

Hollywood's 'October Surprise'

Film Rights Sold on Alleged Hostage Deal

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Ronald Reagan, call your agent. The former president has a unique opportunity to portray himself now that Gary Sick has sold—for a price in the neighborhood of \$500,000—the movie rights to his book "October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan."

On the other hand, this is probably not a dream role for Reagan. Nor is the movie likely to win much applause from the current occupant of the White House. "October Surprise" suggests the Reagan-Bush camp tried to ensure victory in 1980 by making a secret deal with Iran to delay the release of American hostages until after the election.

The purchasers are Columbia Pictures and Peters Entertainment, the home of flamboyant producer Jon Peters. Peters is usually described

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'Surprise'

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as "former hairdresser," but most recently he was co-chairman of Sony Pictures.

Columbia, a subsidiary of Sony Pictures Entertainment, describes the project as "the 1990s equivalent of 'All the President's Men,'"—the Watergate movie based on the Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein book. While the theme is somewhat parallel—putting in the fix on a presidential election—a key difference is that Watergate was documented fact while Sick's book is theory.

In fact, Newsweek and the New Republic have published receipt articles casting doubt on Sick's hypothesis—and Sick himself acknowledges in the book that "there is not enough evidence at this point to launch a prosecution," although "there is enough evidence to raise serious questions." Congress is deliberating whether to investigate.

Sick served on the National Security Council during the Carter administration and was involved in negotiations for the release of the hostages in 1979 and '80. He previously wrote a book on the hostage crisis, and was working on a volume about the Reagan administration and the Middle East when he got sidetracked into the October Surprise.

An April Op-Ed piece in the New York Times ignited the issue publicly, and shortly thereafter Sick signed a low-six-figure deal with Times Books. His book, which was written in three months, was released to the media last week. Beyond the story of the alleged conspiracy, it also recounts Sick's gradual conversion from skeptic to believer.

It's unusual for nonfiction books with serious political content to be bought by Hollywood, much less made. But Steve Wasserman, Times Books editorial director, said, "From the moment I read the first draft of the manuscript, I thought of it as a movie. There are lots of atmospherics."

On the Hollywood end of the deal, Peters's purchase of the book from the William Morris Agency is his first big splash since leaving the chairmanship of Sony Pictures to become a producer. It is also one of the first moves by Mark Canton, newly appointed chairman of Columbia Pictures. In a statement, Canton said yesterday that Sick's book "will make an extraordinary event motion picture." With understatement characteristic of Hollywood, Canton said the book describes "what may be the most significant political act in American history."

In his statement, Peters called the book "the most intriguing, dramatic, suspenseful and awe-inspiring story I've ever read." (This from one of the producers of "Batman.")

Politically concerned director and conspiracy buff Oliver Stone, just finishing the controversial film "JFK," seems like a logical choice to direct. An associate confirms that Stone has an interest in the October Surprise allegations.

But the associate added that Stone hasn't talked to anyone about the Sick project. "I think Oliver's probably a little battle-weary right now," she said. endcol