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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Douglas Heyl

Campaign Position: Deputy Political Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 26, 1992

Overview

Diane D. Blair was an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, when she took a leave of absence to serve as a senior researcher in Governor Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. Approximately one month before the November election, Blair obtained permission from the governor to conduct interviews with participants in the Clinton/Gore campaign. In her own words, ". . . I had two major purposes in mind: first, simply to preserve for posterity an accomplished campaign organization that would essentially disappear on election day; and second, through discussions with campaign workers from all departments, to see what those on the inside believed to be the key ingredients of the campaign's success." She prepared a list of questions and began interviewing people as schedules allowed.

After Blair's death in 2000, her husband, Jim Blair, donated her personal and professional papers to Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries. Douglas Heyl reviewed this transcript and granted permission to make this interview available to scholars, students, and researchers. The final document may contain edits requested by the interviewee. This transcript was processed as part of the Diane D. Blair Papers and prepared for publication by the editorial staff of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

Doug Heyl: I was resting from politics, giving golf lessons in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

DB: When did you join the campaign?

DH: At the end of October 1991.

DB: What was your original job in the campaign?

DH: I came on as a staff person. I was deputy political director under Stephanie Solien, which shifted into mainly working on the Super Tuesday states—the early southern states, mainly working with Craig Smith, setting up the organizations in the Super Tuesday states.

DB: After we got into the primaries, you immediately became the deputy political director?

DH: No. Super Tuesday, obviously, went very well. The rest of the field organizations weren't humming along like everyone would have liked, so Craig Smith became the national field director and we split the country up into, not necessarily regions, but we basically split it up into electoral votes. I had one of the sections, which had a variety of states, different parts of the country. But we balanced them out by electoral votes and delegates that had already passed. We monitored the states that already had primaries and their delegates. We ran the primary campaigns in the rest of the states.

DB: Where did the cluster concept come from?

DH: Actually, it was Mike Whouley, Craig Smith, and with input from the folks that were doing it, it stemmed from the system that we set up at the end of the primaries, in what we were missing staffwise. That's how the regions and the clusters came out—something new that hadn't been tried before that actually had issues people in them, press people, surrogate scheduling. Just all the components in the campaign, we tried to bring under the field operations, so that everything would be within yelling distance basically.

DB: And yours was the southern cluster?

DH: Right.

DB: In that capacity, describe what you did—broadly, what are your responsibilities?

DH: In the primaries, Jeff Eller, Craig, myself, and some other folks came up with some things because we weren't spending the traditional amount of money on field that presidential campaigns had—we came up with free-media strategy. We had field people working on press conferences, issuing press releases.

Technology helped through fax machines, etc. So the cluster system was set up not only to do the traditional monitoring of the coordinated campaigns and traditional field, but, really, to put an emphasis on free media. Dragging people out to do press conferences when the candidates weren't there, setting up speakers' bureaus—it was something that hadn't been done before. It was the focus of the cluster system.

DB: Where did this idea come from?

DH: Those of us who were in the primaries, and we weren't doing any traditional field stuff. The only phone banks we did in the primaries were when we knew the

media was coming by the office and we put people on the phones. It came out of what we had done in the primaries. We just developed it. We wanted to keep it running. We really think it started to momentum. We were down when Perot was doing well, up in the polls. We kept hammering away at the message through free media. We did a lot of things without the candidate that probably had never been done before in presidential politics. We were copying some of the things that the Republicans had done, especially with radio actualities. Set up radio actuality programs in every state.

DB: Describe a radio actuality.

DH: You almost do an interview. You have a staff person do an interview on issues you want to talk about. You can do it with anybody. We used it very effectively in the primaries with local leaders. We went on national levels. You do an interview with them on a certain subject, then you try to get radio stations, news programs to take these and run with them as news.

DB: That's fairly easy to do?

DH: It depends—different subjects—some states have had great success, and some haven't—especially states that are starved for political coverage. The Republicans have been doing this for a bunch of years and we're just caught up with them.

DB: On a typical day, how does your time go?

DH: It depends. The cluster system monitors the opposition—works with the state's staff in handling an event. So chances are, the way the south has been, if we don't have one of our four candidates—we have, usually, one of the four—we have a

couple of ours and a couple of theirs. The system of tracking surrogates and responding to them also falls under our jurisdiction. So keeping the states informed of what the message of the day is. Also, helping them locate stuff, coordinating with the DNC—traditional field operations—reporting back. Late in the campaign, we are more focused on phone calls and leafleting and some of the traditional things that people really think about campaigns. But, in the early days we were the first-line defense, rapid response. We were the ones that said, “Okay, we’re getting hit here.” Then the rapid response has been worked on with our input as well and then issued back to the states.

DB: Has it really been rapid?

DH: Yes. Some cloak-and-dagger. The reputation got it so we looked like we were doing some things faster than we really were. At the same time . . .

DB: What do you do when suddenly somebody calls? For example, a woman just called from Corinth, Mississippi, furious over a leaflet that had been put on her automobile at a shopping center, how Bill Clinton is against school prayer, for gay rights, and this, that, and the other. What do you do about that stuff?

DH: Here’s some of the stuff that goes into the free-media plan. We have done a lot of press conferences. A good example was there was a Young Republican club in Alabama ran a newsletter that had a picture of Reggie Jackson with the Clintons during the convention. It talked about what kind of family is going to be in the White House. It was obviously a racial slur. We had press conferences both in Alabama and South Carolina, where Reggie Jackson’s from, and talked about Lee Atwater tactics and Jesse Helms tactics and racial division. In both states it ran

for two days. And that kind of thing—just like a flyer that’s put on somebody’s car—if it’s really atrocious we can turn it into a positive. We turn those things into positives and talk about it. We’ve been successful. Polls right now show over 50 percent of the people in the country think that the negative part of the campaign is the Bush campaign’s fault.

DB: I got a call from a guy in North Carolina this morning who said that he’s not seen a single positive Clinton ad. All he sees is negatives.

DH: Well, yes. There’s a positive ad as part of the rotation, but it’s definitely not part of our allover rotation.

DB: This campaign is now being called the most effective presidential campaign in recent American history. From your perspective, what made it so effective?

DH: Just being attuned in monitoring what folks are hearing on the news, what they are reading in the newspapers. I think there has been a much more conscientious effort to find out what’s playing. Not just what’s on the national network news, but what’s playing in the local news. Being attuned to local issues more than any other campaign. I think that’s what the success has been. Now what’s yet to be determined is election day—get out the vote activity—did all of our focus on free media cost us having great GOTV operations? I don’t think they did. I think we devoted them at the same time—working with the DNC, how their desk system was set up, and focused on the traditional patterns. Whether the Clinton field office became more like the media outlet. I think it’s going to work out and I think it’s going to be a model presidential campaigns will be run on for quite some time. But it’s yet to be determined. Did we focus enough? If this race

becomes really close and we lose a couple of key states, was it because we didn't focus enough on the traditional stuff?

DB: So you're going to be watching that in addition to everything else on election night? This is a big experiment?

DH: Right. Here in the last couple of weeks we've been focusing on it as well, monitoring whether people got what they need for get-out-the-vote activities. All the money is in the right place.

DB: Specifically, with respect to the campaign organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

DH: It is a lot looser. I think we've given the impression of being so effective because this campaign uses everyone's ideas. There are central locations that tons of ideas go into, and I would think that everybody in this field department, everybody in the rapid-response room and in different outlets of the campaign, at one time or another, probably had one of their ideas become a major focus of the campaign. That's a great morale booster—to think of something, run it through somebody, and have it end up on the national news. I think there has been much more diversity on how the ideas were gathered in this campaign instead of a tight-knit little group of people. You know we've had criticism that there's nobody in charge. I think there's far more strength in this campaign because it's had input from a lot of people that are in different parts of the country. We pay attention if someone is from a certain place—of what they think it does. We've been much more conscious of letting people from states run their state's campaign.

DB: On the other hand, they are all tied to e-mail. They get the talking points. They

know the message.

DH: One of our first rules was when we try to do free media and we generate a lot of national ideas for free media, but they still have the right not to do it. If it doesn't work for you, you don't have to do it. So there is a little loose-net part of this organization. They still have final signoff on the states. It's like this is an information central that we put out ideas and they use it some, but if they have other ideas of how to shape a certain thing, they are able to do that.

DB: What, from your perspective, was the low point of the campaign?

DH: I think, for the ten or eleven that got out here first, the New Hampshire drop, Gennifer Flowers, the draft letter. Then there was a *Nightline* poll that came out and it said, I think, it was like 75 percent of the people said they didn't care. That whole day had been awful, and then when the *Nightline* poll came out, everybody was on track again.

DB: What, from your perspective, was the high point of the campaign?

DH: Super Tuesday. Unbelievable numbers that just aren't supposed to happen in presidential politics and multicandidate fields. The Georgia and South Carolina wins and the Super Tuesday all rolled up together—it was incredible.

DB: Is that when you were certain he would get the presidential nomination?

DH: I think we thought it was then. Then we kind of thought it wasn't going to be. Then I think really until New York. I was still close to Gephardt, who I worked for in 1988. I knew up until late in the race, if we had been a few points lower in New Hampshire, he might have gotten in the race. I don't think people realize that we closed a good eight, nine points in the closing days of New Hampshire

just to get where we were. So there were obviously possibilities there. That was not the greatest couple of days, leading into the New Hampshire primary.

DB: What is it that you want to make certain that the future understands about this campaign?

DH: That it was Bill Clinton's campaign. And Hillary Clinton's campaign. Their focus and their dreams kept them going. There were a lot of times when it could have exploded and the only reason it survived is that he picked himself up from a very sick bed and went back to New Hampshire when he was falling. This is very much his message. This campaign ran on the issues he wanted to run on. No matter what anybody says, he's not handled as much as traditional politicians are. This is very much his campaign. It reflects their personalities, their hopes.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]