

**“Grassy Knoll” Sid:
Hillary’s Personal Conspiracy Theorist**

By Max Holland

The controversy over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s extant and missing emails briefly put long-time Clinton advisor Sidney Blumenthal back in the news, with more surely to come after June 16. That is the day when Blumenthal is scheduled to testify before the [House Select Committee on Benghazi](#), which is investigating the deaths of US ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans on 11 September 2012. It turns out that Blumenthal, Hillary’s “[Svengali-like confidant since the 1990s](#),” advised the secretary on Libya.

Decades have passed since Andrew Sullivan rightly termed Blumenthal “the most pro-Clinton writer on the planet,” capable of making Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s Kennedy-worship look downright tame by comparison. And it has been many years since Blumenthal’s less savory turn as a White House aide, speechwriter, in-house intellectual, press corps whisperer, and compiler of dossiers on aggressive reporters during the Bill Clinton’s second term. Consequently, news organizations felt compelled to remind their audiences of Blumenthal’s résumé: as NPR’s Ron Elving put it, “[Who Is Clinton Confidant Sidney Blumenthal?](#)”

Oddly, one salient fact was always missing from these profiles. While they often noted (as did the [National Review](#) and [Bloomberg](#)) that Blumenthal’s penchant for conspiracy theories earned him the nickname “[Grassy Knoll](#)” inside the White House, the fact is Blumenthal’s moniker is not figurative, but literal. Four decades ago, Blumenthal was not only in league with JFK assassination buffs who claimed shots were fired from the proverbial grassy knoll—he also argued earnestly that “the reason the hopes of the ‘60s were not realized was because a group of people at the top made certain they were dashed.”^[1]

The previous sentence comes from [Government By Gunplay](#), a 1976 paperback book edited by Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian—Yazijian being one of the founding members of what was called the [Assassination Investigation Bureau](#) (AIB), then headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

By the time *Government By Gunplay* was published, the [Warren Report](#), fairly or not, had been in disrepute for a decade. Yet Jim Garrison's [unwarranted persecution](#) of New Orleans businessman [Clay Shaw](#) in the late '60s had put the motives and methods of the Warren Commission *critics* into disrepute too. Garrison, moreover, had left the first wave of researchers into President Kennedy's assassination dispirited, disconsolate, and bitterly divided—a split that persists to this day. Several prominent members of the research community, notably Sylvia Meagher and David Lifton, recognized early on that Garrison was a mercurial demagogue and charlatan. But others who had flocked to his side, most prominently [Mark Lane](#) and Ralph Schoenman, embraced the New Orleans district attorney's [ultimate fantasy](#) of a *coup d'etat* organized by the military-industrial complex in collusion with the Central Intelligence Agency.

As a result of this split, the years immediately following Shaw's 1969 acquittal were barren and devoid of progress in "the case." But then came Watergate and its unraveling in 1973. In the new political climate that emerged, a conspiracy at the highest levels of government suddenly did not seem far-fetched after all. Among several grass-roots groups, none proved more energetic than a small group of Boston-area activists, some of whom had been involved (most notably [Carl Oglesby](#)) in the '60s anti-war movement.^[2]

Friends jocularly referred to them as the "Grassy Knoll Debating Society." But requests for their well-honed lecture on the assassination flooded into the Cambridge apartment that served as headquarters, and soon these activists had a weekly radio show over WBUR, Boston University's FM station. When WBUR's news director suggested a name for the program, the Assassination Information Bureau, it stuck. Over the next three years

[this] dedicated and proselytizing group of Kennedy assassination buffs would . . . spread their gospel of conspiracy and government cover-up in a presentation entitled "Who Killed JFK?" to about 600 audiences in over 45 states. The lecture featured "a provocative verbal and visual presentation" . . . [and] the climax of the meeting was always a showing of the Zapruder film.^[3]

Government By Gunplay was the AIB's first and only book, meant to distill the case for the average citizen thirsting for information. Lecture attendees could purchase an illicit copy of the Zapruder film and some slides for \$30, but that wasn't regarded as sufficient; nor were the lectures themselves, styled after anti-Vietnam war teach-ins and designed to evoke the same kind of politico-emotional commitment. AIB wanted to provide a survey of the basic arguments for conspiracy not only in the JFK assassination, but also in the shootings of Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, and George Wallace, plus "vital background articles on Watergate and organized crime."^[4]

Blumenthal was not an AIB founding member, but he was a 27-year-old journalist in the Boston area with a growing reputation for literate and like-minded presentations. A Chicago native and 1969 graduate of Brandeis University, Blumenthal wrote a political

column for the local alternative weekly, the Boston *Phoenix*, and had published articles in outlets ranging from *The Progressive* (a left-wing monthly) to *[MORE]* magazine (a journalism review) to *Oui* (a skin magazine affiliated with *Playboy*). *Government by Gunplay* would bear Blumenthal's editorial imprint more than anyone's. He wrote the foreword, the epilogue, and two chapters (one on the FBI's COINTELPRO plan against the Black Panthers, and another on the Rockefeller Commission).

The misrepresentations, distortions, and falsehoods that Blumenthal either wrote or associated himself with are so numerous and stupendous they defy listing. Apart from its vulgar Marxist critique (or what Blumenthal called "the tangled web of America's ruling class"), the flavor and accuracy of the book can be gleaned from the following:

- Lee Harvey Oswald, "supposedly involved" with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, was "almost certainly a United States intelligence operative."
- Five shots were fired in Dealey Plaza within a span of 6.8 seconds by at least three different gunmen; all but the third shot struck President Kennedy. The first and fifth shots came—of course—from the grassy knoll.
- The Warren Commission's single-bullet theory—"incredible on its face"—was concocted expressly to close the door on a conspiratorial explanation.
- Oswald "could not have acted alone in the shooting, if he acted in it at all."
- The [Warren Commission's final report](#) was a "whitewash," a "willful and basically successful effort . . . to obstruct justice and suppress the truth."^[5]

Somewhat disingenuously, Blumenthal observes in the foreword that "History itself, of course, is not a conspiracy. There are, however, conspiracies in history." Yet *Government By Gunplay* is nothing if not a testament to what Richard Hofstadter called the "[paranoid style](#)." The book alleges a vast conspiracy that explains all the '60s assassinations and Watergate, these events being the visible evidence of a Manichean struggle for power fought by the appendages of an unaccountable, unseen power elite. Oliver Stone at his worst would be hard pressed to do this conspiracy justice on the big screen.

There is no question but that the AIB's lectures, conferences, petitions, lobbying, and publications, bolstered by the efforts of like-minded individuals and groups, had a tangible and exhilarating outcome. The resurgence of public interest spearheaded by the AIB (and others) culminated in the creation of the [House Select Committee on Assassinations](#) in late 1976. Whether that re-investigation was a good or bad thing is a highly debatable proposition. The House panel made available, via the taking of

testimony and publication of documents, information that could have contributed mightily to public understanding; but its conclusion that Kennedy was “[probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy](#),” which rested entirely on bogus audio evidence, was overwhelmingly harmful.

Few journalists who started out in their 20s did not commit youthful indiscretions that they would prefer forgotten. Still, there is no indication that Blumenthal retracted or ever distanced himself from the rampant paranoia and crude, Soviet-style propaganda evident in *Government By Gunplay*. (Change the names of the editors, contributors, and publisher, and *Government By Gunplay* is almost indistinguishable from the slew of Soviet disinformation tracts about the assassination published from the 1960s to the 1980s, save that it is more thoughtful and informed, and much better written). Blumenthal’s penchant for spinning conspiracy theories has persisted, the only difference being they seem to have become more sophisticated.^[6]

When the press cornered Hillary Clinton on May 19 and asked her about the Blumenthal emails about Libya—emails which we probably only know about because Blumenthal’s account was hacked in 2013—the former secretary of state replied testily,

“I have many, many old friends . . . and he’s been a friend of mine for a long time. He’s sent me unsolicited emails that I have passed on in some instances and that’s just part of the give and take. When you are in the public eye you have to work to make sure you are not in the bubble, and I am going to work to keep talking to old friends, whoever they are.”^[7]

The part about needing to get outside the bubble is true enough. Cabinet secretaries, not to mention senators, presidents, and candidates for president, ought to listen to people outside their inner circle and the sycophants seeking entry into it.

But what does it say about Hillary’s judgment that her objective outside voice on Libya, a suffering nation in upheaval, was Grassy Knoll Sid?

[1] According to a 1998 *Baltimore Sun* article, top White House aide Rahm Emanuel dubbed Blumenthal “G.K.” (for Grassy Knoll) because of Blumenthal’s pronounced tendency to see hidden plots behind every leaked news story or adverse development in the unfolding Whitewater story. Carl M. Cannon, “[‘Far-Right Conspiracy’ a Gift From Blumenthal](#),” *Baltimore Sun*, 15 February 1998.

[2] David Greenberg, “[Dallas Through the Looking Glass](#),” *Slate*, 20 November 2003; “A Farewell,” *Clandestine America*, Washington Newsletter of the Assassination Information Bureau, Vol. 3, No. 3, Nov-Dec 1979/Jan-Feb 1980. The AIB’s founder was [Bob Katz](#), who was soon joined by David Williams, Harvey Yazijian, and then Oglesby.

[3] Richard B. Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film: Mr. Zapruder's Home Movie and the Murder of President Kennedy* (Danvers, MA: Yeoman Press, 2005), 197-198; John Kifner, "[Critics of Warren Report Meet to Ask New Study](#)," *New York Times*, 3 February 1975. The film shown at AIB lectures was a bootleg copy since Time Inc. still owned all rights and was not permitting it to be shown in public.

[4] AIB, Selected Bibliography, February 1977.

[5] Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian, eds., *Government By Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracy Theories from Dallas to Today* (New York: New American Library, 1976), 6-9, 10, 255, 256, 257, 263.

[Philip Agee](#), a disgraced former CIA officer who was effectively functioning as an agent of Cuban counterintelligence by 1976, wrote the introduction to *Government By Gunplay*. The other contributors were Robert Groden, Bob Katz, Allard Lowenstein, Jeff Cohen, William Turner, Robert Fink, Peter Dale Scott, Jeff Gerth, Carl Oglesby, Jerry Policoff, and L. Fletcher Prouty. Somewhat ironically, Gerth was the *New York Times* reporter who broke the Whitewater story in 1992; in Blumenthal's 2003 opus on Bill's presidency, *The Clinton Wars*, he maligns Gerth's reporting and depicts him as an all-too-credulous tool of the Clintons' enemies. In turn, Gerth (now with *ProPublica*) and a *Gawker* reporter broke the story about Blumenthal's hacked emails to Hillary Clinton regarding intelligence about Libya. "[The Clinton Wars': An Exchange](#)," *New York Review of Books*, 3 July 2003; Michael Isikoff, "[Insidious Sid](#)," *Slate*, 20 May 2003; Jeff Gerth and Sam Biddle, "[Private Emails Reveal Ex-Clinton Aide's Secret Spy Network](#)," *ProPublica/Gawker*, 27 March 2015.

[6] On Soviet disinformation, see Armand Moss, *Disinformation, Misinformation, and the "Conspiracy" to Kill JFK Exposed* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987).

[7] Dan Roberts, "[Hillary Clinton Breaks Media Silence and Insists: 'I want those emails out'](#)," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2015.