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July 18-24, 2005

UNEXPECTED VELOCITY

I've often wondered what shuttle astronauts feel as they get rocketed into outer space. Sitting on top of what is for all intents and purposes a bomb - albeit a highly controlled bomb - they're slammed into their seatbacks as the contraption accelerates quickly to thousands of miles per hour. I was about to find out what that feels like.

Although I included my name and phone number on the press release, some people must have heard about PACleanSweep that Monday morning by word of mouth or through an email forward of website link alone. One of those people was Chris Lilik, the editor of grassrootspace.com, one of my favorite blogs. Grassrootspace.com is an offshoot of the Young Conservatives of Pennsylvania, a group that cut its teeth during the Pat Toomey/Arlen Specter U.S. Senate primary race in 2004. Lilik posted several items about me when I ran against Paterno and Holden for Congress. Later on he told me he loved how I kept that race entertaining. That was good, because that's sort of why I was in that race to begin with.

Lilik posted a link to PACleanSweep complete with a screenshot and quotes from the site's front page missive. He titled the post "Operation Clean Sweep Launches To Oust ALL PA State Lawmakers!" Later in the day at the bottom of the post he added, "UPDATE: Site registered to Network Solutions." This was excellent news. He didn't know I was behind it yet. There had been a spate of semi-anonymous political smear websites back then, most notably one called "Drunks for Castor," which was aimed at opposing Montgomery County District Attorney Bruce Castor. Whenever one of these sites would pop up it became de rigeur for all the bloggers to try to find out who the mystery author was.

I was glad Lilik didn't know I was responsible, as some of the folks who commented on his site made some third-party-bashing remarks during my congressional run. Later, when an anonymous smear website came out against PACleanSweep, our candidates, our volunteers and me personally,

we figured out a sure-fire way to uncover who the culprit was. But in July 2005, a private domain registration provided a fairly safe place to hide. Lilik's initial inability to name me as the owner of the site gave just enough cushion to get beyond the wacko danger zone I was worried about with the conservative crowd.

Over the weekend, I had already received a few favorable emails from the Lebanon area asking to be added to our email list or offering other support, but I was fully unprepared for the statewide response I received after the official launch. The phone started ringing. Newspapers from all over the state wanted to know more. Talk radio - which was already boiling over the pay raise - wanted to schedule guest slots. TV news crews wanted to come to PACleanSweep "headquarters" for on-camera interviews for the evening news.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* summed up the overriding theme of all the resultant stories the next day as their article opened by proclaiming: "It sounds impossible, maybe even ridiculous, but Lebanon County businessman and political activist Russ Diamond insists he's serious." Most pieces also included my third-party history, but it was mentioned as mere background information. All the headlines read exactly the way I hoped.

Success!

As busy as I was interacting with the media during that first day, I was completely blindsided by what awaited me at home that evening. I had recently moved the computer on which I did personal and political work out of my office and into a room at the house. Keeping the two segregated became important so I could focus on work at the office and keep everything else in a separate place.

Apparently, I had not done as thorough a job gathering media contacts over the weekend as I thought. The email inbox was crammed with messages from reporters and talk show hosts who had apparently only heard about PACleanSweep by word of mouth. They wanted to know who they could speak to regarding the effort.

One of them was a producer for "Comcast Newsmakers," a five minute TV segment that played at the end of *Headline News* on one of the various 24/7 news channels on the local cable system and others around the mid-state. I did two segments (one for each campaign) during my 2004 runs for office and I remembered the producer. In fact, one of the guys in the control room - who must have sat for endless hours through scads of those campaign tapings - told the volunteer who accompanied me to my congressional taping that it was one of the best interviews he'd seen all year.

When a control room engineer takes the time to offer praise, it makes an impression.

The interview on PACleanSweep was eventually scheduled for August 9th. Although it was not my best TV appearance ever, it went pretty well. After taping it I made a point to regularly check the Newsmakers website to see when it would air, so I could let our hundreds of subscribers (by that time) know about it. I waited. And waited. And waited. It never showed up on the schedule. Did I miss it somehow?

By the time September rolled around I still hadn't seen it on the schedule. I emailed Comcast and asked if it was still slated to air.

"Unfortunately no. Sorry for any inconvenience."

"I take it that's a decision from on high?"

"Yeah, sorry!"

And that was that. Here was one of the biggest post pay-raise news stories - at least to all the other media outlets in the state - but Comcast didn't think it was newsworthy enough to air at all. Perhaps it was just a routine editorial decision, but I suspect there was more to the story. I certainly can't provide a smoking gun, but there is one that's pretty warm.

Comcast had previously received over \$40 million in taxpayer money to help build what is now the tallest building in Philadelphia. When I went to the studio to tape the segment, I was wedged in between segments featuring state Representatives Bruce Smith and Scott Boyd.

The Newsmaker segments - at least a major chunk of them at that time - were little more than a parade of state legislators touting whatever initiatives or programs might impress their constituents and convince them that state government in Harrisburg was Getting the Job Done. It was a great outreach tool for the Establishment - the very same Establishment responsible for awarding Comcast in excess of \$40 million of taxpayer money to build their skyscraper under the guise of "economic development." Here I was, some upstart rebel trying to throw all these guys out of office.

Coincidence? You be the judge.

As an aside, I found it quite interesting when I later learned that one of Comcast's founding board members, Gustave G. Amsterdam, was a prime mover and shaker behind the constitutional revision movement of the 1960's. That movement was capped off by the 1967-68 constitutional convention. The movement was largely responsible for creating the atmosphere that paved the way for the very "economic development" initiatives in Pennsylvania that Comcast had just cashed in on to the tune of over \$40 million.

That kind of information is fodder for an *entirely* different book I hope to write someday.