s why we see attempts at August and September surprises more now because of early voting. However, stay on your toes because October surprises are still a tool in many campaign tool bags. Candidates will use it if they think it could turn a close election in the final days of a campaign.

Next Time

Understanding Political Parties in the next part of my series, Covering the 2026 Campaigns.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee