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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Lisa M. Caputo

Campaign Position: Hillary Clinton's Press Secretary

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 10, 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. Lisa M. Caputo 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: When did you first join the campaign?

Lisa Caputo: I joined the campaign at the end of June, to run or direct the vice-presidential press operations at the convention.

DB: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

LC: I was Senator Tim Wirth's press secretary. So when Senator Wirth decided not to run again for reelection, the campaign called me and asked if I'd go to New York and set up and run the vice president's press operation. To which I responded, "Sure, but for whom am I working?" I didn't know at that point. I went to New York and did that. It was in New York that I met Hillary's staff. They asked me if I'd be interested in being her press secretary. I said, "Absolutely, positively, I would love to." I interviewed with several staffers and then a week or so later I was called and told, "Get on a plane to Little Rock." And I've been here ever since.

DB: How would you describe the unique aspect of being press secretary to a spouse rather than to a candidate?

LC: I'd have to say that I didn't know what to expect. I had spent most of my career, although it's not very long, working for a member of the House of Representatives. Working for the 1988 presidential campaign for Governor Dukakis. And then working for Senator Wirth. So I had always, one, worked for a male; and two, worked for the principal. I wasn't sure what to expect working for a principal, but a principal who was a spouse. I thought that this would be an interesting change. And, also, Hillary is so different. I mean, all I had read really fascinated me and intrigued me. What I found was I worked for someone who was just as political as

the principals, just as savvy as the principals, was even more well read on the issues than the principals. So what I found was somebody who was like the major principal. Yes, there were differences in terms of being a spouse and not being in the forefront of the press attention and the demand was a little different. But what I found was in reality the demand was extremely high—the attention was tremendous because of the type of person she is and the unfortunate tactics of the Republican Party and their brand of politics to blow everything out of proportion and twist her legal writings out of context. The experience for me has been incredible because I watched someone who's a spouse act in a manner, or be like a principal, which is, as I said, someone who is politically savvy, someone who is incredibly bright and very quick on her feet, who gets it, as I say. I mean she gets it. And someone who had the uncanny ability to deliver a twenty-five minute speech with no preparation, no text, no notes, in paragraphs that are all tied together, and the speech flows beautifully. It's sort of a running joke that I have with the press corps, because they always ask me for a copy of her prepared text. And I laugh and I say, "It doesn't exist. In two or three days when I transcribe the tapes, sure. But forget it, there will never be a prepared text." I mean, that's not Hillary.

DB: Has it been frustrating to you, knowing these qualities that she has, that the inquiries ask about style and ask about home furnishings—things that are not her highest priority?

LC: It's not frustrating to me so much as it is a big adjustment for me and for her, I know, as well. I know that those are things that I have to deal with, it's part of my job. She had to deal with them as well as part of her role as first lady. These are not

the first calls I return. The first calls I return are a discussion on the issues, on her work on children's issues, or things of that nature. So it's not so frustrating, it's more of an adjustment, I think, especially for me.

DB: Has it been difficult for you being this important communications link with a public that is maybe not yet ready for a spouse who is politically savvy, knowledgeable?

LC: I don't think it's the public so much as it is the press. Hillary represents many of my generation, young working women who are just starting to be mothers. A lot of my friends are just starting to get married. One or two just had their first child and are working. I think it's certainly true of people in their thirties. So I think that she represents the juggling act, if you will, of being a mother and having a career that so many women across the country are now doing, either by choice or not by choice, but forced to do so economically. So I think there's an acceptance certainly out there, by the majority of American women and men. What I see is a curious speculation on the part of the press corps looking for a story. I see a press corps that wants to make a mountain out of a molehill strictly because there's never been a woman who's had a career in the White House and been a mother. What I think it is, is that the American press corps hasn't been able to accept the generational change. This is a generational change. Hillary has said repeatedly, and I think she's absolutely right, if Bill were running for governor of Arkansas again she wouldn't have gone through the kind of scrutiny she went through during the campaign. And wouldn't be under a microscope like she is now. She went through it once before. People in Arkansas know her and what she stands for. Nationally, you know, the American press corps hasn't accepted a generational change yet. In many ways, I

think, Bill and Hillary Clinton are ahead, if you will, in their generation of being two working parents. Most, or at least many people in their forties are not maybe of that same stature. I mean, even look at the Gores. There are distinct similarities, but there is a difference. It's the same generation, however. Tipper doesn't work and is a full time mother. So I think the Clintons are ahead for their generation and are opening the door for what's to come in future generations. It's maybe just a little ahead of the curve for the American press corps.

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

LC: Well, I'd start with the principals. I think campaigns and organizations and how they operate, their failure or successes, are a reflection of the principals. I think certainly that Bill Clinton and Al Gore were the type of candidates who not only understood the process, but knew how to run a campaign. Knew what were the issues that were important, knew what struck a chord with the American public and most importantly were passionate and cared so deeply about the issues that they talked about. You weren't getting a politician's answer when you talked to Bill Clinton and Al Gore. When you shake Bill Clinton's hand, he's not looking over your shoulder. He looks you in the eye and he listens to what you say, and he responds. So I'd start there. In addition, there was an incredible wealth of talent in this campaign that I don't think has been seen in past campaigns. Certainly not in the last campaign I worked in. This campaign brought together a lot of people who had never been together in a campaign, who brought to the table different talents.

From a media perspective, I truly believe one of the biggest reasons that the campaign succeeded was the physical structure of where we were situated. The fact that we were in a newspaper building. The core of the campaign being press and scheduling. Communications obviously. But press and scheduling were in one room and functioned like a newsroom so that the communication was consistent. There was a tremendous amount of time saved and fluid communication. You could see everybody. You could talk to everybody. There weren't any missed signals or things lost in communication. I think that as well was a big factor.

DB: You were in the Dukakis campaign?

LC: Yes. I was the national issues press secretary in the Dukakis campaign. I also did his briefings.

DB: So you see a big difference between the two campaigns. What were some of the differences?

LC: Structurally it was different. Let me start again with the principals. Two totally different principal candidates. They are just night and day. Bill Clinton is 100 times more personable than Mike Dukakis. As far as how intelligent both are, I think they're both incredibly intelligent. I think that perhaps Dukakis is more of an intellectual. Bill Clinton is not only an intellectual, but politically smart and street smart. I don't think Dukakis had that. Dukakis couldn't connect with people. Furthermore, Dukakis didn't have a game plan, I believe, after he won the nomination. He sort of plateaued and he didn't know where to go. I believe that was because he wasn't sure he wanted to be president. Bill Clinton knew he wanted

to be president because he cared so deeply. I don't think that was true of Mike Dukakis.

DB: Organizationally, how were the campaigns different?

LC: First, we were in Boston and immediately that sends a message. There were a lot of references to the ivory tower in Boston. The fact that the campaign had a lot of Harvard intellectuals. I don't think that was such a big deal. There was some infighting within the campaign. Different camps. I guess you have that in any campaign. There wasn't the kind of camaraderie that we had in this campaign. This amazed me, how well people worked together. Everybody united for a cause. I could never understand why that wasn't the same in the Dukakis campaign. It was such an obvious thing to occur. We were in a ten-story building, we had nine of the ten floors. So you were constantly, and this may sound silly, but constantly going up and down in an elevator. The press was on the second floor, scheduling was in another room on the second floor. Issues was on the ninth floor. Political was on the fourth floor. Communications was on the fourth floor. Field was on the ninth floor. I mean, it was all over the place.

DB: Were the managers up at the top or . . . ?

LC: The managers were down at the bottom. But the issues director was on the ninth floor with issues. The campaign manager was on the second floor in the executive offices. The communications director was on the fourth floor. It was all over. And there was *no* rapid response. You asked me before what was one of the biggest successes. By far that was a real, real contributing factor, I believe, to this success. Probably that's the biggest lesson that people in this campaign, like George

Stephanopoulos and James Carville and Paul Begala and Ricky Seidman—all of those people learned from the '88 campaign, the need to respond quickly and before your opponent, at times, has the chance to make the attack. I think that's one of the biggest things that George brought to this campaign was the understanding of communications and the need for rapid response.

DB: When were you certain that Clinton would get the presidential nomination? You weren't with the campaign during the primaries.

LC: No. I watched Clinton with a real close eye. In fact, I hope Tim Wirth never hears this, but I wanted to come work for the campaign just because he intrigued me. So he was always my personal favorite out of the chute with the other slew of candidates. I was too superstitious to pick a winner, I guess. I thought he could do it. When was I absolutely sure? I was never absolutely sure until we got back from the thirty-hour plane ride, November 3. After going around the country, and coming back to Little Rock and seeing the kind of response he drew in McAllen, Texas; Denver, Colorado . . . these incredible insane hours of the morning—that was when I knew. I mean, it was hard for me to get a perspective throughout the campaign, because you're jetting from here to there, everywhere. I'd be with Hillary. Then I'd be with the governor. Then on the bus tour. So I never knew what was supposed to be the snapshot sort of the American temperature on Bill Clinton. Someone who was a very close mentor to me told me four years ago to watch Bill Clinton.

DB: Even after that speech at the Democratic National Convention?

LC: I watched him on the *Tonight Show*. Someone said, "Watch him." And I did. I watched him. I watched him real closely. He made a real impression on me. I'd

never met him. I knew people who knew him and spoke so highly of him. Then I watched him in the fall. I knew George. When George went to work for him, I thought, "I know I'm right about this guy." To draw somebody like George, I just knew that there was something special there. Another mentor of mine kept telling me I needed to go work for Bill Clinton. I kept saying, "I know that, but I have a U.S. senator that's up for reelection and is targeted and my hands are tied." I would sit there and grapple because I would read all this and I would offer to help in any way I could. I would call, whatever I could do. I helped with things in Colorado, acquiring lists for them or whatever they needed. I always knew he was a different kind of candidate. I just knew. Ever since I was told to start watching him four years ago.

DB: Did you realize then what a major part Hillary would play?

LC: No, I didn't.

DB: When did you begin realizing that? After you joined the campaign?

LC: No. Well before. I watched the campaign closely, out of just my pure interest in politics. I read. I was an avid reader of everything they were doing. It was through reading about him, really last fall, that I began to learn about her, and what an interesting person she was. And now I feel that she's his biggest asset. I really feel that way.

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

LC: Well, I can only speak to when I was on board because I wasn't around for everything that happened. I know that many say that those weeks in New Hampshire were the absolute low point.

DB: Okay, what was the worst thing that happened to you in the campaign? What was the worst day, the worst event, the worst time?

LC: One of the worst events was in Bowling Green, Kentucky. It was like our fourth stop of the day and we were going to another city right after that. We had an event at a vocational technical school. It was the stupidest event. We flew in. I can't believe we were in Bowling Green more than an hour. Flew in. Drove to the school, walked through a beauty salon, a carpentry shop and outside to this mini-house that they built. Then we all kind of stood there—no one really saying anything. I said, "Hillary, why don't we hold a brief press availability?" She said, "I think that would be a good idea." All they asked was about her role in the debate, or debates. It was not well advanced. It was a stupid event. There wasn't really a message attached to it. We all walked out of there very unhappy. So that was, I think, the worst event.

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

LC: Well, the convention, for me, is what will stand in my mind. It was just an incredible night. It was remarkable. Even though at that time I wasn't working for Hillary, I was still a part of the campaign. It was remarkable. I think that some of the bus tours—the first bus tour I went on, which was the second one through Iowa and Wisconsin. We started in St. Louis. I could not believe the fact that people were lining the streets. We would arrive in these small little towns at midnight and they would be standing out there with candles. I was so moved. I could not believe what I was seeing. I had never seen anything like it. I was saying, "Can you believe this?" And people were like, "Ya, ya ya." Because they had already done this and

seen. That had already taken place emotionally on the first bus tour. That was a definite high point. I have to say another high point were all the laughs we had on the plane with Hillary. I mean, it's a side that I hope the American public gets to know. And the press gets to know. She has a great sense of humor. We would laugh it up constantly on the plane. In fact, the governor said on election night, "I want to thank you all for making Hillary laugh." And we did. We laughed constantly. It was a great release of tension and anxiety.

DB: The chemistry with you all that traveled with Hillary was absolutely wonderful.

LC: We all got along so well. We called ourselves "Herc and the Girls." It was true. I'll never forget on our way to Detroit, we popped in a Motown tape and we were going to see the Four Tops that night. Governor Blanchard had organized a big fund-raiser with the Four Tops. We popped in the Motown tape and got Hillary in the aisle and dancing to the Motown. That's what it was all about. The high point for me was getting to know her and discovering so many similarities that I have with her. How we joked. She spent her summers in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I'm from Wilkes-Barre, which is called the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton area. We called each other the "Local Girl." There have been so many high points for me. Election night. What an incredible feeling election night was. I have to say, I will never forget, I was in the basement of the mansion election night—there were a few of us who were going to ride over in the motorcade to the Old State House. Nancy Hernreich just stashed me at the top of the stairwell right on the second floor from the basement, because there were a number of photographers who wanted to get upstairs to take pictures of the special moment when he went over the top. I said "That's not going to happen.

This is a private moment. This is a family moment.” There were a few who were trying to get up the stairs and I stopped them. He went over the top, which I missed seeing on television ’cause I was standing at the top of the stairs. Down came the governor from the third floor, with a big smile and he said, “Hey, kiddo, we did pretty well didn’t we?” And I just thought, it just hit me, “I’m standing here with the president.” I gave him a big hug and I said, “Congratulations, Governor. This is so great. I don’t mean Governor.” He said, “That’s okay. I know what you mean.” I’ll never forget that moment. It was the most amazing feeling to be standing there and there he was.

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

LC: I think that this campaign was a campaign that tried to deliver the country back to the people. To people like me who at the age of twenty-eight felt after five years in Washington, “I don’t have my country.” Now I can say, “I have my country back.” I have a say. This campaign was a grassroots campaign. It defined what old-fashioned campaigning is all about. The term “all politics is local.” That’s what this campaign was all about. I think that’s what it should be remembered for. It was a campaign of the people and for the people. That reached out to America. That drove through America and didn’t fly over America. That’s what I think it should be remembered for.

DB: You wanted to add something about the free media.

LC: Free media as it pertains to Hillary, because that’s where I was directly involved. From the broader perspective, this campaign made incredible use of free media. It

controlled it to the point where it could set an agenda and it could control the free media. It was amazing how James and George and Mandy and others could drive the correct free media on what they wanted. From my perspective with Hillary, I sat down with Maggie Williams and discussed with Susan Thomases the need for a grassroots press strategy for Hillary. That she is best when she is talking about her issues and going into the communities. I made a conscious effort, and we all made a conscious decision that our strategy would be to focus on local press. That would be Hillary Clinton's press strategy. So we would turn away national press interviews or turn away national press corps from traveling with us on the plane because our focus was local. Everywhere she went she held a press availability, sometimes two or three in the same city. Did one-on-one interviews with the local paper and television stations. Did radio. I mean, radio was a huge part of her agenda. She was great at it. I strongly believe that radio is the most under-utilized media. We did a full court press in every aspect of that. Utilizing what I believe are the under-utilized methods of free media, which is the state and regional press and radio. It was an incredible success. We have a clip file on clips of Hillary that is unbelievable, that I will now use to educate the national press about Hillary Clinton. Front page in every state we went into. Lead story on the newscasts. Doing the a.m. drive radio shows. It paid off. That was one of our huge successes. Our media strategy was a home run. It really was.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]