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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with David H. Pryor
Campaign Position: Advisor, Friend
Washington, D.C.
April 27, 1993

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. David H. Pryor 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: This campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign in recent American history. What, from your perspective, made it so effective?

David Pryor: Because it embodied the most elemental part of the soul of politics. That is inclusion. It was a campaign of inclusion. No one was excluded from this campaign, and the people were made to feel that they were important and part of it. Inclusion is what I think of the campaign.

DB: Specifically about the organizational structure, was it centralized, decentralized, or what? Did you always know who to talk to when you needed to get something done?

DP: I never did. Usually, I think the one I would want to talk to was Bruce Lindsey, and I never could find Bruce! This was certainly not the fault of Bruce—it's just the nature of campaigning in a frenzied environment. When Bruce knew I was trying to contact him, he always returned my calls or had someone else do it for him. He gave me all kind of numbers how you could call him on the airplane through some sky pager. But I can barely operate the microwave, much less try to find Bruce on the airplane. Then I would talk to other people, from time to time in the campaign, seeking updates about where we were or what we were doing, or what to say about things, if I were being asked during that period. I think the tightness of the campaign and the alleged organizational structure that was impenetrable, according to the press, was a lot of myth. I think also, we started

believing our own propaganda, which made us believe it was totally centralized and organized. Maybe when you believe something is a certain way, maybe it becomes that. It was a structure where people felt that everybody had a place and everybody had a function and a role to play. If that was a structure, if that was a political organization, then so be it. It worked.

DB: When were you certain that Clinton would get the presidential nomination?

DP: I thought it in New Hampshire, election night for the primary, because I felt that the primary not only bolstered his confidence but he saw himself as the so-called Comeback Kid. I think that did more to lay to rest some of the accusations against him than any poll or any political scientist's study. It was the vote of the people of New Hampshire. The thing that impressed me most about New Hampshire was the people of New Hampshire. I'd always been concerned that New Hampshire—being so influential, always the earliest primary. I tell you what, I spent a little time in New Hampshire, not a great deal, but they are just like a big political science class. Every citizen of New Hampshire, children to old folks, all walks of life, to whatever they did, they felt a real responsibility. They felt like they were representing America. They felt an obligation to take their job and their function very, very seriously. And they took it seriously. And because they took it seriously, and gave Governor Clinton that vote, I thought that was such a strong reflective vote of where the country might go and I felt he could get the nomination after that. From that moment on, he was the front-runner. He was the man to beat. His confidence soared.

DB: When were you certain that he would win the presidency?

DP: The day that Dan Quayle said that he couldn't spell potato. I knew it was all over. I just somehow knew about that time, I said, "It's all over. It's just too much. People will take a certain amount, but there's certain things they just won't stand for." The beginning of the end was President Bush throwing up on the Prime Minister of Japan.

DB: When Bill Clinton first discussed with you whether he should run, do you remember whether you encouraged or discouraged him?

DP: I think I always encouraged him to do it. I remember I was sitting at the funeral for Sheila Foster Anthony's dad. The service was in Hope, Arkansas. Hillary and Bill were here, Barbara was here. I remember on the funeral program, I got a Magic Marker and wrote RUN. I was seated next to Hillary. I said, "Please pass this to the governor." She passed it to the governor, and he looked at it and put it in his pocket. Another time he asked me about it and I said, "I think you ought to do it." We were playing golf. I was more serious about it, a lot more reflective. One, because I have always known that someday he was going to do it. And, in addition, I've always thought that George Bush's support was tissue thin. So a kind of combination of lining up the sun, the moon, and the stars. I felt like they were about as much in-line as they would ever be. The big mistake that most politicians make, as you know, is that they always seek the perfect opportunity, the perfect time to run for this, that, and the other thing. There never is a perfect time. Sometimes we have to help align the stars.

DB: They are waiting for it to be handed to them?

DP: That's it. And that's what some of our friends have done. They've waited for it to be handed to them. Our system doesn't work that way.

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

DP: Not the Gennifer Flowers issue. I think the draft letter probably was the lowest point. I was in El Dorado and I was holding a big health care hearing. I must have had 800 people in the civic auditorium, hanging from the rafters and everywhere. I was up on the stage and had all these witnesses, and this security officer who worked there came up in the middle of the testimony. He said, "You're wanted on the pay phone in the hall." I asked him who it was. He said, "It's Bruce Lindsey and the governor. They're both on the line." So I rapped the gavel and said, "There's a little emergency. I'll be back in five minutes." I recessed and raced backstage and grabbed for the phone. Bruce talked in a whisper: "Senator, let me read you a letter. 'Dear Colonel Holmes.'" I said, "Oh, my." He read me the letter. I thought that the Pentagon had released it. It had to be that they let some people get into those confidential files. That was my initial reaction, and, I think, Governor Clinton's, too. That was a low point.

DB: One of your responsibilities as I saw it was bringing Congress along, interpreting Clinton to your colleagues and shoring them up. Was that the hardest thing for you to do?

DP: No, I don't think so. I rather enjoyed that part of it. I had a notice in the Democratic cloakroom that anyone, any Republican senator who talked about Bill Clinton in an unfavorable way, I wanted to know about it immediately, whether I was at home, on the plane, or here. Wherever. The problem was that between my

office and the Senate floor, I didn't know what had transpired. Usually there was a floor fight and I would just kind of guess what they had said, or imagine what charges had been made.

DB: We had your number over at every phone at headquarters. You were our 911.

DP: It got my adrenalin going. It was kind of a fun experience and I found that you could back them off very easily and they would retreat to the cloakroom with just the slightest response or even the slightest question. They would just retreat back to the cloakroom. It goes back to the theory that you don't allow anybody to say anything about you without being answered. If you'll answer it and if they know you're going to answer it, it has a sense of toning them down. But that was the fun part, dealing with individual colleagues about Bill Clinton, answering questions about him, how he thinks, and also telling them about Hillary Clinton—how outstanding she was. I spoke to these pharmacists about him today. First, I talked about some of the things that might or might not be of help to them. When I really got their attention, I said, “Now I'm going to tear up the notes. The next two or three minutes I'm going to tell you a little bit about this man. I met him when he was nineteen.” All of a sudden, you can see that they are very curious. I always love to say, “If you think the first hundred days of a presidency are controversial, you ain't seen nothing yet.” You know what, they love that. “He's going to talk about some problems that have been swept under the rug. That we've not dealt with. He's going to try to do something about the deficit, and it's controversial. He is going to be willing as he has shown on issues thus far and on the health care plan to expend some political capital. Unlike George Bush, who

had 91 percent approval and wouldn't give one percentage point away over anything. People don't want a leader like that." I said, "Remember Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman? You think those people promised and practiced tranquility? No. They were leaders. They expended political capital. They were ready and willing to do it for a cause and the common good. That's what the Clintons are going to do. If they are going to be re-elected in four years, they'll get re-elected. If not, so be it. They are going to do things right." Oh, boy, they liked that. I think what we have to brace people for is, "Look this is a controversial guy. He's controversial because he leads and takes chances. He will go to the brink and he will do things that other leaders or other people would not do." I think they want it, even though they may disagree. I said to the pharmacists this morning, "There are going to be some things in this plan that you're not going to like, but don't criticize him. Call him up and say we want to talk to some of your people, because there's some areas in here we have problems with. He'll listen to you. He knows it's not going to be perfect. He may not do what you want all the time, but he and his people will listen to you." That goes a long way, too.

DB: When you were talking to the people in New Hampshire, what did you say? What did you say to them that made a difference?

DP: The first time I went there and stayed about three days, I felt very frustrated. I felt like that I was kind of a fifth wheel. I just didn't feel like I was effective. They drove me to the coffee shops, people eating bacon and eggs, drinking coffee. And I'd say, "I'm Senator Pryor from Arkansas." And it was kind of like, "Come on,

let us eat. It's Saturday morning, don't bother us." I did this for two or three days. I came back and felt kind of useless. The next trip I told whoever was arranging it, "Coffee shops are fine, I don't mind doing that. I like that kind of stuff. But I don't think it's effective. I don't think the costs and the benefits match. Find me little groups, in homes or senior citizen centers, or whoever, and let me go out and make little short talks to them." And they did and that time I felt more effective. I think I used the theme—which I think we have to use on health care, deficits, taxes—What happens if we do nothing? What happens if we do nothing and drift? That, I think, has got to be the message. General Motors, 20 percent of their payroll is going to health care costs. Twelve hundred dollars for every car going to pay health care costs. One hundred thousand people a month dropping out of the system, not having any health care coverage. What happens if we continue this? I think we've got to develop this as a theme.

DB: People who were in New Hampshire have told me that one of the great things you did was to bolster up our own staff people up there. They were scared and had seen the front-runner suddenly taking this nosedive and that you were just wonderful, uplifting.

DP: I was into some headquarters rallies before we'd go out and give out literature and go door to door. It was fun. I remember that these people were so young, and they were from everywhere. They would drive from California. They'd ride a bus from Utah. They would appear from nowhere just to be a part of this thing. But they were so easily disillusioned. They had never been on a campaign before. They were not prepared when somebody would knock the hell out of your man.

They didn't know how to respond. They didn't know what to do. They were unsure. All of a sudden there was this kind of outward migration in the headquarters. "Well, where's so and so?" "Well, he'll be back in a day or two. His grandmother is sick." I remember one night during the Gennifer thing, I called New Hampshire and I was in Washington. Patty Criner answered the phone in Manchester headquarters. It was the first day or night of the Gennifer business. And Patty was the only one left, everybody had deserted. They were gone. It was 9:00 or so. Patty answered the phone. I said, "Patty, where's the governor?" I didn't want to talk to him, I just wanted to know how and where he was. She said, "Well, he's over in the hotel, room so and so." I said, "Who's with him?" She said, "About sixteen people." I said, "Is Bruce with him?" She said, "Well I don't know." I said, "Patty, get up and put on your coat and snow boots and go see if Bruce Lindsey's in that room with Governor Clinton." She said, "It's a snowstorm here and there's ice." I said, "Go see if Bruce is there." Well, Patty did that, bless her heart. About thirty minutes later the phone rang and she said, "Bruce is in the room with Governor Clinton." I said, "We're okay then." I enjoyed going up there. I became kind of addicted to all of that. It was exhilarating. I developed a lot of friends. In fact, I spoke the other day somewhere down in Florida to a group. One of the people there came up and said, "I met you in New Hampshire." I felt part of the family.

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

DP: That, by God, he gave it his all. He was willing to take a risk. That we were no longer going to sit on our rear ends and watch this country come apart. That we were going to save it, and we all had a role, no matter how small or large.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]