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The New Right-Wing Smear Machine

by CHRISTOPHER HAYES

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On February 27, 2001, two members of the American Gold Star Mothers, an organization of women who've lost sons or daughters in combat, dropped by the temporary basement offices of the new junior senator from New York, Hillary Clinton. They didn't have an appointment, and the office, which had been up and running for barely a month, was a bit discombobulated. The two women wanted to talk to the senator about a bill pending in the Senate that would provide annuities for the parents of those killed, but they were told that Clinton wasn't in the office and that the relevant staff members were otherwise engaged. The organization later submitted a formal request in writing for a meeting, which Clinton granted, meeting and posing for pictures with four members of the group.

But the story doesn't end there. In May of that year, the right-wing website *NewsMax*, a clearinghouse for innuendo and rumor, ran a short item with the headline "Hillary Snubs Gold Star Mothers." Reporting via hearsay--a comment relayed to someone who then recounted it to the column's author--the article claimed that Clinton and her staff "simply refused" to meet with the Gold Star Mothers, making hers the "only office" in the Senate that snubbed the group.

At first the item didn't attract much attention, but it quickly morphed into an e-mail that started ricocheting across the Internet. "Bet this never hits the TV news!" began one version. "According to NewsMax.com there was only one politician in DC who refused to meet with these ladies. Can you guess which politician that might be?... None other than the Queen herself--the Hildebeast, Hillary Clinton."

Before long, the Gold Star Mothers and the Clinton office found themselves inundated by inquiries about the "snub," prompting the Gold Star Mothers to post a small item debunking the claim on their website. When that didn't stem the tide, they posted a lengthier notice. "These allegations were not initiated by the Gold Star Mothers.... This is a fabricated report picked up by an individual using the Gold Star Mothers as an instrument to discredit Senator Clinton.... We do not need mischeivous gossip and unfounded lies to promote our organization. Please help stop it now."

That plea notwithstanding, the e-mail continues to circulate to this day. Anyone who's been following politics for the past fifteen years won't be surprised to find Hillary Clinton the subject of a false and damning right-wing smear. We've all become familiar with the ways the Republican noise machine transmits lurid bits of misinformation and tendentious attacks from the conservative fringe into the heart

of American political discourse, the process by which a slightly misdelivered joke by John Kerry attracts the ire of Rush Limbaugh and ends up on the front page of the *New York Times*.

But in some senses, the kind of under-the-radar attack embodied in the Gold Star e-mail--which never made the jump to Fox or Drudge--is even harder to deal with. "It's a Pandora's box," says Jim Kennedy, who served as Clinton's communications director during her first Senate term. "Once [the charges] are out in the ether, they are very hard to combat. It's very unlike a traditional media, newspaper or TV show, or even a blog, which at least has a fixed point of reference. You know they're traveling far and wide, but there's no way to rebut them with all the people that have seen them."

Such is the power of the right-wing smear forward, a vehicle for the dissemination of character assassination that has escaped the scrutiny directed at the Limbaughs and Coulters and O'Reillys but one that is as potent as it is invisible. In 2004 putative firsthand accounts of Kerry's performance in Vietnam traveled through e-mail in right-wing circles, presaging the Swift Boat attacks. Last winter a forward began circulating accusing Barack Obama of being a secret Muslim schooled in a radical madrassa (about which more later). While the story was later fed through familiar right-wing megaphones, even making it onto Fox, it has continued to circulate via e-mail long after being definitively debunked by CNN. In other words, the few weeks the smear spent in the glare of the mainstream media was just a tiny portion of a long life cycle, most of which has been spent darting from inbox to inbox.

In that respect, the e-mail forward doesn't fit into our existing model of the right-wing noise machine's structure (hierarchical) or its approach (broadcast). It is, instead, organic and peer-to-peer. If the manufactured outrage over Kerry's botched joke about George Bush's study habits was the equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster, the Gold Star Mother smear was like one of those goofy viral videos of a dog on a skateboard on YouTube. Of course, some of those videos end up with 25 million page views. And now that large media companies understand their potential, they've begun trying to create their own. Which prompts the obvious question: if a handful of millionaires and disgruntled Swift Boat Veterans were able to sabotage Kerry's campaign in 2004, what kind of havoc could be wreaked in 2008 by a few political operatives armed with little more than Outlook and a talent for gossip?

The smear forward has its roots in two distinct forms of Internet-age communication. First, there's the electronically disseminated urban legend ("Help find this missing child!"; "Bill Gates is going to pay people for every e-mail they send!"), which has been a staple of the Internet since the mid-'90s. Then there's the surreal genre of right-wing e-mail forwards. These range from creepy rage-filled quasi-fascist invocations ("The next time you see an adult talking...during the playing of the National Anthem--kick their ass") to treacly aphorisms of patriotic/religious uplift ("remember only two defining forces have ever offered to die for you, Jesus Christ...and the American Soldier").

For a certain kind of conservative, these e-mails, along with talk-radio, are an informational staple, a means of getting the real stories that the mainstream media ignore. "I get a million of them!" says Gerald DeSimone, a 74-year-old veteran from Ridgewood, New Jersey, who describes his politics as "to the right of Attila the Hun." "If I forwarded every one on, everyone would hate me.... I'm trying to cut back. I try to send no more than two or three a day. I must get thirty or forty a day."

Mike D'Asto, a 29-year-old assistant cameraman living in New York, received so many forwards from his conservative father he started a blog called MyRightWingDad.net, where he shares them with other unwitting recipients. "I suddenly have connected to all these people who receive these right-wing forwards from their brothers-in-law," D'Asto told me. "Surprisingly, a very large number of people receive these."

And that, of course, is the problem.

Rumormongering and whisper campaigns are as old as politics itself (throughout Thomas Jefferson's presidency opposition newspapers and pamphlets spread the word of his affair with Sally Hemings), but never has there been a medium as perfectly suited to the widespread anonymous diffusion of misinformation as e-mail. David Mikkelson, who, along with his wife, Barbara, founded and runs the website Snopes.com, knows this better than anyone. Devoted exclusively to debunking (and occasionally confirming) urban legends and e-mail-circulated apocrypha, Snopes attracts 4-5 million unique visitors a month, making it one of the Internet's most popular sites. In the early days, Mikkelson says, there were hardly any political urban legends, but that changed in 2000. "A lot of the things that were circulating in the world at large, things like ridiculing Al Gore for supposedly inventing the Internet," started to be passed along via e-mail, as well as "a photograph of Gore holding a gun intended to mock him for not holding it safely."

From the beginning, the vast majority of these Internet-disseminated rumors have come from the right. (Snopes lists about fifty e-mails about George W. Bush, split evenly between adulatory accounts of him saluting wounded soldiers or witnessing to a wayward teenager, and accounts of real and invented malapropisms. In contrast, every single one of the twenty-two e-mails about John Kerry is negative.) For conservatives, these e-mails neatly reinforce preconceptions, bending the facts of the world in line with their ideological framework: liberals, immigrants, hippies and celebrities are always the enemy; soldiers and conservatives, the besieged heroes. The stories of the former's perfidy and the latter's heroism are, of course, never told by the liberal media. So it's left to the conservative underground to get the truth out. And since the general story and the roles stay the same, often the actual characters are interchangeable.

"A lot of the chain letters that were accusing Al Gore of things in 2000 were recycled in 2004 and changed to Kerry," says John Ratliff, who runs a site called BreakTheChain.org, which, like Snopes, devotes itself to debunking chain e-mails. One e-mail falsely described a Senate committee hearing in the 1980s where Oliver North offered an impassioned Cassandra-like warning about the threat of Osama bin Laden, only to be dismissed by a condescending Democratic senator. Originally it was Al Gore who played the role of the senator, but by 2004 it had changed to John Kerry. "You just plug in your political front-runner du jour," Ratliff says.

Even if many of the tropes were consistent, the tenor of the e-mails grew more aggressive between 2000 and 2004. "It got really nasty," says Ratliff. "You started seeing things reported as real news that, if you looked into it, you realized was opinion or supposition or someone trying to discredit another candidate through character assassination. You saw a lot of chain letters that purported to be from members of the Swift Boat group or firsthand accounts of people who supposedly had experience with Kerry in Vietnam. A lot of them didn't check out."

Aside from specious allegations about his military service, many of the e-mails attacking Kerry either emphasized his wealth (photos of each of his five residences) or relayed putative firsthand accounts of the senator acting like an imperious prick. Hal Cranmer, a former Air Force pilot, wrote a widely circulated account of his experience flying Kerry around Vietnam and Cambodia in 1991 in which Kerry scarfs pizza meant for the crew, forces the pilots to sit for an hour in an un-air-conditioned plane and boasts that he "never sail[s] on anything less than 135 feet." (Since it's a matter of historical record that Kerry has sailed boats smaller than 135 feet, this quote seems highly dubious.)

When I tracked down Cranmer during his lunch break at the aerospace manufacturing firm he works for in Minnesota, I was surprised to hear him ruefully recall his brush with Internet fame. "It gave me a real lesson. My wife says one of the reasons she married me is that I don't talk badly about people," he said with a laugh. "I really didn't mean to do that here."

In spring 2004, as John Kerry began to emerge as the probable nominee, Cranmer e-mailed his account to the libertarian website LewRockwell.com, where readers were sharing their personal experiences about meeting Kerry. "I said, OK, I'll put in my two cents.... I thought maybe I'd get one or two e-mails about it and it would just disappear." That was not to be. "All of a sudden I was getting fifty e-mails a day. I had an annual meeting with the Air Force pilots, and a friend said, 'Tell your story about John Kerry,' and everyone in the room was going, 'I got that e-mail! That was you?' I had neighbors walking in and saying, 'Hey, I got an e-mail about you.' I was trying to keep this low-key, not try to ruin an election here. I was just relating an experience that happened to me. People drew all kinds of crazy conclusions from it other than I had a bad experience with him." Added Cranmer, "Maybe he's the nicest guy in the world, and he was in a bad mood going into Vietnam.... I really didn't mean this to be as huge as it was."

Cranmer told me he was a libertarian and a big fan of Ron Paul. "I voted for Bush in 2000 and have regretted it ever since. I didn't even vote in 2004." He now wishes he'd kept his impressions to himself. Some anecdote of casual thoughtlessness "shouldn't be what defines the presidency."

But of course, that's exactly the kind of thing that did define the last presidential election. Cranmer's e-mail, and those of a similar ilk, were perfectly in line with the broader narrative of the Bush campaign, in which the major knock on Kerry was that he was an elitist, disingenuous jerk--a "bad man," in Lynne Cheney's phrasing. Like the other popular e-mails that circulated in 2004, Cranmer's includes not a single substantive criticism of Kerry's platform or policy preferences, but the unflattering picture it offers has an effect that's immediate and visceral. It lingers in the back of one's head.

It was similar gossip that helped spell doom for John McCain during the South Carolina primary in 2000, when a whisper campaign spread rumors that he had a black daughter out of wedlock. "John McCain was done in by leaflets put on cars in church parking lots," says Democratic campaign consultant Chris Lehane. Forwarded e-mails, he says, "are the digital version of this and potentially more pernicious and far-reaching because of the obvious efficiencies of the online world. I would fully expect to see it manifesting in the GOP primary." Sure enough, a few weeks after I spoke to Lehane, Mike Huckabee's Iowa state campaign chair, Bob Vander Plaats, issued a statement denying that he'd written an e-mail that voters had received bearing his name. In that hoax e-mail, someone impersonating Vander Plaats announced that he was dropping Huckabee because of low fundraising numbers and backing Mitt Romney instead and urging others to do the same.

Faced with dubious attacks, circulating below the radar, campaigns find themselves in a familiar bind, one that handcuffed Kerry in 2004 when the Swift Boat charges first cropped up in ads, talk-radio and e-mail. If you respond, you run the risk of bringing the original false accusation to a wider audience. This is particularly true when the e-mails don't even have a putative author attached. "For lots of these e-mails, there's never any definable source," says Mikkelson. "They just seem to come out of nowhere."

That leads to the \$64,000 question: are these anonymous attacks organic emanations of the diffuse political consciousness, or are they deliberately seeded by professional political operators? Mikkelson is skeptical that anyone could intentionally write the kind of e-mail that would take off virally. "Even people who are steeped in it, it's very, very difficult to start something deliberately that will catch on." Still, there's some evidence it's been done. Snopes determined that a gushing pro-Bush e-mail from 2004 about watching the President worship in the pews of St. John's Church in Washington was actually written by the press spokeswoman for Republican Senator Lamar Alexander. Her name is Laura Lefler, and she now works for Senator Bob Corker. I tried to contact Lefler to get a sense of what inspired her to write the e-mail and how, exactly, she disseminated it, but she wouldn't return my calls or e-mails.

The most notorious smear forward of this cycle is the Obama/madrassa canard, which represents the

cutting edge of electronic rumor. At least two weeks before the Obama/madrassa smear appeared in the online magazine *Insight*, on January 17, it had been circulating widely in an e-mail forward that laid out the basics of Obama's bio in a flat, reportorial tone before concluding thus:

Obama takes great care to conceal the fact that he is a Muslim.... Lolo Soetoro, the second husband of Obama's mother...introduced his stepson to Islam. Osama was enrolled in a Wahabi school in Jakarta. Wahabism is the radical teaching that is followed by the Muslim terrorists who are now waging Jihad against the western world. Since it is politically expedient to be a Christian when seeking major public office in the United States, Barack Hussein Obama has joined the United Church of Christ in an attempt to downplay his Muslim background.

Let us all remain alert concerning Obama's expected presidential candidacy.

Did you catch that typo in the crucial sentence? And the strategic deployment of Obama's middle name? It's a coldly effective bit of slander: a single damning lie (the school Obama attended was a run-of-the-mill public elementary school) snuggled tightly within a litany of mundane facts, followed by dark insinuation.

Who wrote it? The unsatisfying answer is, we'll probably never know. "The thing to keep in mind about e-mail is that there is absolutely zero built-in security or data integrity," my friend Paul Smith, a software developer with EveryBlock.com, explained to me when I asked him if there was any way I could trace the Obama e-mail to its original author. "That's why there is spam. I could construct an e-mail from scratch and deliver it and have it seem like it was coming from Steve Jobs, and for all intents and purposes the receiver would have no way of knowing it wasn't from Cupertino."

But even if the identity of the e-mail's author was unrecoverable, it was still possible to trace back the roots of its content. The origin proved even more bizarre than I could have guessed.

On August 10, 2004, just two weeks after Obama had given his much-heralded keynote speech at the DNC in Boston, a perennial Republican Senate candidate and self-described "independent contrarian columnist" named Andy Martin issued a press release. In it, he announced a press conference in which he would expose Obama for having "lied to the American people" and "misrepresent[ed] his own heritage."

Martin raised all kinds of strange allegations about Obama but focused on him attempting to hide his Muslim past. "It may well be that his concealment is meant to endanger Israel," read Martin's statement. "His Muslim religion would obviously raise serious questions in many Jewish circles where Obama now enjoys support."

A quick word about Andy Martin. During a 1983 bankruptcy case he referred to a federal judge as a "crooked, slimy Jew, who has a history of lying and thieving common to members of his race." Martin, who in the past was known as Anthony Martin-Trigona, is one of the most notorious litigants in the history of the United States. He's filed hundreds, possibly thousands, of lawsuits, often directed at judges who have ruled against him, or media outlets that cover him unfavorably. A 1993 opinion by the US Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, in Atlanta, described these lawsuits as "a cruel and effective weapon against his enemies," and called Martin a "notoriously vexatious and vindictive litigator who has long abused the American legal system." He once even attempted to intervene in the divorce proceedings of a judge who'd ruled against him, petitioning the state court to be appointed as the guardian of the judge's children.

When I asked Martin for the source of his allegations about Obama's past, he told me they came from

"people in London, among other places." Why London, I asked? "I started talking to them about Kenyan law. Every little morsel led me a little farther along."

Within a few days of Martin's press conference, the conservative site *Free Republic* had picked it up, attracting a long comment thread, but after that small blip the specious "questions" about Obama's background disappeared. Then, in the fall of 2006, as word got out that Obama was considering a presidential run, murmurs on the Internet resumed. In October a conservative blog called Infidel Bloggers Alliance reposted the Andy Martin press release under the title "Is Barack Obama Lying About His Life Story?" A few days later the online *RumorMillNews* also reposted the Andy Martin press release in response to a reader's inquiry about whether Obama was a Muslim. Then in December fringe right-wing activist Ted Sampley posted a column on the web raising the possibility that Obama was a secret Muslim. Sampley, who co-founded Vietnam Veterans Against John Kerry and once accused John McCain of having been a KGB asset, quoted heavily from Martin's original press release. "When Obama was six," Sampley wrote, "his mother, an atheist, married Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian Muslim, and moved to Jakarta, Indonesia.... Soetoro enrolled his stepson in one of Jakarta's Muslim Wahabbi schools. Wahabbism is the radical teaching that created the Muslim terrorists who are now waging Jihad on the rest of the world."

On December 29, 2006, the very same day that Sampley posted his column, Snopes received its first copy of the e-mail forward, which contains an identical charge in strikingly similar language. Given the timing, it seems likely that it was a distillation of Sampley's work.

Despite the fact that CNN and others have thoroughly debunked the smear, the original false accusation has clearly sunk into people's consciousness. One Obama organizer told me recently that every day, while calling prospective voters, he gets at least one or two people who tell him they won't be voting for Obama because he's a Muslim. According to Google, "Barack Obama Muslim" is the third most-searched term for the Illinois senator. And an August CBS poll found that when voters were asked to give Obama's religion, as many said Muslim as correctly answered Protestant.

Oh yeah. And the e-mail continues to circulate.

"Everybody started calling me" when the e-mail first made the rounds, Andy Martin told me. "They said, 'Hey, did you write this?' My answer was 'they are all my children.' "