



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 31, 2010

## Halloween Came Early in '64 Campaign

Is it merely a coincidence that Election Day comes so soon after Halloween? The voting is always in early November, perhaps in consideration of farmers who may be busy harvesting crops through October. Whatever the reason, the campaigns are at or near their climax as witches, ghosts, and goblins appear on the scene and horror movies are on the TV and movie screens to try to scare the populace more than the politicians do. It's a tough challenge for the ghoulish creatures, since the candidates tend to run for high office on the principle that fright makes right.



Political mud-slinging and scare tactics have an ancient and disreputable history, but the negative television ad is of fairly recent origin, at least on the presidential level. TV ads in the campaigns of the 1950s were generally of the happy, upbeat "I Like Ike" variety and in 1960, the Democrats won with ads featuring Frank Sinatra singing about "High Hopes" with Jack Kennedy. But in 1964, the Lyndon Johnson campaign came up with a mud-breaking ad that makes the Swift Boat Veterans' crusade against John Kerry in 2004 look like a Sunday school seminar.

Johnson was running that year against Barry Goldwater, a hawkish cold warrior who had made some troublesome remarks about allowing NATO commanders in the field to use tactical nuclear weapons on their own authority. The Johnson campaign saw an opportunity to create and exploit in the public mind the discomforting thought that Goldwater might not be the safest person to have command over the nation's nuclear arsenal. The strategy was to define the Arizona senator negatively early in the campaign and keep him on the defensive before the senator's own campaign could offer the public a more moderate, reassuring image. So Halloween came early in 1964, as the opening ad of the Johnson campaign aired with an atomic "bang" on the evening of Labor Day, September 7.

Much of the nation was tuned into NBC's *Monday Night at the Movies*, featuring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward in the 1951 film *David and Bathsheba*. At what was no doubt a high point in the biblical affair, the Johnson campaign commercial changed the theme rather dramatically from royal adultery to nuclear apocalypse. The spot, which came to be known as the Daisy Girl ad, opened onto a peaceful scene of a pretty little girl picking petals off a flower and counting them aloud. Then a narrator's voice began a countdown, from ten to zero. An explosion was followed by a sudden burst of light and the child was vaporized before our eyes. As the mushroom-shaped cloud appeared on screen, viewers heard the voice of President Johnson proclaiming: "These are the stakes: To make a world in which all of God's children can live — or to go into the darkness. We must either love each other, or we must die." The spot ended with the voice-over urging: "Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home." (To view the Daisy Girl ad, [click here](#).)

The ad was no less outrageous for being fiendishly, diabolically clever. It was deceptively subtle — so subtle, in fact, that the viewer might not have noticed that Goldwater was never mentioned. Yet it was



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clearly aimed at him and the implication that a nuclear war would be likely if Goldwater won the election was inescapable. And the Republican reaction was predictable. Republican National Committee Chairman Dean Burch complained the ad implied that "Senator Goldwater may somehow cause some sort of atomic conflict because he is a perfectly reckless person," something Burch denounced as not only a libel, but "the most violent political lie." His counterpart, DNC Chairman John Bailey, in his best Pontius Pilate impersonation, countered by saying that any frightening image of Senator Goldwater had been created by Goldwater himself.

The Democrats ran that ad only once, but the controversy it provoked ensured that it would be aired for free on network news programs and dissected and expounded on in newspapers and national magazines for weeks. Indeed, it was part of a *Time* magazine cover story on the nuclear issue. And Republicans couldn't stop talking about it.

"Yesterday Burch said, 'This ad implies that Senator Goldwater is a reckless man and Lyndon Johnson is a careful man,'" Bill Moyer, then Special Assistant to the President, wrote in a memo to Johnson. "Well, that's exactly what we wanted to imply. And we also hoped someone around Goldwater would say it, not us. They did."

Meanwhile the Johnson campaign had aired another ad showing a little girl eating an ice cream cone while a mother's voice warned of the dangers of radioactive fallout contaminating children's milk and ice cream. (Goldwater had voted the previous year against the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.) On September 16, Senator Thruston Morton of Kentucky rose in the Senate chamber to denounce both ads as "slime" and to protest that they were "scaring the wits out of children in order to pressure their parents." On September 29, more than three weeks after the Daisy Girl ad ran, Senator Goldwater was heard venting his indignation over it.

"The homes of America are horrified," he said in a speech in Indianapolis, "and the intelligence of Americans is insulted by weird television advertising by which this administration threatens the end of the world unless all-wise Lyndon is given the nation for his very own."

But the ads were effective. A week after the Daisy Girl ad appeared, a Harris poll showed 53 percent of women and 45 percent of men believed Goldwater as President would likely get the nation into war. Meanwhile, Johnson was assuring the populace that Americans would not bear the brunt of the fighting in a growing war in South Vietnam.

"We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," the President declared. Thus assured, the American people entrusted the nation to Johnson for another four years, with a landslide 44-state victory for the incumbent. A few months later, the "all-wise Lyndon" was bombing North Vietnam and sending U.S. combat units to "do a job" in South Vietnam. By the time Johnson left office four years later, more than half a million men under arms were in Vietnam fighting a war that we and South Vietnam ultimately lost.

Trick or Treat!

*Photo: screen-grab from Daisy Girl ad*



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