

How the Republicans Win

Pull out their old play cards

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Barack Obama made it across the tightrope of the Democratic National Convention, gaining solid endorsements from Bill and Hillary Clinton and giving a rousing speech before some 80,000 supporters at Invesco Field in Denver. But now comes the time when the Republicans win elections.

Over the past four decades, Republicans have dominated the outcomes of presidential races by mixing negative campaigning in public with illicit dirty tricks behind the scenes, as I've recounted in my last two books, [Secrecy & Privilege](#) and [Neck Deep](#).

As a party, the Republicans have not only refined the art of the political smear – with such memorable moments as the Willie Horton ads in 1988 and the “swift-boating” of John Kerry in 2004 – but they also have defined the concept of the October Surprise, manipulating late-breaking events to drive the electorate toward their candidate.

Much of this Republican behavior traces back to their perceived victimization at the hands of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in the razor-thin 1960 race. Though many historians dispute the significance of alleged voter fraud in that election, the notion that Richard Nixon was robbed became an article of faith inside the GOP.

In 1968, Nixon and his operatives were determined that they wouldn't get outmaneuvered again. As the race entered its final weeks, their great fear was that President Johnson would negotiate a settlement to the Vietnam War and thus push Vice President Hubert Humphrey over the top to victory.

So, although a half million American soldiers were in the battle zone and the war was tearing the United States apart, Nixon's campaign made secret contacts with South Vietnamese leaders, allegedly offering the assurance that if they refused to cooperate with the Paris peace talks, they could expect a better deal from Nixon.

The evidence is now clear that the Nixon campaign dispatched Anna Chennault, a fiercely anti-communist Chinese-American, to carry that message to South Vietnamese president Nguyen van Thieu.

Journalist Seymour Hersh first described the initiative in his 1983 biography of Henry Kissinger, *The Price of Power*. Hersh reported that U.S. intelligence “agencies had caught on that Chennault was the go-between between Nixon and his people and President Thieu in Saigon. ... The idea was to bring things to a stop in Paris and prevent any show of progress.”

In her own autobiography, *The Education of Anna*, Chennault acknowledged that she was

the courier. She quoted Nixon aide John Mitchell as calling her a few days before the 1968 election and telling her: "I'm speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon. It's very important that our Vietnamese friends understand our Republican position and I hope you made that clear to them."

Secret Cables

Reporter Daniel Schorr added more details in a Washington Post article on May 28, 1995, citing decoded cables that U.S. intelligence had intercepted from the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington.

On Oct. 23, 1968, Ambassador Bui Dhien cabled Saigon with the message that "many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged me to stand firm." On Oct. 27, he wrote, "The longer the present situation continues, the more favorable for us. ... I am regularly in touch with the Nixon entourage."

On Nov. 2, 1968, Thieu withdrew from his tentative agreement to sit down with the Viet Cong at the Paris peace talks, destroying Johnson's last hope for a settlement and clearing the way for Nixon's narrow victory.

Though Johnson and his top advisers knew of Nixon's gambit, they kept it secret apparently out of concern that it could further divide the country.

Anthony Summers's 2000 book, *The Arrogance of Power*, provides the fullest examination of the Nixon-Thieu gambit, including the debate within Democratic circles about what to do with the evidence.

Both Johnson and Humphrey believed the information - if released to the public - could assure Nixon's defeat, according to Summers.

"In the end, though, Johnson's advisers decided it was too late and too potentially damaging to U.S. interests to uncover what had been going on," Summers wrote. "If Nixon should emerge as the victor, what would the Chennault outrage do to his viability as an incoming president? And what effect would it have on American opinion about the war?"

Summers quotes Johnson's assistant Harry McPherson, who said, "You couldn't surface it. The country would be in terrible trouble."

The direct U.S. role in the Vietnam War continued for more than four years with additional American casualties of 20,763 dead and 111,230 wounded. The toll among the people of Indochina was far higher.

Johnson and Humphrey went into retirement - and to their graves - keeping silent about Nixon's treachery.

No Political Peace

The Democratic silence about Nixon's sabotage of the Paris peace talks did not bring them political peace. Instead, it seemed to embolden Nixon.

In the years that followed, Nixon built a clandestine apparatus designed to neutralize his political enemies and ensure his reelection in 1972.

Nixon's "plumbers unit," employing former CIA operatives, spied on individuals who caused Nixon difficulty - the likes of Daniel Ellsberg who exposed the Pentagon Papers history of the Vietnam War - and on the Democrats, too.

In May 1972, the plumbers planted bugs in the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee, apparently gleaning information about the last-minute strategies of the Democratic establishment to block the nomination of Sen. George McGovern, whom Nixon viewed as the easiest Democrat to beat. [For details on what Nixon got from the bugs, see [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

The next month, when the plumbers returned to plant more listening devices, they were caught by Washington police, leading to the Watergate investigation. But Nixon was able to keep the story mostly under wraps until he won his landslide victory against McGovern.

In 1973, with the help of such clever operatives as Republican National Chairman George H.W. Bush, Nixon tried to fend off the mounting evidence of his guilt, but he was finally forced to resign in August 1974. His successor, Gerald Ford, then lost Election 1976 to Jimmy Carter.

Though many political observers assumed that the Watergate debacle taught the Republicans some harsh lessons, it actually convinced them that they needed a stronger media and political infrastructure so they could protect their leaders from future scandals. By the late 1970s, the modern right-wing media began to take shape.

The Republican hope for redemption came soon enough, in the 1980 race that pitted conservative Ronald Reagan and his running mate George H.W. Bush against President Carter.

The Reagan-Bush brain trust, especially campaign chief William Casey, saw the lingering crisis with Iran over 52 American hostages as a powerful vulnerability for Carter but also a potential game-changer if Carter succeeded in engineering their release shortly before the election.

October Surprise

Vice presidential candidate Bush talked publicly about the potential for Carter pulling an "October Surprise" by freeing the hostages. But the evidence is now overwhelming that the Republicans also were contacting senior Iranians behind Carter's back to make sure that Carter failed in that effort.

Over the past 28 years, more than a score of witnesses - including senior Iranian officials, top French intelligence officers, U.S. and Israeli intelligence operatives, the Russian government and even Palestine leader Yasir Arafat - have confirmed the existence of a Republican initiative to interfere with Carter's efforts to free the hostages.

In 1996, for instance, during a meeting in Gaza, Arafat personally told former President Carter that senior Republican emissaries approached the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1980 with a request that Arafat help broker a delay in the hostage release.

"You should know that in 1980 the Republicans approached me with an arms deal if I could arrange to keep the hostages in Iran until after the elections," Arafat told Carter. [*Diplomatic*

History, Fall 1996]

Arafat's spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif said the GOP gambit pursued other channels, too. In an interview with me in Tunis in 1990, Bassam indicated that Arafat learned upon reaching Iran in 1980 that the Republicans and the Iranians had made other arrangements for a delay in the hostage release.

"The offer [to Arafat] was, 'if you block the release of hostages, then the White House would be open for the PLO'," Bassam said. "I guess the same offer was given to others, and I believe that some accepted to do it and managed to block the release of hostages."

In a little-noticed letter to the U.S. Congress, dated Dec. 17, 1992, former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr said he first learned of the Republican hostage initiative in July 1980.

Bani-Sadr said a nephew of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then Iran's supreme leader, returned from a meeting with an Iranian banker, Cyrus Hashemi, who had close ties to Casey and to Casey's business associate, John Shaheen.

Bani-Sadr said the message from the Khomeini emissary was clear: the Republicans were in league with pro-Republican elements of the CIA in an effort to undermine Carter and were demanding Iran's help.

Bani-Sadr said the emissary "told me that if I do not accept this proposal they [the Republicans] would make the same offer to my rivals." The emissary added that the Republicans "have enormous influence in the CIA," Bani-Sadr wrote. "Lastly, he told me my refusal of their offer would result in my elimination."

Bani-Sadr said he resisted the GOP scheme, but the plan was accepted by the hard-line Khomeini faction.

Though some Carter advisers suspected Republican manipulation of the hostage crisis, the Democrats again kept silent. Only after the Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986 - and witnesses began talking about its origins - did the 1980 story get fleshed out enough to compel Congress to take a closer look in 1991-92.

Again, however the Democrats feared that the evidence could endanger the fragile political relationships in Washington that enable governing to go forward. Once more, they chose to ignore the GOP machinations and, in some cases, literally hid the evidence.

[For the most detailed account of this October Surprise evidence, see Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

The Reagan campaign benefited from another surreptitious operation, the purloining of President Carter's debate briefing book before a pivotal confrontation between the two candidates.

Though political pundits still recall Reagan's clever debate rejoinders, such as his famous "there you go again," some members of Reagan's debate preparation team had the benefit of knowing what Carter was likely to say.

The Bush Years

Nixon-style strategies carried over into the campaigns mounted by George H.W. Bush in 1988 and 1992. The elder Bush's dark side would come out most glaringly when he was in what he called "campaign mode."

The general election campaign against Michael Dukakis in 1988 stands as one of the nastiest in U.S. history, with Bush playing the race card by exploiting Willie Horton, a black inmate who raped a white woman while he was on a Massachusetts prison furlough.

Bush charted a similar course in 1992, with the goal of destroying Bill Clinton's reputation and winning re-election by political default. The strategy, managed by then-White House chief of staff James Baker, involved searching Clinton's passport files looking for dirt to use against the Democratic candidate.

President Bush was personally involved in this "silver bullet" strategy aimed at portraying Clinton as disloyal to his country, possibly having collaborated with Soviet bloc intelligence.

In a later interview with federal prosecutors, Bush acknowledged that he was "nagging" his aides to press a sensitive investigation into Clinton's student travels to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. Bush also expressed strong interest in rumors that Clinton had sought to renounce his U.S. citizenship.

Bush described himself as "indignant" that his aides failed to discover more about Clinton's student activities. But Bush stopped short of taking responsibility for the apparently illegal searches of Clinton's passport records.

"Hypothetically speaking, President Bush advised that he would not have directed anyone to investigate the possibility that Clinton had renounced his citizenship because he would have relied on others to make this decision," the FBI interview report read. "He [Bush] would have said something like, 'Let's get it out' or 'Hope the truth gets out'."

The passport caper backfired in early October 1992 with disclosure of the State Department's improper search of Clinton's passport files, creating a scandal called "Passport-gate."

Some inside the Bush administration, including James Baker, saw the resulting furor as an element in Bush's defeat to Clinton a month later.

On Nov. 20, about two weeks after the election, a distraught Baker even tried to submit a letter of resignation, but Bush refused to accept it, according to pages of Bush's diary that I found at the National Archives.

"Jim Baker came in here this morning about 10:30 deeply disturbed and read to me a long letter of resignation all because of this stupid passport situation," Bush wrote in his diary.

When a special prosecutor was named to investigate "Passport-gate," the Bush administration was lucky because right-wing judges had just taken over the selection panel and picked Republican stalwart, Joseph diGenova, who proceeded to clear Bush and his top aides despite evidence of their guilt.

Bush-v-Gore

The Republican brazenness expanded into the actual counting of votes in Election 2000.

Though Al Gore won the national popular vote and stood to gain the presidency if a full recount of legally cast votes in Florida had been allowed, five Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court sided with George W. Bush and stopped the Florida recount, effectively handing Bush the presidency.

Almost a year later, in November 2001, a group of eight large news organizations finished a study of the uncounted Florida ballots and discovered that under any standard used for the chads - dimpled, hanging or fully punched through - Gore would have won if all ballots considered legal under Florida law were counted.

However, in the post 9/11 climate, the news organizations tried to spin their own findings so as not to undermine Bush's "legitimacy." The Democrats also didn't do much. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Gore's Victory](#)" or our book, [Neck Deep](#).]

Again, this bipartisanship wasn't reciprocated. In 2004, Democrat John Kerry was badly hurt by a smear campaign against his Vietnam War heroism, led by a well-funded right-wing group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. At the GOP convention, Republican activists highlighted skepticism about the severity of Kerry's war wounds by passing out "Purple Heart Band-Aids."

In Campaign 2004, the power of the right-wing news media also was at its apex with a multitude of print, radio, TV and electronic outlets that could twist reality into almost any shape desired.

So, in the campaign's final days, when Osama bin Laden released his first video in a year to denounce President Bush, the pro-Bush media treated it as an "endorsement" of John Kerry.

After bin Laden's video, last-minute polls showed a surge of about three-percentage points toward Bush and he hung on to win by an official margin of about 2½ points (although suspicions persist that Bush also benefited from voting irregularities in key states, such as Ohio).

Only after Election 2004 - in a book by journalist Ron Suskind - did the public learn that inside the CIA, senior analysts concluded that bin Laden had issued his 11th-hour video with the intent of tipping the election to Bush, whose belligerent policies bin Laden saw as helping al-Qaeda's cause. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[CIA: Osama Helped Bush in '04](#)."]]

In the past four years, however, the political terrain for the Republicans has grown more treacherous.

Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2005 revealed the cronyism near the heart of the Bush administration. The open-ended wars in Iraq and Afghanistan sapped away the public's trust in Republicans as the party of national security.

Nevertheless, the Democrats and the Obama campaign should not assume that some of the old tricks won't be tried.

Indeed, the Democrats probably should expect that the Republicans will pull out their old playbooks - and pull out all the stops - in a fierce determination to make sure Barack Obama never makes it to the White House.

[For readers wishing more details about the history of Republican dirty tricks, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep* are available through [the publisher's Web site](#) at a special combined rate, with \$5 of each purchase going to help keep Consortiumnews.com alive. The books also can be obtained at Amazon.com.]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#). His two previous books, Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq and Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth' are also available there. Or go to [Amazon.com](#).

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