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## Sidney Blumenthal Uses Former Right-Wing Foes To Attack Obama

Former journalist Sidney Blumenthal has been widely credited with coining the term "vast right-wing conspiracy" used by Hillary Clinton in 1998 to describe the alliance of conservative media, think tanks, and political operatives that sought to destroy the Clinton White House where he worked as a high-level aide. A decade later, and now acting as a senior campaign advisor to Senator Clinton, Blumenthal is exploiting that same right-wing network to attack and discredit Barack Obama. And he's not hesitating to use the same sort of guilt-by-association tactics that have been the hallmark of the political right dating back to the McCarthy era.

Almost every day over the past six months, I have been the recipient of an email that attacks Obama's character, political views, electability, and real or manufactured associations. The original source of many of these hit pieces are virulent and sometimes extreme right-wing websites, bloggers, and publications. But they aren't being emailed out from some fringe right-wing group that somehow managed to get my email address. Instead, it is Sidney Blumenthal who, on a regular basis, methodically dispatches these email mudballs to an influential list of opinion shapers -- including journalists, former Clinton administration officials, academics, policy entrepreneurs, and think tankers -- in what is an obvious attempt to create an echo chamber that reverberates among talk shows, columnists, and Democratic Party funders and activists. One of the recipients of the Blumenthal email blast, himself a Clinton supporter, forwards the material to me and perhaps to others.

These attacks sent out by Blumenthal, long known for his fierce and combative loyalty to the Clintons, draw on a wide variety of sources to spread his Obama-bashing. Some of the pieces are culled from the mainstream media and include some reasoned swipes at Obama's policy and political positions.

But, rather remarkably for such a self-professed liberal operative like Blumenthal, a staggering number of the anti-Obama attacks he circulates derive from highly-ideological and militant right-wing sources such as the misnamed *Accuracy in Media* (AIM), *The Weekly Standard*, *City Journal*, *The American Conservative*, and *The National Review*.

To cite just one recent example, Blumenthal circulated an article taken from the fervently hard-right AIM website on February 18 entitled, "Obama's Communist Mentor" by Cliff Kincaid. Kincaid is a right-wing writer and activist, a longtime critic of the United Nations, whose group, America's Survival, has been funded by foundations controlled by conservative financier Richard Mellon Scaife, the same millionaire who helped fund attacks on the Clintons during their White House years. Scaife also funds AIM, the right-wing media "watchdog" group.

The Kincaid article that Blumenthal circulated sought to discredit Obama by linking him to an African-American poet and writer whom Obama knew while he was in high school in Hawaii. That writer, Frank Marshall Davis, was, Kincaid wrote, a member of the Communist Party. Supported by no tangible evidence, Kincaid claimed that Obama considered his relationship to Davis to be "almost like a son." In his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama wrote about meeting, during his teenage years, a writer named "Frank" who "had some modest notoriety once" and with whom he occasionally discussed poetry and politics. From this snippet, Kincaid weaves an incredulous tale that turns Davis into Obama's "mentor."

Kincaid's piece had been previously circulating within the right-wing blogosphere, but Blumenthal sought to inject the story into more respectable opinion circles by amplifying it in his email blast.

In the same piece, Kincaid, expanding his guilt-by-association tactics, also wrote that Obama "came into contact with more far-left political forces," including former Weather Underground member William Ayers. Until a few weeks ago, Obama's tangential connection with Ayers -- whose 1960s anti-war terrorism occurred when Obama was in grade school -- was echoing among right-wing bloggers.

Some Clinton supporters who also knew about Ayers have been discreetly trying to catapult the story out of the right-wing sandbox into the wider mainstream media. On April 9, Fox News' Sean Hannity interviewed fellow right-winger Karl Rove, who raised the Ayers-Obama connection. The next day, ABC News reporter Jake Tapper wrote about Ayers in his *Political Punch* blog. The following week, on his radio show, Hannity suggested to his guest, George Stephanopoulos, that he ask Obama about his relationship with Ayers at the upcoming Philadelphia presidential debate. Stephanopoulos, who was Bill Clinton's press secretary, replied, "Well, I'm taking notes." The following night during the April 16 nationally televised Presidential debate, Stephanopoulos dutifully asked Obama about Ayers, who is now a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

One can only speculate how much influence Blumenthal did or did not have in elevating the Ayers story into the mainstream media and into the national political debate. What is certain is that Blumenthal sought to keep this classic red-baiting controversy alive.

Blumenthal's April 24 email dispatch featured a two-year old article by Sol Stern, published in *City Journal*, sponsored by the right-wing Manhattan Institute. The article, from the journal's Summer 2006 issue, doesn't mention Obama. Why would Blumenthal resurrect it now? The article, entitled "The Ed Schools' Latest--and Worst--Humbug," was, instead, a frontal attack on Ayers' views on educational theory and policy. Blumenthal obviously wasn't trying to offer enlightenment on educational policy or Obama's positions on school reform as much as he was presumably trying to keep Ayers' name, and his controversial past, in the public eye.

As a follow-up punch, Blumenthal again dipped directly into the "vast right wing conspiracy" by retrieving and circulating an article from the current issue of *National Review* -- the staunchly conservative opinion journal founded by William F. Buckley. The piece, titled "The Obama Way," was penned by Fred Siegel who, like Sol Stern, is a former 60s leftist who has moved to the opposite end of the political spectrum, serving at one point as a political advisor to Rudy Giuliani. Siegel's piece links Obama to corrupt Chicago machine politics, observing that "Blacks adapted to both the tribalism and the corrupt patronage politics" of Chicago's Democratic Party. In the process, he manages to throw in as many spurious ad hominem attacks on Obama as he can, calling him a "friend of race-baiters" and a "man who would lead our efforts against terrorism yet was friendly with Bill Ayers, the unrepentant 1960s terrorist."

When Blumenthal worked in the White House, a big thorn in Bill Clinton's side was the *Weekly Standard*, the right-wing magazine edited by William Kristol and owned by Rupert Murdoch. But in mid-February, Blumenthal's email attack featured an article, "Republicans Root for Obama," written by *Weekly Standard* executive editor and Fox News talking head Fred Barnes. That same month, Blumenthal also offered up a piece by Scott McConnell, titled "Untested Savior," that appeared in *The American Conservative* (a magazine founded by Pat Buchanan) claiming that Obama "would probably lead them [Democrats] to disaster in November."

When Blumenthal isn't relying directly on anti-Obama smears from the extreme right, he's pumping up more traditionally sourced material, from the *Washington Post*, *New Republic*, and other publications, to question and damage Obama's character and electability. On several occasions, Blumenthal has circulated articles from the *Chicago Sun Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* about Obama's ties to developer Tony Rezko, a relationship Obama has said he regrets. In one email, Blumenthal wrote: "The record on Obama's fabled 'judgement'? So how would he conduct himself in those promised summits without preconditions with Ahmadinejad, Kim Jong Il, Chavez, Castro, and Assad? Let's look at how he did with Tony Rezko."

Earlier this year, one theme pushed by Clinton supporters and buoyed by Blumenthal's efforts, was that Obama's appeal was similar to that of a messianic cult leader. Obama's capacity to inspire people was reframed as a kind of malevolent force, as though his followers would somehow willingly drink poisoned Kool-Aid if Obama so demanded. In his February 7 *Time* magazine column, "Inspiration vs. Substance," writer Joe Klein, who, like Blumenthal, worked on the Boston alternative paper, *The Real Paper*, in the 1970s, wrote: "There was something just a wee bit creepy about the mass messianism -- 'We are the ones we've been waiting for' -- of the Super Tuesday speech and the recent turn of the Obama campaign." That same morning, Blumenthal sent the Klein column to his email list. Later that day, in his *Political Punch* blog, ABC News reporter Jake Tapper wrote, "The Holy Season of Lent is upon us. Can Obama worshippers try to give up their Helter-Skelter cultish qualities for a few weeks?" (*Update*: In response to OffTheBus, Tapper is categorical in denying that he in any way relied upon Blumenthal or was influenced by Blumenthal in the production or in the writing of this story or his reports on William Ayers or the Obama "cult")

The following day, in the *Los Angeles Times*, columnist Joel Stein wrote: "Obamaphilia has gotten creepy. What the Cult of Obama doesn't realize is that he is a politician."

After this idea had bounced around the media echo chamber for a few days, the liberal watchdog group Media Matters for America, run by David Brock, posted a summary on February 8 of the sudden outbreak of "cult" references about Obama. It was headlined: "Media figures call Obama supporters' behavior 'creepy,' compare them to Hare Krishna and Manson followers." The next day, Blumenthal sent the Media Matters piece to his email list. A few days later, the *New York Times*' Paul Krugman, a Clinton supporter, weighed in with a column, "Hate Springs Eternal," in which he wrote, "I'm not the first to point out that the Obama campaign seems dangerously close to a cult of personality." Nor would he be the last. Four days later, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, an arch conservative, penned a column entitled, "The Audacity of Selling Hope" in which he simply quoted Klein, Tapper, Stein, and Krugman.

One of Blumenthal's associates scoffs at the notion that there's anything vaguely conspiratorial about these emails and that a number of the people on the list-serve are also the authors of the pieces he sends out. "They're just Sid's friends," he told me. This is, in fact, the very definition of an echo chamber. People in the opinion-shaping business also seek to influence other opinion-makers, who then bounce their ideas through their overlapping outlets -- newspapers, magazines, talk shows, websites, blogs, and social and political fundraising circles. The connections are so incestuous that it's hard to untangle where the "feedback loop" begins and ends.

Among those whose names show up as recipients of Blumenthal's emails are writers and journalists Craig Unger, Edward Jay Epstein, Thomas Edsall (Politics Editor of the *Huffington Post*), Joe Conason, Gene Lyons (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette columnist and author of *The Hunting of the President: The Ten Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton*), John Judis, Eric Alterman, Christine Ockrent, David Brock, Reza Aslan, Harold Evans, and Josh Marshall; academics and think tankers Todd Gitlin (Columbia U sociologist), Karen Greenberg (NYU law school), Sean Wilentz (Princeton historian), Michael Lind, William M. Drozdiak, and Richard Parker; and former Clinton administration officials John Ritch, James Rubin, Derek Shearer, and Joe Wilson.

Not all of Blumenthal's recipients, or those who, like me, receive the emails second-hand, are Clinton supporters.

Before and after his service in the Clinton White House, Blumenthal wrote for the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, *Washington Post*, *the Guardian*, and *Salon*, where he was often accused of engaging in partisan journalism.

In the Clinton administration, Blumenthal was primarily a behind-the-scenes strategist, but often found himself speaking in front of the cameras and on the record. In both roles, he was known as a committed Clintonista who played hardball. He's demonstrated those same traits since joining Hillary's campaign as a senior advisor last November.

Presidential politics can get down and dirty, and Blumenthal is a master at the game. Some Obama supporters might even wish that his campaign would resort to similar tactics. If it did, there would be no shortage of anti-Hillary screeds by the "vast right-wing conspiracy" activists and writers, such as surfacing the photo of Rev. Jeremiah Wright with Bill Clinton at a prayer breakfast at the White House in 1998, invited by the president in the midst of his Lewinsky scandal. Indeed, the right-wingers probably hate Hillary more than they dislike Obama. But so far the Obama camp has avoided slinging the right-wing mud, at least with any of the enthusiasm and diligence demonstrated by Sid Blumenthal.