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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Andrew Aultz
Telecommunications Director
Little Rock, Arkansas
December 2, 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. On behalf of her deceased husband, Andrew, Paula Aultz 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 before you came with the campaign?

Andy Aultz: I worked for Southwestern Bell and went on a political leave of absence to come on board with the campaign full time.

DB: And that was when?

AA: I came on full time in the middle of March. And I assisted for about two to three weeks before that. Just came down evenings and weekends till I was able to get the leave of absence approved.

DB: Can you give me a summary overview of your responsibilities and what some of the major hurdles and accomplishments were?

AA: Sure. I and my staff had responsibility for any communications that took place via cellular phones, modems, fax machines, telecommunications systems, and so forth. Beepers, sky pagers, local beepers. Anything that had to do with getting in touch with one another via other than face-to-face, we took the responsibility for it. We set up all of the telecommunications for all of the field offices nationwide. There are approximately sixty-five of those.

DB: Did you have to go out yourself and do that?

AA: No. I was able to do most of that remotely, working with the state directors. We funneled all of the equipment leases through Little Rock and sent the equipment out and then we'd have AT&T or some local vendor install the equipment. One of the things that we did that was a first in political—not ever having been involved with a campaign I wasn't aware of how things had been done in the past, so I just

kind of tried to figure out the best way to do it—we negotiated a national payment agreement with the regional Bell operating company so we'd have a single point of contact to deal with all of the operating companies nationally and we could have one letter of credit. So what made it very easy for our sixty-five field offices, rather than having to contact potentially sixty-five different phone companies, we were able to contact one office in Nashville, Tennessee, and they placed our orders for us nationwide. So it was really nice. It made it much easier on us and much easier on the field people.

DB: What were some of the other things that you think maybe happened in this campaign that hadn't been done before?

AA: Well, from the people I've talked to that were involved in prior campaigns, the Dukakis campaign and the Mondale campaign, we were able to do things much more efficiently in this campaign than they ever were in the past, just on economy as a scale. When you set up a single point of contact, it made it much easier to get press filing funds in, as an example, or advance lines, staff lines. Whenever there was an event around nationally, we were able to save money by going through the national payment agreement because we were able to establish a bank letter of credit which helped our cash flow. So we weren't in a situation where we were FedExing deposit checks all over the country and never getting that money back. We got it back very quickly since we were able to do that. Something else that we did, from a billing perspective, is they increased our billing from a normal monthly billing which the telephone company generally does, which can be up to

six or eight weeks behind. They were billing us every two weeks, which allowed us to keep our cash flow going, not only from making sure the bills were paid quickly and deposits were given back to us, but we were able to bill back the press for press filing funds and keep our cash flow up on that as well.

DB: What would one of those bills look like?

AA: Our AT&T bills literally came to me in boxes of paper—a normal box of paper, about twelve pounds of paper—and I would get six boxes at a time, was our AT&T bill for all of our offices. So it was quite interesting. The mail people would tell me—say, “Your bill's here. Can I send up a dolly and bring it to you?” So it was a lot of fun when we got those.

DB: I heard that at some point headquarters was like the third largest phone system in Arkansas.

AA: That's correct. That was one of the challenges that we faced, in having the national headquarters here in town, having not done that in Arkansas, and again I approached it as I would any other large business in Arkansas. Towards the end, the last two or three weeks of the campaign, we were processing approximately sixty-five thousand calls a day through campaign headquarters, inbound and outbound, which from a call-processing basis made us the second largest consumer of telecommunications in the state of Arkansas. And we actually processed more phone calls than the state system did. We were ahead of Tyson Foods. Ahead of Walmart. We were ahead of all the major hospitals around here just in sheer volume of calls. So that was a real challenge to make sure we were able to keep up with that, not only with being able to handle the inbound calling

volume from voters and concerned people, but staff—the calls that the staff had to make. It was a real challenge. And we felt like we kept up. We were real proud of the job that the whole staff did.

DB: Tell me how many lines you dropped.

AA: Well, every time Governor Clinton or Senator Gore—or for that matter Mrs. Gore or Mrs. Clinton—every time there was an event, we would have to drop staff lines for their use while they were at the site and for the advance people. And then in addition, we would set up a press filing system so that all the press people could file their stories immediately after. Now we heard, and were very well aware via our contacts, that the Bush/Quayle campaign was doing a very poor job of taking care of the press. So we went out of our way to make sure that we did everything that we could to make the press comfortable. Because we felt like that if someone from the press is sitting there—they don't have power for their laptop, they don't have a phone line to file with, they're writing this story, regardless of how well the event went—if they were upset about these little things, it might influence the story. So we went out of our way to make sure that they had plenty of press lines with which to file. As I mentioned earlier, we can bill that back to them so it was really not a problem with money. So we went out of our way to make sure that they were happy everywhere. So from the Democratic National Convention when we left New York until November 3 when the election was over, we dropped nearly nine thousand telephone lines in that period of time for press files and staff. And we were able to recoup most of the money from the

press, which, as a matter of fact, we feel helped us. It was an investment. So it was interesting. You know, we dropped nearly one thousand lines the last two days when Governor Clinton did the marathon, because we had to get these press filing lines everywhere.

DB: Any special preparations for election night?

AA: Election eve and election night, my involvement with that was I was the liaison to the local telephone company, Southwestern Bell, and they did just a yeoman's job of keeping up with it. But they dropped somewhere in the neighborhood of fourteen hundred lines for that one night for international and national press that were dropping in. And then in addition to that—you may have heard Senator Gore on the stump talk about fiber optics and how we needed to upgrade, and the same with Governor Clinton. We had fiber-optic network laid all over downtown Little Rock—and the networks, CNN, as well as Clinton/Gore television—we employed fiber-optic circuits throughout downtown Little Rock so that our video and audio feeds were all over fiber optics. So that was quite a project in and of itself. So it's been exciting. It's been a challenge all the way through and I've very much enjoyed it.

DB: From your perspective, what made this campaign so effective?

AA: I think what made it very effective and very efficient was a combination of things. I give a lot of credit to Eli Segal, and Eli surrounded himself with some very, very effective managers and some very effective political people. I think we all had a common goal in that there wasn't a question of well, that's not my job, that's

someone else's job. We did the job regardless, because we all had the same goal and we were all working as a team. So there wasn't that hierarchy line of well, this is my job and this is your job. And the hierarchy of management so that you can't go directly to Eli with a problem, you have to go through this person and this person who will take it over to another person. And I attribute a lot of that to Eli's function as chief of staff because he kept everyone very focused. It was very much a team atmosphere and everyone felt that they were an important, integral part of the campaign, from just the volunteers who answered the phones on the talker calls we called them down in the lobby, all the way up to Eli's and Mickey Kantor's and those guys' offices. Everyone felt like they were a part of the team and felt that their contribution was very, very important. I know my staff felt very proud of what they did. And everyone appreciated what they did and when we went above and beyond the call of duty, it was recognized. An example that pops into mind is during the convention, the weeks prior to the convention, I was in New York trying to get everything set up for the convention itself. I got a call from Steve Rabinowitz on the date that Governor Clinton was announcing Senator Gore as his running mate. I got the call at ten o'clock eastern time which was nine o'clock central time that they—

DB: That day?

AA: That day. That they were holding a press conference on the back lawn of the Governor's Mansion and they needed radio lines and press lines to make sure that the audio feed went out to everyone. And when we were able to pull that off and get those lines in in a period of two hours, two and a half hours, I made calls to

the local phone company from New York. My staff was scrambling down here, and we got the phones and everything done. When it was all over with, we felt that we had accomplished something because it was also recognized, and people within the campaign came to us and said, “We really appreciate your coming through on short notice.” And when you did something like that they really made you feel that you contributed to the campaign. And I think that was a big part of why it was so efficient. I think Carville described it as “organized chaos.” And I like to think that that meant that everyone pitched in everywhere. And while I was in telecommunications, if something needed to be done in press, we were over there in press helping out and vice versa. So it was just a joy to be a part of it. It was something I'll treasure forever.

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

AA: The only time that we ever—the morale was very good almost all the time. Even prior to the convention when we were running third in the polls behind Perot and Bush, there was still that feeling that we could pull this thing out. And then obviously we went straight up during the convention and Thursday night everyone was peaking. The only time that I felt any doubt whatsoever was that short period postconvention but prior to the Republican National Convention. There was a lot of jockeying for position in the campaign and people inside the campaign, particularly my level and below, were a little concerned. And I wouldn't call it a low point, but there was a period of time there where we didn't have the common enemy, if you will, prior to the Republican National Convention. We'd won the primary and we'd gotten through the big battle and

now we were gearing up for the big war, but the big war hadn't started yet. So there was a two- or three-week period that we weren't real focused. But at that point, you know, Governor Clinton sat down with the staff and some changes were made. And I think that's actually when James came into the headquarters and took over the "War Room." And when he came in and took over the War Room, focus came back. Because we went up. I remember when I set the room up for communications, they called and said, "We're setting up the War Room." And it was just the fact that we had this quick rapid-response room, made us feel focused again, and the fact that we knew that whatever Bush threw at us, we were ready for it. And that's when things picked right back up. I've rambled a lot here, but I don't feel like there was ever a low point, but that was the only time that there was any problem inside the campaign with morale at all. And I think it was—I mean, you had that natural letdown after the convention, you know, you say, "Geez, everyone's peaking," and then had that little letdown until the Republicans came back and put the fire right back into it.

DB: After the Republican convention, as I understand it, our phones just rang off the hook.

AA: Oh, yes. Our calling volume increased about 40 percent during the Republican National Convention.

DB: They did us a great favor?

AA: They did. It was wonderful. You know, I'm not a political strategist, but knowing middle America like I do, being a part of what I consider middle America, all of my friends and family and everyone was just, "I can't believe that," the way the

Republican National Convention went. My father's been a card-carrying Republican for years and years and years, and he was proud that I was working with the campaign and was standing up for what I felt were the right ideals and so forth. And after the Republican National Convention, he came over. He started wearing Clinton buttons. So it was wonderful.

DB: What, for you, was the absolute high point of this incredible year?

AA: There are actually two major-league high points for me. Well, two or three, that come to mind. One is that I was very much a part of the Democratic National Convention with everything that was involved with that. And Bill Clinton's acceptance speech was just an incredible high for me, because being in the service department, I had a pass that allowed me area access, so when he came in I was backstage, just to make sure that everything was functioning properly. And he came through and he shook my hand, as he did everyone else, and then I walked out front and I was standing there watching him make his acceptance speech. And I was on the floor of the convention and I was standing there. My wife had flown up for the convention, and my wife and I were standing there and Stephen Stills came up and stood beside me and we stood and we were watching this. And I looked over and he looked at me and he shook my hand and said, "This is great, isn't it?" And I looked up and I just got chills going up and down my back as Governor Clinton was speaking. It was such a great speech. And it was just a high point to that point in the campaign. And the tag line—and I have no idea who wrote this tag line—but it was the best line when he finished up with "I still believe in a place called Hope." And I don't know who wrote that, but they

deserve a medal, because it was—it was indescribable for me. It was much an adrenaline rush—you know, the adrenaline was pumping through your body and you feel so good about what you're doing and what you're about to do. And it was a real high point. The second high point for me was election night when he made his acceptance speech, or the speech where he said, “Yes, we've won, we've done it,” and he used the tag line again and we were all down there and everyone was singing and we were at the Old State House, and it brought me back to when he announced for the presidency. I was working that day and wasn't able to come down, but I was very much in support of his candidacy at that point and I thought, “I really need to go volunteer.” And I went down and started very seriously considering volunteering when the New Hampshire primary was going on. And then I came down to headquarters shortly thereafter.

DB: What do you want history to know about this campaign?

AA: That several hundred people from all over the country, from very diverse ethnic and financial and professional backgrounds, ranging from kids right out of college to business professionals like myself who took leaves of absence, and people like the Eli Segals who put their businesses and personal and professional lives on hold and came together for something that they truly believed in—and truly believed that they could change America in spite of the fact that the Republicans had been in control for twelve years and had these gargantuan approval ratings that were through the ceiling. That this diverse group of people came together and, in spite of all the odds stacked against them, persevered and can change

America. And that we can all make a difference. And that this group of people really has made a difference and now we believe that change will continue for the better.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]