



William J. Clinton Presidential History Project

Briefing Materials

Sidney Blumenthal

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL TIMELINE

Prepared by Nitu Bagchi

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- 1969** Sidney Blumenthal completes his B.A. from Brandeis University. (Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Clinton Presidency*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 27)
- Blumenthal joins *Boston After Dark*, a weekly Boston newspaper. (Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 205)
- 1972** Blumenthal joins *The Real Paper*, a newspaper originally formed to protest the merger of the Cambridge *Phoenix* with *Boston After Dark*. Blumenthal's editor, Martin Linsky, proves to be a "superb guide" for Blumenthal's increased focus on Massachusetts politics. (Blumenthal, pp. 205-206)
- 1982** Blumenthal is an advisor to candidate Michael Dukakis in the Massachusetts gubernatorial campaign. (Blumenthal, p. 208)
- 1983** Blumenthal joins *The New Republic* to cover the 1984 presidential campaign. He becomes the magazine's national political correspondent. (Blumenthal, p. 209)
- 1984** After the first session of the Democratic National Convention, Blumenthal meets Katherine Graham, President of *The Washington Post*, and discusses the Convention. A week later, Blumenthal is offered a job at *The Washington Post* and accepts the offer. (Blumenthal, pp. 212-214)
- 1987** Blumenthal meets Bill and Hillary Clinton at Renaissance Weekend, a conference on political, cultural and religious subjects, in South Carolina. They talk about his national ambitions and the future of the Democratic Party. (Blumenthal, pp. 5-6)
- 1990** Rick Hertzberg rejoins *The New Republic* as Editor and offers Blumenthal a job. Blumenthal accepts the position. (Blumenthal, p. 218)
- 1992** Blumenthal joins *The New Yorker*, replacing Elizabeth Drew as its Washington correspondent. It is reported that Blumenthal will write the "Letter From Washington" feature and contribute national political reports. (*The Washington Post*, 08/25/1992)
- 1993**
- January* Blumenthal meets Tony Blair, a member of the British Labor Party, at a luncheon in Washington. They discuss why and how Clinton won office. Blair draws analogies between his own party and Clinton's politics. Blumenthal says that

Blair could “barely believe that someone like Clinton had been elected.”
(Blumenthal, p. 301)

- June* It is reported that the Clintons are hosting a series of private dinner parties with people from Washington’s political, media and press establishments, as well as some old friends. Blumenthal is among the guests who are said to have attended these dinners. (*The Washington Post*, 06/24/1993)
- 1994** Reports state that Blumenthal will no longer be writing the “Letter From Washington” feature for *The New Yorker*. He continues as a political writer for the magazine. There are speculations that Blumenthal’s pro-Clinton articles are the reason for this change. Blumenthal says his removal is a direct result of his refusal to write stories about the Whitewater scandals. (*The Boston Globe*, 08/12/1994; Blumenthal, p. 227)
- 1996**
- January* Blumenthal and Clinton discuss how to communicate a “lasting message” about an “activist government and Democratic policies” in the upcoming State of the Union address. Blumenthal suggests that Clinton’s vision can be summed up in one phrase: “One America.” He argues that this phrase will capture Clinton’s vision of the federal government leading a unified but diverse population by serving everyone’s needs. (Blumenthal, pp. 149-150)
- March* In the midst of the Whitewater scandals, Blumenthal arranges a luncheon for Hillary Clinton in New York where she meets with some editors and writers from magazines and book-publishing houses. Later the same day, she delivers a speech on women’s rights and economic development at the Council on Foreign Relations. Blumenthal says that this foray “was the beginning of her involvement in New York on her own, a step on the road that led her eventually to decide to run for the Senate there.” (Blumenthal, pp. 176-177)
- April* Tony Blair begins his three-day visit to the U.S. The visit starts with a cocktail party at Blumenthal’s house. Among the guests are senior members of the Clinton Administration as well as Hillary Clinton. The next day, Blair meets with President Clinton. (*The Independent*-London, 04/10/1996; *The Guardian*-London, 04/13/1996; Blumenthal, p. 306)
- October* Blumenthal’s play, “The Town,” begins performances at Harvard University’s Institute of Politics. The play has already been staged in Los Angeles. The play is about the Washington press corps. In it, Blumenthal says he has “compressed the entire history of the Clinton era as seen through the midlife anxieties of the White House press corps.” His characters attempt to resolve their crises by ignoring national news and world affairs, focusing instead on countless scandals involving Scamper, the White House dog. It shows a press corps where a “scandal is

essential to career promotion.” (*The Boston Globe*, 10/02/1996; *The Boston Herald*, 10/27/1996)

November Blumenthal writes that the lesson of the 1996 election may be that there are two different national consensuses. “The returns suggest that the Democratic Party, the Northern party, has emerged as the dominant presidential party, and the Republican Party, the Southern-centered party, has become the congressional party.” Blumenthal says the conclusion may be that “the more entrenched the Republican Party becomes as a congressional party, the more difficult it will be for a Republican to be elected president.” He opines that Clinton should be able to exploit the fissures in the Republican Party for progress in his second term. (*The Denver Post*, 11/17/1996)

1997

January Clinton asks Blumenthal to join his White House as an Assistant to the President. He also discusses his Second Inaugural address. Blumenthal advises Clinton to focus on the millennial themes which he had campaigned on. (Blumenthal, pp. 189-190)

June It is reported that Blumenthal will join the Clinton White House as Assistant to the President for Communications. Blumenthal will be writing major speeches, have input in foreign policy affairs and help develop themes for the second term while working under Communications Director Ann Lewis. (Levy, p. 27; *The Washington Post*, 06/16/1997, 06/17/1997)

August Conservative journalist Matt Drudge publishes a report alleging that Blumenthal has “a spousal abuse past that has been effectively covered up.” The report confronts Blumenthal on his first day at the White House. Blumenthal says he plans to sue Matt Drudge and America Online for the allegations. Drudge eventually retracts the story, which he admits was “based on two sources who clearly were operating from a political motivation.” (*The Washington Post*, 08/12/1997)

Blumenthal sues Drudge on the grounds that he made no attempt to check the accuracy of the facts before publishing his report on Blumenthal. The suit seeks \$10 million in compensatory damages and \$20 million in punitive damages. According to White House Press Secretary Joseph Lockhart, Blumenthal discussed his plans to sue Drudge with both Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, who said they would support his decision. (*The New York Times*, 08/26/1997; *The Washington Post*, 08/29/1997)

October Blumenthal sends Clinton a memorandum suggesting that the One America initiative should have three focal points: acting “swiftly and effectively on discrimination issues that could be addressed by laws”; acting on “issues of separation, exclusion and isolation on a multi-issue basis”; and “framing the

American identity so that its multicultural sources are understood as intrinsic in, not separate from, or outweighing, the whole.” Clinton begins holding town hall meetings on the One America initiative in December. (Blumenthal, p. 277)

Drudge’s attorney Manuel Klausner alleges that the Clinton Administration is trying to “silence” a “free and independent press.” Blumenthal’s attorney William McDaniel retorts that the case is not connected with the Administration. Deputy Press Secretary Barry Toiv says it was solely Blumenthal’s decision to sue and that he informed Clinton and Gore “as a courtesy.” (*The Washington Post*, 10/16/1997)

November The Senate Judiciary Committee refuses to confirm the appointment of Bill Lann Lee as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. Blumenthal suggests that Lee should be named as an interim appointment. He is appointed in December and stays in the position till the end of Clinton’s term. (Blumenthal, p. 263)

1998

January It is reported that Blumenthal and Assistant to the President and Counselor to the President Paul Begala have played a prominent role in crafting the State of the Union message. The address is expected to combine Clinton’s centrism with more traditional Democratic priorities. Aides also credit Blumenthal for Clinton using the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards to push for government and business working together to help displaced workers. (*The Boston Globe*, 01/03/1998)

Clinton holds his annual “thinkers” dinner to discuss ideas for his forthcoming State of the Union speech. Guests include political scientist William Galston, historian Albert Camrillo, journalist Michael Lind and philosopher Richard Rorty. Blumenthal lays out the themes for the evening and serves as the moderator. The themes are nationalism and progressivism, values, family policy and multiculturalism, and globalization and interdependence. The discussion is about the “big ideas” and not just about specific policies. (*The Guardian*-London, 01/19/1998; Blumenthal, pp. 314-317)

Hillary Clinton appears on the *Today Show*. Blumenthal helps her prepare for the appearance. He suggests that she should highlight that the question is whether the President had tried to “suborn perjury.” She should say that “there are professional forces at work whose only purpose is to sow division by creating scandal.” (Blumenthal, pp. 373-374)

February Blumenthal hosts a dinner for British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other British and American policymakers. He also helps organize Blair’s visit to the U.S. including briefing the British team on the current political situation, helping write a joint radio address on Iraq, and preparing Blair for his joint press conference with Clinton. (Blumenthal, p. 395)

A White House dinner is held for Blair. Guests include singers, musicians and politicians. Blumenthal helps Clinton's social secretary in compiling the guest list. (*The Washington Post*, 02/06/1998; Blumenthal, p. 395)

Independent Counsel Kenneth W. Starr subpoenas Blumenthal, former U.S. Secretary of Commerce Michael Kantor, and Terry Lenzner, head of Investigative Group International, a private investigating firm, to appear before a grand jury investigating Clinton's relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky. The subpoena also demands that Blumenthal turn over any documents he has regarding Starr's staff and any contacts Blumenthal may have had with the media regarding Starr's office. Blumenthal says this is "an outrageous attempt to intimidate public opinion and to silence all reporting that might be skeptical or critical of Ken Starr and his methods." (*The Washington Post*, 02/24/1998; *The New York Times*, 02/24/1998; Blumenthal, pp. 408-410)

There are reports that the President will invoke executive privilege to protect top aides, including Blumenthal, from testifying about internal White House discussions about the Lewinsky investigation. The White House will argue that the President's discussions with his advisors are confidential and disclosing them would prevent him from receiving proper advice in the future. (*The New York Times*, 02/24/1998)

April

Clinton and other world leaders meet at the Summit of the Americas, a gathering of thirty-four heads of state. They agree to sign an accord endorsing the creation of a new position, Special Press Advocate, at the Organization of American States. The Press Advocate will have the authority to bring cases of intimidation against journalists in Latin American countries before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. Blumenthal says, "There are still restrictions [on the press] in Latin America, and there are still crimes of impunity and intimidation that go completely unpunished. We hope this new position will be the beginning of real change." (*The Washington Post*, 04/19/1998; Blumenthal, p. 442)

U.S. District Judge Paul L. Friedman rules that America Online and other Internet services, unlike traditional publishers, are immune from civil suits stemming from the editorial content they carry. The judge states that AOL is only a conduit of information and not publishers of material. This means that AOL is no longer a defendant in the lawsuit filed jointly against the company and Matt Drudge. Jo Marsh, Blumenthal's lawyer, says that the decision will be appealed. (*The Washington Post*, 04/23/1998)

May

Chief U.S. District Judge Norma Holloway Johnson rules against using executive privilege to block prosecutors from questioning senior aides. Johnson claims that Starr's need to collect evidence in his obstruction of justice probe outweighs Clinton's interest in preserving the confidentiality of White House discussions.

This means that Blumenthal can no longer claim executive privilege and withhold his private conversations from the grand jury. (*The Washington Post*, 05/06/1998)

Blumenthal travels to Berlin with the President. During the visit, he meets with Gerhard Schroeder, leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party. They discuss the “potential role of an SDP chancellor in the international Third-Way Progressive Governance process.” Blumenthal opines that if Schroeder becomes chancellor in the September elections, it “would mark a further ratification of Clinton’s brand of center-left politics in the West.” (Blumenthal, pp. 446-447)

June Blumenthal testifies before the grand jury. Blumenthal’s lawyer, William McDaniel, says that most of the time was spent on questions such as, “Up there at the White House, do they talk about us as prosecutors?” and, “Up there at the White House, do you talk about Starr’s investigation?” McDaniel says that this is “a further example of what appears to be the obsessive view these people have about what other people think of them.” (*The Washington Post*, 06/05/1998)

Blumenthal makes his final appearance before the grand jury. After his testimony, he tells reporters, “What I told the grand jury under oath supports completely what the President has told the American people and is contrary to any charge that the President has done anything wrong.” He also says that he has had private conversations with Mrs. Clinton about the Lewinsky case and that she told him the “accusations will collapse eventually of their own insubstantiality.” (*The Washington Post*, 06/26/1998)

July Hillary Clinton presides over what is expected to be the first of several meetings at the White House at which prominent Democratic thinkers gather to find common ground on policy issues. The purpose of the meeting is to engage the participants in deeper philosophical debate while attempting to bridge the gap between traditional Democrats and third-way Democrats. Blumenthal, who organizes the meeting, says, “This was a step in the long-term development of a new progressive politics in America that has been begun by the President and it reflects that the center of political and intellectual vitality lies here in what we call ‘the Third Way’.” (*The New York Times*, 07/18/1998)

August Blumenthal works on the speech that Clinton will make after his deposition in the Lewinsky case. He works on the assumption that Clinton will deny a relationship with Lewinsky. He also writes an alternative version in case of a change of plans. He keeps in constant contact with Mrs. Clinton and talks to her about the politics of the case. (Blumenthal, p. 461)

Clinton gives a national address on his relationship with Lewinsky. It is reported that there was deep division among his staff about what the tone of the speech should be. Though the product is considered Clinton’s own, it is said that Blumenthal advised the President to take the offensive against Kenneth Starr for

the roaming nature of his investigation. Blumenthal, in Europe during the speech, faxes in his suggestions to the President. (*The Washington Post*, 08/19/1998)

Blumenthal says his trip to Europe has shown him that continental leaders feel a shared need to cope with the forces of globalization and the problems it can cause in postindustrial democracies. He says leaders “want to give individuals the ability to master their environment rather than be at the mercy of it. Otherwise, you will end up with the politics of fear, resentment and division that can endanger the health of our societies.” Blumenthal is to organize a conference in New York which will bring together President Clinton and some European prime ministers such as Britain’s Tony Blair, France’s Lionel Jospin and Italy’s Romano Prodi, for a discussion on forging common policy perspectives. (*The Washington Post*, 08/20/1998)

September Clinton delivers a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York on global economic stabilization. Blumenthal arranges this speech as a response to the economic crisis in Asia. He argues that the President should make it clear “that the management of the economy is a day-to-day matter” and that global economic stabilization is crucial for economic stability in the U.S. (Blumenthal, pp. 474-476)

An online magazine, *Salon*, reveals that House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry J. Hyde (R-IL) had an affair with a married woman in the 1960s. Republicans insist that the story was leaked to the press by staffers at the White House, pointing specifically to Blumenthal. Both Blumenthal and White House Press Secretary Michael McCurry deny any involvement. It is confirmed that the source was a friend of the man whose ex-wife Hyde was involved with. (*The Washington Post*, 09/17/1998, 09/18/1998)

1999

January The House prosecution team proposes three witnesses for the coming impeachment trial: Blumenthal, Monica Lewinsky and Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., a close friend of President Clinton’s. The House team asserts that Blumenthal’s testimony about his conversation with the President shows obstruction of justice because the President knew Blumenthal would be subpoenaed before the grand jury and, therefore, deliberately lied to him so that Blumenthal could repeat the false story before the grand jury. (*The Washington Post*, 01/27/1999)

The Senate adopts a Republican proposal to videotape depositions by Blumenthal, Lewinsky and Jordan. These depositions will then be shown in the Senate. The lengths of the depositions are not yet determined. It is reported that Blumenthal is to be questioned by Rep. James Rogan (R-CA). (*The Washington Post*, 01/29/1999; *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 01/29/1999)

February Blumenthal gives his videotaped testimony to the House prosecutors with Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and John Edwards (D-NC) in the room. It is reported that the session lasted about three hours and included questions about Blumenthal's conversation with Clinton on January 21st, 1998, and about a White House smear campaign against the Office of the Independent Counsel. Blumenthal is said to have stated that he did not spread rumors against the OIC or spread rumors that Lewinsky was a "stalker." (*The Washington Post*, 02/04/1999; *The New York Times*, 02/03/1999, 02/06/1999)

Journalist Christopher Hitchens says that at a lunch in March 1998, Blumenthal referred to Lewinsky as a "stalker" multiple times, contradicting his grand jury testimony that he did not spread rumors about Lewinsky. In an affidavit, he says, "Mr. Blumenthal advised us that this version of the facts was not generally understood" about the relationship between Clinton and Lewinsky. Blumenthal says, "My testimony to the Senate was truthful. If someone is saying it's not, they are mistaken." (*The Washington Post*, 02/07/1999)

April Blumenthal says that the ongoing NATO air campaign against Yugoslav targets has solidified the relationship between Clinton and Blair. He notes that this friendship has also made the NATO alliance extremely cohesive and much more effective than it was in dealing with Bosnia in 1995. The common support which Clinton and Blair give each other and to other European leaders, says Blumenthal, has made it easier to demonstrate a common front against Milosevic with minimal criticism from political foes. (*The Washington Post*, 04/09/1999)

October Clinton plans to make a live Internet appearance in November where he will field questions online and viewers can watch the responses on video. This is the first live Internet appearance by a president and, according to Blumenthal, "He was instantly enthusiastic." (*The Washington Post*, 10/30/1999)

November An international conference of the Third Way movement entitled Progressive Governance in the Twenty-first Century is held in Italy. The conference includes Clinton, Blair and a large number of leaders from European states. The main theme of the conference is globalization. Referring to the necessity of the conference, Blumenthal says, "We are in the new economy, whether we like it or not. What is the alternative? Close your economy? Reflate? Nobody among these center-left leaders is doing that because everybody knows it leads straight to disaster." (*The New York Times*, 11/20/1999, 11/21/1999; Blumenthal, p. 666)

2000

January Clinton delivers the last State of the Union address of his presidency. Blumenthal says he will be "laying out an agenda for the decade, an agenda that understands the new realities, that's visionary and practical. They may not all be reached this year, but they will be reached." (*Plain Dealer-Cleveland*, 01/27/2000)

February Blumenthal joins a small group of advisors to help Hillary Clinton prepare her speech formally announcing her intention to run for the Senate from New York. President Clinton attends the practice session as well. (Blumenthal, pp. 686-688)

Hillary Clinton announces her candidacy for the United States Senate, calling herself a “new Democrat.” Blumenthal is among the guests attending the event. (*The New York Times*, 02/06/2000)

March Blumenthal serves as “editor of a collection of articles solicited from scientists, economists, historians and other thinkers addressed to what they thought were the problems of the future.” (Blumenthal, p. 742)

May The House Government Reform Committee continues its investigations into missing White House emails that should have been examined with regard to past subpoenas. Blumenthal says that his emails were deleted by “an early version of the Love Bug.” (*The Washington Post*, 05/08/2000)

June Another Third Way meeting is held in Berlin. Blumenthal works with participants from other countries to prepare a joint communiqué “stating the democratic principles of the Third Way, and advocating a comprehensive global program embracing education, health care, the alleviation of poverty,” and other Third Way ideals. Together these ideals will combine to form “a new international social compact.” The communiqué is signed by all the participants in the conference. (Blumenthal, pp. 673-675)

2001

May Blumenthal drops the suit against Drudge. Blumenthal says the suit “gave Drudge the oxygen of publicity he thrived on.” (Blumenthal, pp. 784-785)

2004

March Blumenthal joins *Salon* as part of its newly created Washington bureau. (*National Journal*, 03/20/2004)

TIMELINES

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- John F. Harris, "Latest Additions to Staff May Add Spice to White House Stew," *The Washington Post*, 06/29/1997.
- Carl M. Cannon, "Hillary's Brain," *The Weekly Standard*, 02/23/1998.
- Michael Powell, "Mud About You: Sidney Blumenthal, Rumor-Monger? Not if He Has Anything to Say About It," *The Washington Post*, 09/25/1998.

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- Martin Walker, "The Third Way International," *New Statesman*, 03/27/1998.
- David Corn, "Seeking Party Central," *The Nation*, 08/10/1998.
- Jonathan Chait, "The Slippery Center," *The New Republic*, 11/16/1998.

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- Brian McGrory, "Daily Mission: Trying to Save the Clinton Presidency," *The Boston Globe*, 02/11/1998.
- Howard Kurtz, "Prosecutor Lobs a Grenade: Blumenthal's Subpoena Sends Press Corps a Shock," *The Washington Post*, 02/25/1998.
- Lloyd Grove, "A Parting of Ways: Chris Hitchens and Sidney Blumenthal," *The Washington Post*, 02/08/1999.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL SUGGESTED TOPICS

Prepared by Nitu Bagchi

Miller Center, University of Virginia, 2/13/2006

Origins of Relationship with Clinton

- When did you first meet Bill Clinton? What were your early impressions of him?
- How often did you interact with Clinton before you joined the White House? What were the occasions for these interactions?
- Discuss how your relationship with the Clintons developed before you joined the White House Staff.
- Discuss the private dinners hosted by the Clintons in their first few months at the White House. What was the purpose of these dinners?

Covering the Clinton White House

- Discuss your interactions with President Clinton during the 1992 Presidential campaign. How often did you see him?
- In covering the first term of the Clinton Presidency, how often were you at the White House?
- Describe your relationship with Tony Blair before you joined the Clinton Administration. In what venues did you meet with him? Discuss his relationship with the President while still leader of the Opposition.
- Evaluate the relationship between Clinton and the press during his first term. Discuss how your favorable treatment of him in your writing was received by the rest of the Washington press corps.

Assistant to the President for Communications

- Discuss your appointment as Assistant to the President for Communications. Did you have any discussions with President Clinton about your portfolio in this position?
- Characterize your role and responsibilities as Assistant to the President for Communications. What types of issues occupied most of your time?
- How was the Communications Office organized during your tenure?
- What role did you play in setting White House communications strategy? Discuss your interactions with the press during your tenure.
- Describe your role as a senior advisor to the President. How often would you talk to the President? What are the issues on which he consulted you?
- Discuss your relationship with key members of the White House Staff. With whom did you work most closely and on what issues? Describe any differences you may have noticed in White House operations under Chiefs of Staff Bowles and Podesta.
- Describe your relationship with Hillary Clinton. What role did you play in her 2000 Senate campaign?
- Discuss the organization and the importance of the “thinkers” dinners at the White House.
- Discuss your involvement in formulating the second term agenda. Comment on your role in crafting the 1998 State of the Union address. To what extent was speech-writing a part of your job description?

- Discuss the Administration's commitment to pursuing a "Third Way" political agenda. Describe the Third Way conferences and their impact on policy. What role did you play in organizing the Third Way conferences and setting the agenda?
- Discuss Clinton's relationship with Tony Blair.
- To what extent was the President affected by the Lewinsky case? Did it change your relationship with the President? How did it impact Clinton's second term?

The Clinton Presidency in Retrospect

- Evaluate Clinton as a public leader, a legislative leader and a party leader.
- What effect has the Clinton presidency had on the Democratic Party?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton presidency?
- Assess Clinton's legacy on Third Way politics in America and around the world.
- What personal traits of Clinton made it possible for him to withstand the pressures of 1998-1999? What parts of his personality and temperament made him an especially effective president? Which of his traits contributed to his problems as president?
- What features of the Clinton presidency were missed or misunderstood by the press? How should the Clinton presidency be viewed by history?