

False Truth

Tuesday night, a week ago, I pulled the plastic tray with a half-steaming, half-still-cold Salisbury steak dinner from the microwave and was ready to sit in front of CNN for a heaping helping of palavering pundits and pols. Of course, the phone rang. It was my client, candidate for governor Bart Munson.

“Tommy, meet me at the CV immediately,” he said.

“Maybe later? I just –”

“*Now.*” He clicked off. His tone had the no-backtalk edge of a man angry or in crisis, so I sighed, shoved the dinner into the fridge, and made my way to the Capitol View Café.

That’s the kind of thing that makes me a worse-for-wear middle-aged schlub. Political campaigns are a hard business. I’m ground down from years on the road, eighteen-hour days ‘nourished’ by missed breakfasts, scarfed grab-and-gobble lunches, and rubber-chicken dinners, topped by boozy late nights with reporters. It’s a lifestyle incompatible with marriage, as I proved twice. Folks tell me I look like Humphrey Bogart, only older, heavier, and four-eyed.

I pushed through the door of the CV. Jerry the bartender greeted me, “Hey, Mr. Keller. Scotch and splash, right up.”

As he said that, he placed a cocktail napkin on the bar in front of Bart and set a drink on it. It was a ‘Mojave martini,’ a gin drink with no vermouth, no olives, no shaking, no stirring.

My humor aspires to be as dry.

Bart told the barkeep, “Leave the bottle.”

“Uh, that’s only in movies,” Jerry said. “We’d lose our license.”

The Capitol View is very public, but still useful for private meetings: no one gives a second thought to seeing a politician and a press aide having drinks there. Bart picked up his suit coat from the adjacent barstool and turned towards the back to find a quiet booth for our tête-à-tête. I noticed his shirt was soaked with sweat. Had he jogged from campaign HQ?

We slid into a quiet booth. Bart was a worried version of the man pictured on his campaign posters: graying temples and a squarish newscaster-handsome face. His eyes scanned shiftily, checking for nearby ears. He leaned in, hunching over the table. "A reporter called. She claims to have a source on that old Guard rumor, saying I was AWOL."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"She's surely not from the *Henderson Herald*."

"I meant who's the source, but okay, where is the reporter from if not the *Herald*?"

"That's the reporter's name!" he hissed, then spelled for me, "S-h-i-r-l-e-y K-n-o-t-t."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was." He took a deep breath. "I was going over today's polls when a call comes in. The front desk sent it to me because senior staff was out for dinner."

"Senior staff" included me as communications director for the campaign, and "out for dinner" meant my miserable microwave meal.

He continued, "So I pick up and give the caller a hearty 'Hyello, this is Bart Munson and I'm working hard to be your next governor!' I hear 'surely not from the *Herald*' then she spells her name. She starts right in with 'Senator Munson, I have a source claiming that while you say you served in the National Guard, you actually did not complete your training or other duties. Do you have a comment?'

"I froze. I managed to sound calm and asked who was saying that? She said she was – quote – not at liberty to say, and asked again for a comment.

"I ducked by saying I hadn't met her and didn't know she reported politics, was she new at the *Herald*? She said she had 'other reporting duties' but had a source about the Guard."

Bart's a good guy, but I've seen him under pressure. I imagined his hands sweating, making the phone slippery, and him passing the receiver from hand to hand so he could wipe them on his pants.

His National Guard stint was decades ago. There had been vague mutterings, questions in prior campaigns that got no traction. But this was somebody not asking about his service but stating he was AWOL. Bart’s opponent, Buster Shaw, could make something of it even without proof.

Treacherous questions can surprise during campaigns. Fortunately, this was on the phone and not on live TV. What do you do? Do you lie? They said after Watergate it’s not the crime, it’s the cover up. Saying “no comment” sounds guilty. And since the question was about himself, Bart couldn’t say, “Let me check on that and get back to you.”

I should have gotten the call. It’s my job to know how to defer, deflect, distract, defuse – whatever is necessary. As it was, we didn’t know the story’s source. Maybe there was no source. What if this was simply some hack reporter fishing for a damaging response? I asked Bart what he said.

“I said I didn’t know what her ‘source’ was smoking, but I stood by my record. I said, ‘I’ve served faithfully as a legislator, and intend to serve the state as governor.’”

Ah, standard procedure: sidestep a question with the Non-denial Denial.

“She said the state National Guard acknowledges I was inducted but has no records of my service. I said they lost the records and it’s up to them to find them. Then I asked if she was familiar with my tax reform plan, but she didn’t fall for that. She interrupted asking if I had my own copy of my service records.

“I was exasperated, so I went with the ‘Hello? Hello? Are you still –?’ routine and hung up on myself.”

Rare compared to the Non-denial Denial, but effective in a pinch: the Non-hang-up Hang-up.

Bart called me immediately after ending that call and high-tailed it to the CV.

I said, “Listen, the *Herald* is like a small-town weekly shopper that happens to print daily. It proves Jefferson County is replete with house-training puppies and birds in cages, otherwise there’d be no reason to buy the *Herald*.”

Bart sighed. He picked up his martini and knocked back the last third in one gulp. “Haaaah.”

Yikes. Even across the table I could feel the burn trailing down his throat.

He seemed relieved. “Sheesh, she had me sweating. So, there’s nothing to worry about?”

“Hell yea-*uh!* If they print you were AWOL, papers, TV, press across the state will report that a story was published, even if they don’t themselves investigate it. It’s the meta-story: if you can’t report the story, report the reporting. Shaw won’t even have to claim it’s true to keep it in the news.” I switched to my rather good impression of Buster Shaw’s drawl, “I know some folks’s sayin’ Bart Munson was Aaay-WAWL, but we’s jes’ stickin’ to the issues.”

That’s the Non-mention Mention. Talk about something by repeating frequently that you are not talking about it.

“Okay, Bart, I’ll check out this Shirley Knott – jeez, comedian parents? – and find out what she’s got. But I’ve got to know: what is the story?”

Bart sighed, again. He’d not practiced law in years, but as an attorney he would have advised a client to tell him the whole truth. Nothing is worse for a defense than being surprised, either in court or on the campaign trail.

“It was Vietnam; I didn’t want to go. I graduated college; I signed up for National Guard to avoid the draft; then I went to law school. That’s it.”

Bullet points. I liked that Bart could speak very concisely for a politician. But I didn’t like what Bart said. If it was so simple, why did the reporter’s question have Bart literally sweating?

I probed. “Did you make friends in the Guard, anybody who’d remember you and could verify your story?”

“The *Capital City Courier* four years ago found guys who remembered me. They printed that, and haven’t mentioned it since.”

“But if somebody has proof?”

“The Guard confirmed I showed up, but my training records were lost or destroyed.”

“But if they’re not sure?”

“Come on, whose side are you on here? It’s 2006, dammit, why does something from thirty-five years ago matter to voters?”

I felt my lips scrunch in dissatisfaction. I thought, If hearing about it made you sweat, then you know why it matters. I tried another tack. “If the rumor gets attention, maybe we can do something else like demonstrate things you would have learned. You were trained on an M1 rifle? You can still clean, load, and shoot an M1, right?”

“I haven’t touched a gun in years. I mean, I wasn’t the best soldier, this was a long time ago, and my mind has since filled up with stuff other than guns.” A politician, he automatically added, “Of course, I fully support the Second Amendment and citizens’ rights to bear arms.”

This was bad. The military had switched to the M16 by the time the Vietnam War started escalating, and training would have drilled out of a recruit the indiscriminate use of the word “gun” for rifle.

Bart’s a solid technocrat, not a slick politician. As a state rep and senator he was known for workmanlike legislating and good constituent services. He didn’t make outlandish promises, and so wasn’t a typical ‘lying politician.’

But Bart was lying about his Guard service, and that would make my job doubly hard. I not only would have to keep the press away from the story, but with Bart not confiding, I wouldn’t know where the landmines might be. If it’s denied and proof comes out, the mud splatter would bury the campaign and sink me.

It would be a major step back for my career. I had hopes for a good showing in the election. A few more wins and I would be a first-tier operator able to expand my Thomas Keller Communications with hired foot soldiers in the field. Politicians would come to me. I could stay put, restoring a non-nomadic life, perhaps one worth sharing.

I didn’t have a choice. If I quit Munson at that point in the campaign season, there wouldn’t be another gig for two years.

As for the campaign? I wasn't a true believer – just an employee. But I felt Bart Munson would be a better governor than Buster Shaw, a radio talk show host who'd never run anything but his mouth.

I would rather put out the story, the true story, but under my control, releasing it some Friday night when few pay attention. Bart would quietly mention “a youthful indiscretion” followed by, “If I've offended anyone, I apologize” – the Non-admission Admission, and the classic Non-apology Apology.

§ § §

The next day I did a computer search and called my down-state contacts. Shirley Knott reported society and styles for the *Henderson Herald*.

Back at the CV, the info baffled Bart. “You're kidding, right? Why'd a society reporter call with allegations about my Guard service? Does Henderson even have ‘society?’”

“Dunno. Maybe she met somebody at a begonia club luncheon whose husband was in the Guard. Could be anything.”

“Alright. Where are they on this?”

I unfolded a newspaper clipping. “The only mention they've printed was in a front page story, but deep, after the jump. Shirley shared the byline with their hard news reporter. It was after she talked to you. It's a summary of statewide political events that says, “The *Herald* spoke directly to Sen. Munson and asked about rumors he had shirked his National Guard duty. The senator replied that he “stands by his record.” Since they didn't dispute anything, no other press picked it up.”

I concluded, “They don't have enough evidence, so they're sitting on it.”

“Then it's over?” the candidate asked hopefully.

“Not until November 7th,” his press flack sighed.

§ § §

The receptionist buzzed my intercom. “Tommy? I have a reporter on line four. Says her name is Shirley Knott. Can you believe it?”

Time to figure out what’s going on. I picked up.

“This is Shirley Knott, from the –”

“You’re surely not who? Sorry, I couldn’t resist. You’re with the *Herald* down in Jefferson County, right?”

“That’s correct. I’m calling about Senator Munson’s claim to have served in the 799th National Guard Brigade.”

Punch the SPIN CYCLE button – deny, defy, charm, disarm. “That was a long time ago. Bart doesn’t have much to say about it, doesn’t remember very much. And anyway, the state faces a number of issues now that deserve the next governor’s attention far more than irrelevant ancient history. I’ll send you a copy of Bart’s position paper on agriculture. You’ve got farms there in Jeff County, right? Maybe –”

“Excuse me, Mr. Keller. Almost every family in this state has a member who is or was in the service, or they have friends who are or were. And they may be deployed now in Afghanistan or Iraq, in harm’s way. Those folks will be interested to know what Senator Munson’s experience was, and why such an ordinary step in his career should be shrouded in such mystery.”

Oh, hell. She might be a yokel working for a rag, but she’s righteous. She knew she was onto something and was biting hard. Part of my stomach tightened, another part turned. I said, “Do you have a source? Who is it? What makes you think they’re credible? And what are they alleging?”

“I won’t say at this time. We only want the truth.”

I suppressed my Jack Nicholson impression – *you can't handle the truth!* – and settled for, “You’ve printed that Bart stands by his record. Why don’t we leave it at that and go on to –”

“Why would a bigtime political pro such as yourself be reading the teensy-weensy *Herald*?”

“It’s my job to stay on top of all distractions” – including the ones we manufacture – “and possible untruths that might be promulgated by our opposition” – or by us against them.

Some things you don’t say. I’m not cynical, just experienced. Politics ain’t patty cake.

§ § §

We were alone in the conference room. Bart wedged a chair under the door knob to make sure no one could barge in.

I opened the dossier on his new nemesis compiled by a private investigator. I read aloud, “Shirley Mae Knott –”

“No way!”

“– forty-eight, never married, lives alone, owns a two-bedroom in Henderson, debt free –”

“Huh! Wonder what that feels like.”

“– has reported for the *Herald* for, uh, twenty years –”

“What kinda car does she drive?”

“What? What the hell difference does that make?”

“You’re telling me everything else.”

“Let me finish. An English degree from Steadman College. No professional awards. Two cats. I half-expected a brother named Gordy N., but nope.”

“So how the hell does such a do-nothing nobody from nowhere get a source claiming I skipped out on my Guard stint?”

“It’s not only Woodward and Bernstein who can crack a story.” In my reporting days, I’d bylined a few scoops.

“Come on, Tommy, what do we do?”

“My best guess is the *Herald* is holding off because they have one witness – but only one – who was in the Guard who says they remember you were, too, but you went AWOL. Without the records, it’s a he said, he said. What do we do? We wait.”

Bart scowled. “I’m raising and spending two million bucks a month on this campaign, and working a hundred hours a week, every week. The closer to Election Day this thing drops, the less we can do about it. If they are purposely waiting just to screw me and support Shaw, we can claim it was an October Surprise.”

“If voters even half-way believe it, they won’t care if it is dirty pool,” I said. “Shirley is right. With the connection voters in this state have to the military, this campaign will be in the toilet if they think you were AWOL.”

The candidate twisted in his chair; his cheeks bulged as he exhaled through tight lips. He tried some ideas. “Can we lean on the editor of the *Herald*? The publisher?”

“And confirm for them they’ve got the scoop of the year?”

“We can’t buy her off ... or can we? Maybe she’d like a spot in my administration?”

“Keep your enemies closer? Get real.”

“Maybe she’d like a new car? You didn’t tell me what she drives.”

I fought but couldn’t stop it: my eyes rolled.

He barked, “Come on, there’s gotta be something.”

“Yeah, she’s got the two cats. We’ll spread a rumor that she’s a crazy cat lady.” I was frustrated. By not facing up to the threat, Bart was increasing the danger.

Time to take it up a notch. I fixed my gaze on the candidate. “Bart, tell me. Where are your records?”

“I told you, they’re lost. The Guard said publicly they don’t know what happened. They did say the colonel that ran things – whatzisname, Nickerson? Dickerson? – had fouled up lots of

things, including the office stuff. He was drummed out back in the seventies. A drunk. I bet he's dead by now."

"Okay, the Guard doesn't have your files. Do you?"

"Why would I have them? They're gone, I told you."

I looked up at a light fixture in the grid of the suspended ceiling. I hated how the cheap fluorescent bulbs put out a grayish blue light that sucked the life out of everything in the room. Like in movie interrogations, I wanted a bright light to shine in Bart's eyes, a light to suck the truth out of him.

I suggested, "Come clean. It was a youthful mistake. Throw yourself on the mercy of the voters. I'll have cover, a distraction ready so we can bury this when it comes out."

"No."

"Bart, –"

"I said, no."

"Come on!"

"No, dammit!"

"Why the hell not!"

He glared at me in the sudden silence; I glowered in return.

I waited him out. It could have been a full minute.

Bart sighed. Quietly, with eyes moist and throat tight, he said, "It's my mom. She's still alive. She was so proud It would – kill her – to find out."

"Find out that you ...?"

Bart exploded. "I skipped out! Alright?!" His face went crimson. "Fuck! I hated the nonsense, the total fucking nonsense of the drill training." He took a deep breath then said, almost a whisper, "So I just – I took off."

Looking at the ceiling, he spat the details. "I called a friend; he picked me up; I stayed at his place; we partied. I spent days watching TV; we smoked so much weed you wouldn't believe.

After the ten weeks that I would have been training, I slunk home, expecting the Guard would've called my parents and they would disown me. Hell, I figured I'd be arrested.” He heaved a sigh of relief. “But, the damndest thing: no call, no arrest. Like I said, administratively, at that time, at that base, they were totally screwed up.

“I would have forgotten the whole thing, but in '78, when I first ran for state rep, everybody knew you had to have volunteered, been drafted, done the Guard thing, had a 4F, or skipped to Canada. My parents told everybody I was in the Guard, so I was stuck with it.”

I'd seen how getting this story out of Bart was like pulling teeth, extracting tooth by tooth, truth by truth. I asked, “And that's it? That's everything?”

Bart looked around and found a trash can in the corner to stare at, avoiding my eyes. “My first job after law school was being a flunky in the state attorney general's district office in Greenville. I assisted on a land transfer from the state to the Army to expand Camp Bullard. That's where my training was.

“We had some meetings on the base. I fiddled a way to stay late in the office. I rummaged through every damn file cabinet. Finally, about four in the morning, I found my folder. It had fallen off the hangers and was flat on the bottom of a drawer.”

“And you took it?”

“It disappeared,” Bart said silkily. But then, holding his hands out, he said, “Look, why do you think I've worked this hard to be an effective, to be an *honest* public servant? I screwed up, but a second chance appeared. I took it, and I've done my best to make it worthwhile.”

I put my feet up on the conference table, and clasped my hands on my stomach, mulling options. Even with no file, there was still risk. If Bart destroyed the only file – and it seemed likely there were no copies otherwise one would have surfaced – the *Herald* could still print the story. Even if their source was not fully credible, attention could surface sources that were. That would be fatal for the campaign.

Having the file out of circulation did not solve the problem.

After a minute, I said, “Bring me the file.”

“It’s gone. Disappeared, I told you.”

“Bring it tomorrow.” I rose heavily from my seat, removed the propped chair from the door, and went to the Capitol View Café for a think. And a drink.

§ § §

The next morning, Bart walked through campaign headquarters dodging youthful volunteers as they skittered about trying to look busy. He saw me on the far side of the big room. He made eye contact and tossed his head toward the conference room. I joined him there. Bart again did the wedged chair thing, making sure the chair legs were digging into the carpet.

I considered the purple and white “MUNSON06” banner on the wall of the conference room. I thought it was stupid to mash the 06 against the name making it hard to read. I’d been informed it looked ‘hi-tech.’

Bart spoke first. “Supposing you had my Guard file, what would you do with it?”

“What I *am* going to do is give that information to Shirley Knott.”

Bart’s jaw dropped. “Shirley Knott?”

I made a half-smile and let the joke speak for itself.

“And kill my campaign? You don’t look good, either, Tommy, if this tanks.”

“Listen. We don’t know *who* her source is. It sounds like a person with a plausible story, but we can’t do anything about it because we don’t know who or what. But why is the *Herald* sitting on the story? They need more evidence, some corroboration before publishing.” I plopped my feet on the conference table. “But we can neutralize Shirley and the *Herald*, discredit them, thus their current evidence is discredited, too.”

“The cat lady thing? What!”

“Let me see the file. I need to know what I’ve got to work with.”

Bart stared at me; I stared back.

He said, "Listen, Tommy, you better know what the fuckin' fuck you're doing." With that, he opened his briefcase and produced a tired manila folder with smudgy handprints and the crescent of a coffee stain on it. He slid it across the table.

I sat up and opened the file. I looked at it for ten minutes.

Bart sat, then paced, then sat, then paced more.

I read carefully, examining each page front and back, holding some pages up to the light as if I were a Florida chad checker.

"151 pounds? You were thin back then," I smirked.

"We *all* were," Bart snorted. He hugged himself like he was cold.

After another minute, I closed the file. "I can make this work."

"I still don't see how giving my file to that, that woman gets me off the hook."

"Not the file. I said I'd give her the *information* from the file." I put my feet back on the table, hands behind my head. I tried to keep a poker face but felt the glimmer of a grin play across my face. "What your Colonel Dickerson did was write a letter to the Pentagon, with a copy for you and a copy for the files, stating you left base without permission and were in breach of your obligation, et cetera. However, all three copies went into the file folder; none was sent. But you know all that.

"The plan? I'll anonymously send that information to Shirley, and –"

"But it's the smoking gun!"

"Yes, it will confirm what she suspects. And I hope she prints it. Ideally, they'll print photos of the pages."

"But how does –"

I put an edge in my voice to quell the interruptions. "I'll send a copy of this letter. That is, I'll send the *contents* of this letter. It will look very much like this original" – I waved the Colonel's letter from the folder – "and it will be the same, word for word, but it will not *be* the original. I'm

hoping the *Herald* will be so ecstatic to have the smoking gun they’ll rush the story to print and everybody else picks it up.”

Bart cringed, no doubt imagining a press feeding frenzy and his campaign circling the drain.

I continued, “See, the *Herald* is a two-bit rag, and they won’t have the resources to notice what I send is a forgery. But the city papers and TV will. Or, no-lifers on the internet will. *That’s* what discredits Ms. Shirley Knott and the *Herald* – their big story will be based on a fraud. Any other evidence they have becomes tainted.”

I grinned. “Yep, they’ll have a true fact wrapped in a false package. A false truth.”

I, Tommy Keller, had invented the Non-truth Truth.

Bart admired the elegance of the plan for a minute, then jumped on an apparent flaw. “But – what if the *Herald* commits journalism and has the document checked out? Like at the state police lab? Or a university?”

“Yep, they could. Hey, maybe they’ll see through it immediately. But look at it from their point of view. They already have something, but something not solid, not corroborated. Then, they get something spectacular that seems to prove their case but find it’s a forgery. Their first guess will be that it’s from Buster Shaw’s campaign and conclude whatever they had already is also some sham from Shaw. They either go after Shaw or drop it altogether.”

“This sounds good. It sounds brilliant, in fact. But it’s not foolproof – is it?” The grayish blue light on the candidate’s face accentuated the lines of late middle age, highlighting his hunger for reassurance.

Foolproof? I reckoned that to run for governor without resolving this AWOL secret made Bart a 40-proof fool.

“No,” I said after mulling it, “not foolproof. But it’s what we got.”

§ § §

I took the parlous papers home and got to work on my computer. I scanned the Colonel’s letter to get the letterhead and signature. I downloaded a font that was a good match for the other documents. It looked like a typewriter with ink stuck in the crannies of certain letters and had other imperfections characteristic of mechanical typewriters.

There was a sheet in the file with handwritten notes about some issue completely unrelated to Bart Munson. But the back of that sheet was blank and could be used for the letter – it was the same paper with the same yellowness of age as the other documents. I figured it would support the story by looking like someone had mistakenly written notes on the back of the Colonel’s letter, but filed the letter anyway when they realized their mistake.

I prepared a package containing some innocuous forms from the file – Bart’s indicative data, such as name, birthdate, address, height and weight, and a form he signed when he showed up the first day – along with the transcribed copy of the Colonel’s letter documenting recruit Munson had left the base without notice or permission. The first items would bolster authenticity; the latter would plainly state Bart’s infraction.

But upon careful visual examination of the letter, it would be noted that the date when Munson was discovered missing – June 14th – had the ordinal indicator in superscript, something simply not possible with typewriters common in the seventies. That would prove the letter to be fraudulent.

In the clipping from the *Herald*, I highlighted the reference to the rumor about Bart being AWOL. I stapled the clipping to a cover note where I wrote in block letters with a red marker, “THIS IS WHAT YOU’VE BEEN LOOKING FOR. THE TRUTH MUST GET OUT!”

The spycraft didn’t have to be perfect, just good enough to get the *Herald* people excited, yet imperfect enough that credibility would collapse under scrutiny. Oh, and it must not be tied back to the Munson campaign. Nothing I was doing seemed illegal – I was, after all, revealing the truth about Bart – but the scheme would blow up if someone figured out the Munson campaign fake-snitched on its own candidate.

I wore cotton gloves when handling the papers, and used a cloth and then a slice of stale bread to remove earlier fingerprints from the papers. I'd learned the bread trick from an artist who used it to clean drawings. There could be residual oils in the paper, but I had not heard of those being specific enough for forensic identification. To mail the large envelope and get a postmark from within the *Herald's* coverage area, I drove to Franklin, a suburb of Henderson. I paid cash at the post office which used a computer-printed sticker for the postage. I didn't handle the sticker, and didn't lick the envelope, so I left no DNA evidence.

And what to do with the original letter? The true truth? I returned it to the candidate: it was Bart Munson's to come to terms with.

§ § §

Back home that evening, I poured a glass of my best Scotch, put my feet up, and pondered.

Is this any way to run a democracy? Is it okay for the voters to not know something important about Bart Munson? Or to know it but not believe it? Politics, and especially campaigns, are maelstroms of assertion and spin, beliefs prevailing over facts, yet the nation depends on voters to sort it out. Still, partisanship is a powerful filter which can make even smart voters impervious to facts.

Must leaders be perfect? There was the long-time long-ago politician, revered by his party and respected by his opposition – a lion of the legislature, but also a lush and a letch.

What do voters want? Voters say they want sensible policies, but the taller, better financed, better looking candidate has the edge. They say they want to hear the issues, but savor scandals and irrelevancies. They say they want better schools, a stronger military, more services, but vote for lower taxes. They say they want positive campaigns, but will vote for negative campaigners.

Sure, politicians lie. So do voters.

What’s the role of a campaign functionary like me? My job is to make the best case for my candidate, and, sometimes, the worst case for the opponent. The voters are the ultimate judges of what is fair or not, what is important or not. But how often does it come down to which candidate the voter would rather have a beer with?

And lastly, the press: the public depends on reporters and their outlets to convey truth and expose falsehoods, all on deadline and with diminishing resources. So, what would Shirley Knott and the *Herald* do with the truth of Bart Munson’s very brief military career?

§ § §

The next morning’s weather was clear and pleasant. On my walk to headquarters, I was feeling good about our chances. The campaign was moving ahead, much like the city bus I watched pull away bearing a MUNSON06 ad.

An elderly lady, also watching the bus, gave a palsied tug to my jacket sleeve and asked, “Tell me, please, what is a Munsonog?”

Perhaps the campaign still faced some self-created headwinds.

I did my regular work of scheduling events and press conferences, chatting up reporters, and checking out the young female volunteers.

Our pollster collared Bart and me. She told us, “We’re up four points since last week. If we keep it, it’s the solid margin we need. Is there anything on the horizon, any October Surprise to worry about?”

I caught Bart’s eye and answered, “Surely not.”

He grimaced and shambled away, a bundle of twitches and tics. He stopped in his tracks when shouts and whoops erupted from staffers gathered around a TV.

Bart and I joined the crowd to see breaking news. Live video showed police cars with flashing lights. Police officers and detectives milled around a crime scene. Firefighters struggled to free a

shirtless blubbery bald middle-aged man stuck in a bathroom window behind a local motel. It was Buster Shaw. The TV reporter said police were questioning “a woman not Mrs. Shaw” in the motel room.

Campaign workers laughed and danced, but my stomach sank. The second rule of campaign communications: when your opponent steps on a landmine, don’t distract from their disaster. Weeks of campaign coverage featuring images of Buster flailing in the window would be pure gold, but reports of Bart’s AWOL, even if subsequently neutralized, would push Buster’s brouhaha off the news.

Could I intercept my smoking gun package before it got to Shirley? I grabbed my jacket and ran for my car. I hoped to figure a finagle on the way. The first rule of campaigning: when you think it’s over, it’s not over. Call it the Non-ending Ending.