

THE FEDERAL PAGE

'October Surprise' Probe Awaits a Reluctant Congress

Amid Atmosphere of Distrust, House to Authorize Panel to Investigate 1980 Iran-Hostage Issue

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The "October surprise" investigation lurks in Congress's future like a rotten fish on the kitchen table. No one wants to touch it, but someone has to pick it up just to get rid of it.

Soon, perhaps this week, the House will pass a resolution authorizing a special task force to conduct the investigation. The measure will prompt bitter debate and will have little, if any, Republican support. A similar Senate probe languishes in limbo.

Once installed, the investigators will try to determine whether the Reagan-Bush campaign conspired with Iranian officials to ensure that 52 U.S. hostages held in Iran would not be released until after Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981.

The aim, the story goes, was to avoid an October surprise, an election-eye hostage release that could have propelled incumbent Jimmy Carter to reelection in 1980. The 11-year-old legend of an Oc-

tober surprise received new impetus in May through a newspaper article by Carter administration National Security Council aide Gary Sick, whose book-length account of the alleged conspiracy is to be published next month.

The Democratic leadership of the House and Senate in August announced separate but parallel investigations. Neither has begun, and both have met with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), ranking minority member on the House's October surprise Task Force, said many Republican colleagues are worried about a witch hunt—"another political excursion to try to dirty up Reagan."

Many Democrats say they fear a wild goose chase that will open them to charges of unfairity trying to smear President Bush. "Nobody likes this, and everybody's troubled by it," said Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.), a task force member. "Everybody

hopes that nobody finds anything."

But all sides agree that the notion of an October surprise has to be put to rest. Carter, Reagan and Bush have expressed a desire for a formal clearing of the air. Hyde said, "The last thing I would want is to protect anyone who is guilty of such a heinous crime."

Both the Senate and the House have thus determined to get on with it, albeit in an atmosphere of intense distrust.

The Senate probe is being conducted by the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, headed by Sen. Terry Sanford (D-N.C.). On Oct. 16, Sanford introduced a resolution asking for \$596,000 to conduct the investigation.

The next day, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) challenged the resolution on procedural grounds, and it was sent back to the Foreign Relations Committee. "Is there one shred of



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evidence to support these allegations? Is there even enough evidence to look for a shred of evidence?" Helms asked in a committee meeting last Tuesday. "The answer, of course, is no."

In the House, the investigation has undergone several tortuous changes in direction. Rather than assign the probe to a committee, the House leadership settled on a special task force. The Democrats actively sought bipartisan support and appointed Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), a foreign policy expert widely respected by both parties, to head the panel.

Republicans were willing to listen but extremely skeptical. Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.), in

announcing his five panelists, branded the investigation "a fishing expedition unmatched outside the pages of 'Moby Dick.'"

In the past three weeks, House leaders repeatedly have tried to draft a bipartisan resolution opening the investigation. A senior Democratic leadership aide acknowledged that negotiators for House Speaker Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.) underestimated Republican skittishness, but several sources said the Republicans also raised so many procedural questions that the Democrats began to doubt the minority's good faith.

With the negotiations all but terminated, Torricelli said late last week that he "would be prone to

compromise" if the Republicans had raised "serious and substantive" objections.

In the end, bipartisanship stumbled over two Republican wishes that the Democrats refused to countenance. The first was that the probe also examine Carter administration initiatives toward Iran during the hostage crisis.

This, the Republicans said, would give balance to the investigation, allow more Republicans to support it and give them political protection. "To say this isn't driven by politics is to deny Newton's laws of physics," Hyde said.

Hamilton said he would not block GOP attempts to examine the Carter administration, but the House leadership has refused to include what Hyde calls "the C word" in the resolution.

"To equate the two is ridiculous," Torricelli said. "The October surprise is about private citizens maybe committing felonies. The Carter administration is a sovereign government that can negotiate with anyone it wants."

The Republicans also wanted the investigation to be terminated after six months, fearing an endless prolongation with endless embarrassments. The Democrats contend that obtaining security clearances alone could take six months. The Democratic-drafted resolution, does, however, promise a report by July 1, 1992.

The Republicans refused to play. Without "explicit mention" of the Carter allegations and a time limit, Michel said in an Oct. 22 letter to Foley, Republicans would not support the Democrat resolution and "it would be my intention to offer a substitute."

The substitute will fail, but it will let Republicans register their objections to the probe without abandoning it altogether. The Democratic resolution, meanwhile, will pass, and the investigation will go forward.

Republicans, their political misgivings overcome, guarantee what Hyde described as "a straightforward and nonpartisan investigation." Republicans, he said, "will not approach this with the idea of sabotaging it."



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