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HILLTOPICS

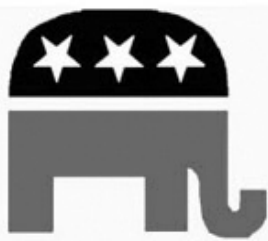
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The 2008 Presidential Debates: A Commentary

As election day nears and both parties attempt to garner as many votes as possible, we become bombarded by political advertisements, coverage of rallies, and one-on-one interviews. The Presidential debates offer us an opportunity to compare the candidates against each other in one single venue – they have the same questions, they have the same amount of airtime, and they can respond directly to one another. Thus the debates can be integral to the selection process of any undecided voter. How did these debates go?

The anticipation and buzz for the first debate was immeasurable. How would the less-experienced Obama, who's been accused by the right of prioritizing style over substance, articulate a realistic plan of action for accomplishing his lofty goals? How would the older McCain, who's been criticized for being out of touch, connect with younger voters? Truth be told, the circumstances surrounding this debate seemed to make a bigger impact than the debate itself. The drafting of a \$700 billion bailout plan, McCain's subsequent suspension of his campaign, and his request to postpone the debate, created a rather slanted debate environment. The campaign suspension backfired for McCain, and put him in an unfavorable position before the debate had even started. Though the debate was intended to cover foreign policy and national security, moderator Jim Lehrer devoted the first half of the debate to the financial crisis, magnifying McCain's campaign gaffe. Overall, the debate was a stalemate – neither candidate ventured from their talking points, and both reiterated the same issues we had



heard countless times through other means. According to the polls, though, Obama came out well-ahead, but this was most likely due to the circumstances surrounding the debate rather than the debate itself.

The Vice Presidential debate that followed was also highly anticipated. Sarah Palin, a relative political infant who had been lambasted for poor showings in recent interviews, was up against Joe Biden, a well-established Senator known for being a "loose cannon" and possessing combative rhetoric. With these factors in mind, Biden was heavily favored. Palin, though, was impressive, performing confidently and with clear articulation. This debate, according to polls, was largely seen as even, but the fact that Palin held her own against Biden was a victory in itself for the McCain campaign. Many left-leaning pundits criticized Palin for deflecting the questions, and manipulating them to fit a script that she had learned. Additionally, they questioned her methods of trying to connect with the voters: namely, her continuous winking at the camera. Whatever the strategy was, though, it worked, as consensus has been that the debate was a draw.

The next Presidential debate was in a town hall format, and the only one that I perceived to have a clear winner. Going in, there was talk of an advantage for McCain – he was a master of the town hall format, and the campaign had received a slight boost after Palin's success in her own debate. Here, though, Obama won handily, and the town hall

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We welcome submissions from all members of the SMU community. Letters to the editor should be up to 300 words in response to a previously published article. Contributions should be articles of up to 300–600 words on any topic or in response to another article. Please email your submission to hilltopics@gmail.com by Wednesday at 7:00 PM to be included in the following week's publication. Special deadlines will be observed for breaking campus events. The opinions expressed in *Hilltopics* are those of the authors solely and do not reflect the beliefs of *Hilltopics* or any other entity. As such, *Hilltopics* does not publish anonymous articles.

The Financial Crisis: How it All Unfolded

by Beth Anderson

Approximately one year ago, on October 9, 2007, the Dow Jones Industrial Average closed at an all-time high of \$14,164. How times have changed, my friends.

As we all know by now, the United States is experiencing the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. This statement, however, is pretty much the only thing the government is willing to say about the situation. We want to know reasons – we want answers. How did we get to this point?

There are three main “centers” of this crisis:

1. The dollar
2. The housing bubble
3. The credit crunch

Let's start with the dollar. Before 1791, the dollar was on some kind of a standard. From 1792 to 1875, the dollar was on a bimetallic standard. Each paper note was exchangeable for a set, fixed amount of gold and silver. In 1875, the dollar was switched to the gold standard – same concept. In 1971, President Nixon took the dollar off the gold standard. It became a “faith-based” currency. The dollar was put on a standard in the first place by our forefathers. Before that, the currency was the Continental Dollar. It, too, was a “faith-based” currency. It was backed on the anticipation of tax revenues. The government printed too much of it and hyperinflation occurred. In an effort to prevent inflation in the future, the U.S. adopted the bimetallic standard so that the dollar would have a solid backing.

Whenever the government prints more money, the value of the dollar decreases. And in spite of some recent gains, the dollar is considerably weaker today than it was several years ago – look at what it's done compared to the Euro. When the Euro was first issued, it was worth a little less than one U.S. dollar. Now, a Euro is worth \$1.34. Considering the shocking amount of debt that the U.S. is in right now (\$10 trillion and counting!) the decline in the value of the

dollar makes even more sense.

The second main center is the housing bubble. From 1997 to 2005, the U.S. experienced a record increase in house prices. This drastic increase in prices, however, did not correlate to an increase in home *value*. A particular house may cost \$1 million, but it does not necessarily mean that this particular house is actually *worth* \$1 million. This is what is known as the “bubble.”

Many Americans made some unfortunate investment decisions in the middle of this bubble. This is partly due to the intervention of the Federal Reserve, and partly due to the fact that typical Americans, many of our politicians included, do not have good economic knowledge.

The Fed got into the trend of lowering interest rates. When interest rates are low, people can borrow more money than when rates are high. There was also a general belief that housing prices were not going to go back down. Real estate investments suddenly seemed more stable than investing in the highly volatile stock market. Many people took out ridiculous loans that they really could not afford. The banks were happy to do this, because they could go on to securitize the loans and sell them to someone else. Different kinds of loans became available, such as sub-prime mortgages and home equity loans. Under a sub-prime mortgage, a person can borrow the entire value of his or

her home. A home equity loan basically means that you can “borrow” the increased price of your home since you purchased it. Say that a person bought a house for \$300,000 pre-bubble. During the bubble, the price of his home (but not the actual value) increased to \$600,000. This person gets a loan for \$300,000, the amount his home price has increased. Then, post-bubble, the house price goes back to \$300,000, or perhaps even lower. This person is suddenly going to find himself between a rock and a hard place. Another terrible side effect of the housing bubble was that many mortgage companies went on to sell these loans as investments to other investors, including banks, who were told that the investments were high-grade and secure. As a result, banks have a buildup of assets that are extremely



overvalued. Now, they are wary of giving out more loans.

Anna Schwartz cites the credit crunch as another huge problem at the center of this crisis. Ms. Schwartz has worked at the National Bureau of Economic Research in New York since 1941, co-authored "A Monetary History of the United States" in 1963 with Milton Friedman, and lived through the Great Depression.

"The basic problem for the markets is the [uncertainty] that the balance sheets of financial firms are credible," says Ms. Schwartz in an October 18th interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. "Lending freezes up when lenders are uncertain that would-be borrowers have the resources to repay them."

In addition to all of this, you have to take into account that for the past several years, the entire country has been living outside of its means. People have been spending more than they make, taking out multiple credit cards, living in the moment without considering how it would affect the future.

So there you have it – our second Great Depression in a nutshell. It is the result of overvalued assets, confidence in the wrong sources, the astonishing greed and immorality of Wall Street, and all-around bad financial decision-making.

Beth is a senior accounting major and can be reached at ejanders@smu.edu



Health Care

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method seemed to fit him like a glove. The set-up provided for movement by both candidates, and gave them the opportunity to address audience members directly. Obama moved with purpose, and really seemed to connect with those who asked him questions. McCain, however, hobbled aimlessly, reminding us of his age, and demonstrating a seeming discomfort with the debate style. The debate centered around economic issues, and viewer polls strongly demonstrated that Obama won the debate.

The third and final debate was a crucial one for McCain. By this point, Obama was leading by double digits in election polls, and had virtually all momentum going in. While McCain may not have convincingly won the debate, he gave his strongest performance. His namedropping of "Joe the plumber" proved effective in making a connection with voters. While most polls reported that viewers thought that Obama had won, his point lead, which had steadily been growing since the second debate, receded, with some polls showing that it had decreased to as low as two percent.

Overall, the debates provided for consistent poll oscillation, and as they have closed the race is mostly in the same position that it was before. Obama maintains a narrow lead, and the battleground states are still up for grabs. The fact is that presidential debates have lost much of their impact. Instead of hearing honest answers, we're simply fed the same talking points we've heard several times before. Instead of seeing real interaction between the candidates, we see the same attacks and back-and-forth that we see in the advertisements. Essentially, instead of seeing a debate, we see the result of hours of coaching and preparation. The debate may not offer us the insight into the candidates we want, but we live in the information age, and this is not our only source. I implore everyone who is reading this to conduct their own research – read about their track records, learn their policies, and evaluate their plans. And, most importantly, vote on November 4th.

Andrew is a senior political science major and can be reached at atshaw@mail.smu.edu

Do you have an opinion about... politics, music, class, television, football, shopping, intramurals, fraternities, movies, tests, the Mavs, sex, restaurants, religion, sororities, driving, study abroad, Umphrey Lee, fashion, news, the war, parking, technology, magazines, bars, baseball, the weather, professors, the Mustang Band, dating, books, nightclubs, Texas, the Daily Campus, pets, club sports, or anything else ?

we're listening at hilltopics@gmail.com

'Hub of SMU Spirit' Needs Hub Completed

SMU has a reputation for having exceptionally high standards for the school's appearance. All the buildings must be of the same Georgian Revival architecture. Mulch must be put out wherever grass will not grow. The interiors of buildings must look like the lobbies of four star hotels. This preoccupation with façades, however amusing, sometimes excludes the places that only students see. Namely, all the places your parents never get to see on the Mustang Monday campus tour.

The SMU band hall is definitely one of those places. The current band hall is located under the Perkins Natatorium. A steep spiraling ramp leads ominously down to a drab, poorly lit room. The flooring is worn and spotted. Low-hanging eaves around the edges make getting to the instrument shelves difficult. During rehearsals, drums are constantly knocked over by people simply trying to get through. Latecomers have to interrupt rehearsal to have stands and chairs passed across the room to them. Handicapped band members have to play from the edges of



the ensemble because there is no way they can get anywhere else. Ceilings are very low, and this greatly diminishes the effectiveness of the ensemble's tuning and dynamic efforts. *The Wenger Guide to Music Facilities* suggests that for an ensemble the size of the Mustang Band, the rehearsal space should be *at least* four times larger.

Thankfully, the band finally found a new place to call home. The new band hall space is located in the Dedman Center for Lifetime Fitness. It has all the elbowroom a marching band could ever want. It is literally a very large, open space. The problem is that everything which makes a space functional has yet to be built: dividing walls, lockers, shelving, etc. The cost to have the space outfitted is estimated at right around two million dollars.

This is an amount that SMU can usually raise with just a few phone calls and the wave of a generous hand. Construction can actually begin when 80% of the total cost has been met. The Office of Development and External Affairs oversees fundraising for building projects like this. Facilities

such as the Crum Center and 'Caruth 2.0' are funded by donors with specific purposes in mind. Unless a donor specifically designates that his or her gift should go to the Mustang Band, the money will likely go to bigger name projects. This is understandable, since more visible projects benefit more people and elevate the school's reputation, which is good for everyone. However, if this pattern continues, it could be several years before enough money comes down the pipeline to make the new band hall usable. Even once the funds are raised, it will take an additional year and a half just to build.

Sure— the group can still play well, march well, and come to all the games even if they don't have adequate rehearsal space. That is certainly true. The flaw in this reasoning comes from viewing the band as a means rather than as an end in itself. Don Hopkins, director of the mustang band, would describe the group's outward function as a "PR Band." The group plays at pep rallies, groundbreakings, football, basketball, and volleyball games, and lots of other things most students never even hear about. While band members enjoy this, many just like 'being' in band

— rehearsing, performing, and taking part in the rich tradition. Ask any band alumni and they will describe being in band as their most memorable college experience. There is something to be said for this. Musicians are always passionate about what they do. It is because the experience deeply touches so many individuals that one must consider the ensemble an end in itself. A nicely equipped band hall would be the best reassurance that the university recognizes the value of the band, not only to the school, but also to those who participate in it. This attitude would be mutually reassuring to the band, and greatly help recruitment and retention of band members since their participation would finally seem validated by the school. As long as SMU 'can't find the money,' band members past and present will wonder what they really mean to SMU.

Ashley Howe can be reached at amhowe@smu.edu

Mogwai and Fuck Buttons at the Grenada

by Thomas Dunlap

This current Mogwai/Fuck Buttons tour may just be the most interesting show I've ever been to. Not necessarily the most important or culturally significant, but most interesting. This lineup is the best example that I have witnessed of a bill that brings us up to speed with all the influences leading up to a present moment in music... and then hints at what is next to come, the future if you will.

This isn't to say that Mogwai was some sort of dinosaur on this tour. Quite the opposite, Mogwai has established themselves as a post-rock powerhouse over the last decade for good reason. Just listening through their discography is a lesson in how ideas about atmospheric music have evolved. Judging by their show and the new material off their upcoming album, *The Hawk Is Howling*, I would say Mogwai is very much alive and kicking.

The band let far more personality and vitality shine through than I was expecting. I was anticipating an imposing force raining down shadowy sounds from behind smoke machines, and there was a fair share of that (minus the smoke), but underneath the poised figures of Mogwai were five really happy guys. Sure, the set began with five statuesque goliaths taking the stage matter-of-factly and launching right into their set without so much as a "Howdy do?" but over the course of the next hour we got to see the façade crack here and there.

One of the greatest aspects of Mogwai's music and perhaps one of the most problematic for some listeners is the absence of a relatable human face. I've always felt that Mogwai's music can convey a definite sense of action, the way people claim symphonies tell a story. With Mogwai, I can get at least a vague plot. Maybe the best way to describe it is an opera with no actors and no lyrics. Although Mogwai has experimented with vocals in the past, they didn't perform any songs during their set with any vocal elements. The lack of such a familiar part of our usual listening experience can make it easy to forget all the personal input that goes into creating Mogwai's brooding and introspective sound even as the songs swirl and grind their way to our ears. That's why it was nice to see some of their calculation and precision melt away during this show. Oddly enough, the moments where the band members really shined happened during some of the most technical parts of the music. During a rather bom-

bastic moment in the first song of the night, Martin Bulloch's stick splintered and the music took a backseat to watching him go through stages of surprise, confusion, anger, and disappointment as he played on while searching for a new stick. Some of the faces he made were priceless; in this case, he literally attached a human face to the music for me and



anybody else with the same view of the stage. My favorite moments would have to be during the only two real mistakes that the band made: a misstep in the beginning of a new song that led to the band dissolving into laughter and happily informing the crowd that there would be a re-start, and a missed cue in that very same song which relied on huge crashes of sound coming out of near silence that sent bassist Dominic Aitchison from his perch at center stage to share a laugh with the rest

of the band.

Whereas most of Mogwai's – and a lot of their contemporaries' – physical aspects are revealed through what most people would consider mistakes or accident, Fuck Buttons are producing experimental and atmospheric music teeming with physical energy and arguably expressed in exactly the opposite way. Fuck Buttons' live performance confirmed for me what fans of Major League Gaming and anyone in Korea already knew; watching two guys hunched over laptops can be awesome. In the very beginning; before any of the vocals, drumming, keyboards, dancing or convulsions, there were just two men at opposite sides of a table bobbing and fiddling with knobs. And it was mesmerizing. There was a palpable energy as Andrew Hung and Benjamin Power looked straight at each other and threw all of themselves into turning those knobs. They've commented that although there is an electronic element to the music, they want their live shows to have a "sensual" aspect, and they've succeeded fantastically. Power would scream indecipherable lyrics into his Playmate recorder and more often than not it looked like he was actually coughing up a microphone rather than putting it to his mouth. On "Ribs Out," Hung took over vocal duties howling and yelping through a kind of tribal dance while Power beat on a single tom, using the sides, rim, and sticks themselves equally. My predictions for the future might be premature, but I sure hope they're right.

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When we elect the president, who else are we electing?

by Cody Meador

As of August 31, 2008, financial reports showed that John McCain had raised \$230 million and that Barack Obama had raised \$454 million for their respective presidential campaigns. McCain decided to accept public funds for his general election campaign while Obama declined, becoming the first major party presidential candidate to do so since the public funding system was initiated in 1971.

Accepting public funding for the general election limited the McCain campaign to spending approximately \$84.1 million in public funds between his official nomination at the Republican National Convention and the election. However, McCain can continue to raise money that is designated for limited legal and accounting needs because of a loophole in campaign finance laws. By contrast, Obama's decision to forego public funds has allowed him to continue his record-setting fundraising practices and outspend John McCain in several competitive states. Obama's was a strategy to build a lead and stay ahead in a game that is often decided on the basis of monetary might.

In effect, Obama will be accepting more money than John McCain, though they will both do as much as they can to capitalize on these funds to the maximum degree possible. What this amounts to, sadly, is the fact that, regardless of the outcome of this November's election, the candidate who takes office as the next President of the United States will owe a great debt to those large donors. It is these interests groups who we are also electing into power when we cast our votes for President.

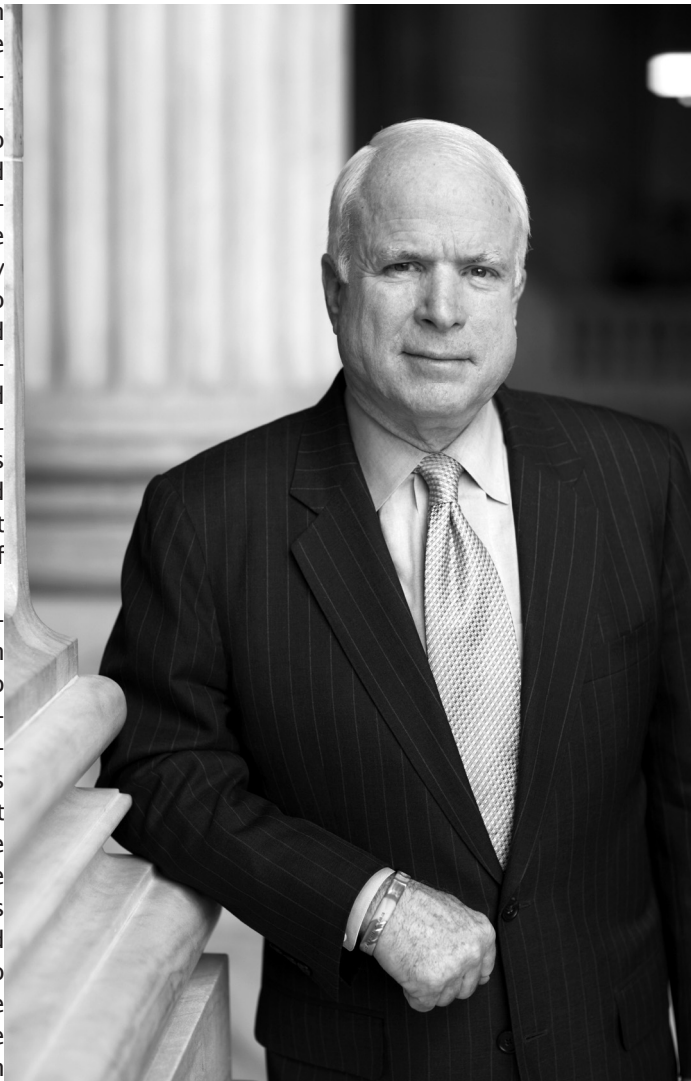
Obama's Donors

Barack Obama has worked hard to build a reputation as a candidate of the people and not of the special interests, and it is true that he has raised a significant amount of money from so-called "small donors" (donors of \$100 or less). According to the Obama campaign in May 2008, 90% of contributors had given \$100 or less, and 41% had given \$25 or

less. Despite the role of small donors, the Obama campaign has benefited greatly from bundlers and other big donors. Bundlers gather individual donations from people in their networks (organization, company, industry, etc.) and then receive credit for the total donation to the campaign. In essence, they accrue influence in the campaign and possibly in the next administration. In April 2008, the *Washington Post* reported that seventy-nine Obama bundlers had raised at least \$200,000 each and that these bundlers were granted access to the candidate and his strategists.

Lawyers and law firms have collectively given the most money to the Obama campaign (\$27,689,330), with retirees coming in a close second (\$27,220,507). Educational institutions come in third (\$12,222,365), and securities and investments firms fourth (\$10,847,652). Below are Obama's top ten specific contributors.

*Remember that, because of federal limits on donations, these donations generally occur through bundling.



Goldman Sachs	\$739,521
University of California	\$697,506
Harvard University	\$501,489
Citigroup Inc	\$492,548
Google Inc	\$487,355
JPMorgan Chase & Co	\$475,112
National Amusements Inc	\$432,169
Microsoft Corp	\$429,656

UBS AG \$419,550
 Lehman Brothers \$391,774
 Source: opensecrets.org

McCain's Donors

John McCain's fundraising situation is different than Barack Obama's because of McCain's use of public funds for the general election. Up until his nomination as the Republican candidate in September, McCain's private donations were largely unlimited by the government. Notably, John McCain had raised 23% of his money from small donors as of May 2008. After the nomination, his funds came from public money and private donations could only be made to a very limited *legal compliance fund*. Retirees have given the most to John McCain's campaign (\$30,263,018), followed by lawyers and law firms (\$9,334,909), real estate (\$7,651,562), and securities and investment firms (\$7,634,378). McCain's top ten contributors are as follows.

*Again, remember that these donations generally come in the form of bundles of smaller donations.

Merrill Lynch \$349,170
 Citigroup Inc \$287,801
 Morgan Stanley \$249,377
 Goldman Sachs \$220,045
 JPMorgan Chase & Co \$206,392
 AT&T Inc \$183,663
 Credit Suisse Group \$175,503
 PricewaterhouseCoopers \$163,670
 Blank Rome LLP \$153,426
 US Government \$152,118
 Source: opensecrets.org

So this means...

Do you recognize any of the names on the lists from recent news? Both candidates have received substantial amounts of money from some of the financial institutions which have been involved in the recent downturn of the economy. It is necessary to concede the deeply troubling truth about the effects that this kind of corporate influence can have on the decisions of these candidates once in office.

Even before either has taken the office, both candidates have voted for a bill that basically takes billions of dollars from the American people and hands the money to the very institutions responsible for the financial crisis. Since both candidates have recently condemned those institutions for their abuse of the liberty granted to them by limited government oversight, it must be safe to assume that neither would willingly grant monetary asylum to these enemies of the people. However, it is the heavy, influential hand of the lobbies that has dictated the voting records of both John McCain and Barack Obama, demonstrating in the clearest fashion

the kind of political power that money can buy.

So, what can be done? The cynic will here conclude that the financial tumor is, at this point, necessary for the electoral process to proceed. If there was no money, then a candidate could not buy TV time, press coverage, propaganda, or public appearances. What if the best candidate was not able to disseminate his message due to lack of funds? Well, this is where a concept known as *Clean Elections* comes into play. With Clean Elections, candidates have the opportunity to accept full public funding and can thus participate on a level monetary playing field. No monetary lobby influence is present, because all candidates are instead funded by the government itself. Such systems have actually been put into place in Arizona and Maine, among other states, with overwhelmingly positive results. In these kinds of elections, the American tax payer and voting citizenry are the ultimate lobby and it is only to them that the candidates are indebted. If you would like to know more about campaign finance reform, the local SMU chapter of Democracy Matters meets every Tuesday at 8:00pm in Hughes-Trigg Portico A to plan opportunities for SMU students to get involved in politics and learn more about the role that money plays in the process.

Cody Meador is a junior political science major and can be reached at CodyLM@gmail.com





Homecoming
SMU v. Memphis
Saturday, November 8, 2008
3:00 PM
Gerald Ford Stadium



Thumbs up:

- Dr. Pepper is giving away free soda after losing a bet with Guns n' Roses frontman Axl Rose.
- Blood and bone marrow drives on campus. Donate, people. Somebody definitely needs it more than you.
- The Engineering school finally has a name! For the longest time, I wondered who Mr. Engineering was and what he'd done to get a school named after him.



Thumbs down:

- Beyoncé wishing to be called "Sasha Fierce". "Beyoncé" wasn't unique enough?
- The fact that Hilltopics can't comment on or predict the presidential election results at the time of this issue's printing. If you know any gypsy mind readers, send them our way.

Upcoming Events:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| October 28 | Teach for America
information session
8:25 pm HT Forum |
| | The Great Pumpkin Search
(carving contest) 4-8pm
The Falls at Dedman Gym |
| October 29 | President Turner's
Leadership Summit
5pm HT Forum |
| October 31 | Halloween! |
| November 4 | Election Day
Bid iDeas Fall Symposium
10:00-11:30AM HT Forum |

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SMU Totally Fictitious Fact:

The tunnels underneath campus have been used for hiding political fugitives, conducting bizarre occult rituals, and throwing wicked rave parties. Not necessarily in that order.

