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## **Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)**

### **1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews**

Interview with Steven A. Cohen  
Campaign Position: Press Advance  
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. Steven A. Cohen 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 and what were your first responsibilities?

Steve Cohen: I first joined the campaign on October 14 two weeks after the announcement. My first responsibilities were pretty much undefined. There weren't a lot of people down here, so it was just whatever—answer the phones, take down the Governor's phone interview requests, clip the newspapers—just about anything.

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

SC: I had graduated college the summer before. I spent the summer traveling. And waited for candidates to announce for president, so I could determine who I was going to work for. That was basically what I was doing.

DB: So nobody reached out and got you? You presented yourself to the campaign?

SC: Yes. I drove down and just showed up.

DB: You chose Clinton. Why?

SC: It was sort of a process of elimination. I thought about Senator Kerrey and Governor Clinton. I did a little research and just took a little leap of faith. A lot of luck.

DB: Then your responsibilities began to expand.

SC: As some structure took place and we actually had a press department and different departments, I think responsibilities became more solidified. There were just two of us in the press office, so it was doing the same things in terms of interview requests,

putting out daily schedules. Being an information source for the press. Again, doing whatever it took to make a press office work, when it was just two of us.

DB: The other was?

SC: Richard Mintz, at the time.

DB: Then you started traveling. How did this come about?

SC: Right. When we drew a larger press corps early on, than most candidates, simply because of some of the troubles drew a large contingency. Attack pack journalism. We had to have somebody out on the road to assist in some of the more menial tasks that the hierarchy didn't have time to do, such as just simply the flow of basic information and just moving the press and getting them where they needed to go. When they had troubles—it could be as simple as if they lost their bag the night before at the hotel—they came to me. They wanted to know how much filing time they had, they came to me. If the phone didn't work in the phone center, I had to somehow fix it. So all these things,

DB: That you were “highly trained” for.

SC: Exactly, that I was faking most of the time.

DB: Where did you go to college?

SC: Washington University in St. Louis.

DB: And you didn't major in phone fixing?

SC: No, political science. But all those things before that time were going through George and Dee Dee, who don't have the time to deal with phones and bags and schedules, and stuff like that. So they put me out there. Actually it was a little

simpler than that because we had nobody who was billing the press. So we went for weeks and had no idea who was flying on the plane. We had a system if you wanted to fly, it was like, “Sure, come along as long as we have a seat for you.” But no one ever wrote down their names. And then we got a bill and we realized that we were going to foot the bill. So I originally came on the plane with credit card machines and I walked the aisles with the credit card machine and took people’s credit card prints until we got a more sophisticated system. So it was most simplistic why I was there.

DB: Could you have imagined when this started out that you would be flying with the Presidential Press Corps?

SC: Not at all. When they first told me I was going out, one of the first things I did—I was still in the office at 2:00 a.m. and I called my brother on the east coast at 3:00 a.m. and told him that I was going to fly out with Governor Clinton in the morning. And back then we were only on a nine-seater plane, so it wasn’t as though we were getting on this huge plane and I would never get to see him. We were going to be right there.

DB: Knee to knee.

SC: Exactly. So I was excited, nervous, and all those things.

DB: Do you remember your first personal exchange with Governor Clinton?

SC: The very first one came only ten days after I had come down to Little Rock. It was a Sunday and we were working in the office. It was around the thirtieth, maybe two weeks. We had just moved into our second headquarters on Third and Pulaski.

Somebody came running in and said that Mrs. Clinton had called that everyone was invited for lunch over at Mack McLarty's house. There were a lot of fund-raisers in town and Hillary thought it would be nice, since it was a new town, and there were a lot of volunteers, "Why don't we just bring these people over?" It was Sunday, and we were all in sweats and unshaven. I was truly nervous about going over there. I sort of hung back. I said, "You all go on without me." But they dragged me over there. We went to his house, this gorgeous home, and we didn't know too many people, so a bunch of us were out on the balcony, kind of a good place to hide. But, actually, the governor came. It was the first time I had seen him. He was in casual clothes. He was in a leather jacket, like a Paramount Studio jacket, some Hollywood jacket. He came right out to the balcony after making his way through the crowd. It was like he and four others of us and he sat there for about forty-five minutes. You could see the Arkansas River, and he was pointing out different things and folklore, and stuff like that. At that moment you felt the presence of greatness. You felt the specialty. Other people you can walk by and you can feel no electricity. But he controls. I remember he was talking with his hands—big giant, almost like paws cutting through the air—talking about it. Overcome.

DB: They don't teach you about that in political science?

SC: No, they don't. Something that's happened to me all the time on the campaign was my brain trying to take it all in. My brain was saturated. I'm trying to remember every detail. I almost wanted to take notes on what he was saying that day. Just trying to remember when I got home so I could call my brother and say, "You'll

never believe this.” There was a bunch of those happenings one after the other. The next day someone asked to take something over to the mansion. Again, I had never been to a governor’s mansion before in my life. Never thought I would be there. That was pretty neat. When I was over there he was in the kitchen. It was always interesting to see people in such casual atmosphere. You don’t think of somebody like Governor Clinton coming to the kitchen for a snack. Well actually now you do, but it was just kind of strange to see him in such a common place.

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

SC: The people, for one. Such an efficient, driven team. Maybe it came from years of losing. I had never worked on a campaign, but started getting in the office at 6:45 in the morning because you felt driven by people like George, and so forth, who were getting there. It just trickled down. It started at the top with George and David and so forth, and it just made people like me come. You were driven, and you were trying to be efficient and committed and work hard and fast. No task was too small and no thing too unimportant to do. That started early on, and as more people came down I think you caught the fever of what everybody was committed to. It was easy. One thing that hadn’t been mentioned was that people were so nice. They were so easy to work for. One of the things that was the best thing, written by *The New York Times* when they were talking about the different staffs, they said that our staff reflected its candidate. There were people who liked people and who worked hard. It was contagious. So the early stages laid

the foundation as it built and grew into this big, big process. Also, our communications—the way we used communications, in terms of getting out the Governor’s message every day on radio and TV. The whole idea of the “War Room,” putting that together. It was revolutionary. I don’t think that there will ever be another campaign that doesn’t have a War Room—a system for getting out your messages quickly.

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

SC: From being out on the road seeing it? One of the most efficient things that we did was we started transferring all of our paper to electronic mail, instead of faxing it. We used to fax things, which is a really inefficient way of doing things. It just seemed every time you want to fax something, a fax machine on the other end was jammed, or something. Well, if you’re trying to get a fax to the governor and he’s doing an interview in a half an hour and the paper’s jammed, what are you going to do? So what we started doing is we put everything in the computer. So on the other end all they need is a telephone line and they tapped into your computer and just printed it. So things like that were moving quicker and cleaner, and people kept other people from seeing it. We didn’t have to use hotel fax machines anymore. We could use our own person’s computer to download it and just print it. So we just cut out a tremendous amount of work in terms of that. So we were getting information to the governor, to the staff, and to the press. We got this thing up and running. We were able to put up press releases within minutes. The governor would give a

speech, within fifteen minutes the press would have the paper. We never left any time for the press to speculate about things because we tried to put our answer in their hands. So if the Republicans were attacking, we already had the answer in their hands, or we tried in the best-case scenario. If their surrogate was in Arkansas saying that we raised taxes 128 times, we would try within the hour have the correct answer. If it was fifteen pages long, it didn't take much to put it in the computer and just print it, copy it, and it was in their hands. It was so well oiled. It came from people like George, Dee Dee—just the communication in terms of the press. It just seemed like it was really well run. Jeff Eller had all these communications systems up. It made life really nice and easy. You knew you had a support system for each little piece.

DB: So the travel party knew that there was this massive and very effective support system.

SC: The people who were on the road the most time knew it really well because we didn't have that system for so long. When things were in their infancy, you don't have a lot of money, you don't have a lot of structure, and the only person you worried about was the Governor.

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

SC: It built. We went to this event. The first one I went to was the Democratic Rainbow Coalition. I was walking in. Kerrey had a table set up, Harkin had a table set up. It was the first time I had ever realized that these guys were really in it. I saw these people who could have been me—twenty-two-year-old kids who were so feverishly

for Kerrey. I'm thinking there were people out there for somebody else. When I went on the road, I got a better perspective. I felt, except for some of the dark days around the Jennifer Flowers thing—which, in all honesty, I was nervous about those days—I felt in my heart that we were going to get out of it. I believed the governor in all that he said, but I wasn't sure that his truthfulness was going to be enough. I thought that the press would get the better of him. Sometimes they do that in spite of the truth, obviously. I'm not sure which day, but you could feel that we had that under control. There was a YMCA rally in New Hampshire within that forty-eight hours, a "We were with you" type of rally. You could just feel it in the crowd. I was standing next to somebody else and we were talking to each other and saying, "This is just crazy. He is the one. He's the best one for it." You could just feel it. I remember Frank Greer had this thing all done up. People even used some clips for an ad. You felt it that night that he was going to be okay. I remember being in the office the morning after the state chairs in Chicago, when the clips came out. I spent all day faxing those clips all over the country so that everybody knew how well we really did. From that day on was when it really began. That morning we really broke it apart. From then on, we really didn't look back. The scandals tried to slow us down, but we didn't look back. We had a great December with fund-raising, all the stuff in Time when they put us on the cover, nine months before they had ever put a presidential candidate on the cover. Cuomo staying out—that was a good feeling, although I don't know if I was being spun by our own officials.

George had me believe that if Cuomo got in it would almost be better. I don't know if that's campaign spin, but I bought it. We'd be the clear choice for most people.

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

SC: After the convention and the initial bus trip. It started to feel real, as early as July. Perot, at his first run—it seemed he would come down between five and eight percentage points. And if Bush could do anything right. Although I'm not sure if I thought the Governor was going to win, I just couldn't see the other two men winning, either. I knew we were going to be in it until the end. Then we started going from city to city and state to state. From July to the Republican convention, it was just incredible. I think every rally was the most unbelievable, energetic rally. He was connecting with everybody. It was out of control. We couldn't go to hotels at 2:00 a.m. because there were three hundred people in the lobby. I remember every day, I would say, "Oh, my God. It's 3:00 a.m., we're tired and I know there are going to be hundreds of people in the lobby." And he'd want to shake everyone's hand. Everyone. And you're witnessing this amazing thing. It was translating into unbelievable press. He was in an unbelievable mood. And you could feel from the press—they were starting to talk about the winning. You could truly see the White House correspondents were asking for stints with us. So they would switch off to see what all the noise was about, and they would tell me, "It's like a funeral march on the other side." When you started processing all that—after the Republican convention was such a disaster, it was so abominable that I started believing that we were going to win this thing. Then when it got down toward the

end and Bush was surging—he was doing well. But when we did that Western Governors tour into these states that were not Democratic states and the crowds and the energy, it was inevitable that things would go our way. And it certainly did.

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

SC: The low point was sitting in the press office watching CNN during the Gennifer Flowers tapes. Actually, the tapes that they played on the radio weren't the same as TV, and we kept cutting back to the TV to the radio. We were listening to them and you could feel the energy being zapped out of everybody because you worked so hard and for something like this—it would have been fine to lose on policy, but for something like this, it was low. To see somebody like George walking around—he's not full with emotion, but filled with hope—and you could see the hope drained out for the day. You went home. I remember talking to Mike Gauldin and asking him what he thought. He said, "Well, if we don't do something in the next seventy-two hours, we're all going home." You hate to hear that after something like that. I was pretty scared. But the next day came and, again, the efficient structure of finding the letters that were written that would contradict her story—finding this—just poking holes, finding that money was offered here. And all of a sudden it felt right again. Like, this is ridiculous, this is nonsense. It was the structure and the system that we used in positive ways, we had to use for negative ways. But it still worked. Instead of attacking the Republicans on some policy, we were attacking this ridiculous story. We just used the same system. That day felt better. The next

day more things came out. There was only one day, but that one day was the absolute lowest.

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

SC: I just had an unbelievable year. I just switched my high point to forty-eight hours ago when I was at the Blair House. I thought the Blair House was unbelievable. When he called me on my birthday was pretty special. I wasn't on the road for that. Hillary and the governor called me. There are so many. Sometimes it was a high point when he came off the stage and I would be standing there and he'd give me a high five. Just special moments like that were high points for me. There were so many rallies and events that I was privy to that were once in a lifetime, and all on the same level.

DB: Do you worry that the rest of your life's going to be downhill?

SC: I don't know if I've peaked at twenty-three. I've had an article written about me, and I'm worried that I'm going to be this old man sitting on a park bench showing this yellowed copy of this Washington Post article, saying I was something at twenty-three. So I hoped I haven't peaked too early.

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

SC: What I tell my friends at home when I was there at Thanksgiving and they ask me, "What is Bill Clinton really like?" That is what they always ask. I always tell them that the excitement that I take forward is that history will actually learn what some of us, which you, are unbelievably privileged to know about this man. It's coming soon. It'll take some time. Even though we elected him president, I don't think a lot

of people know who he is. They will understand that when he works a rope line now he's working it because he wants to touch the people, he wants the interaction. This man genuinely cares. I always tell them that when he came off stage he would continue to talk about this. He never shut the door and said, "Thank God, that's over with." He was always like, "Did you see the woman in the front row?" Or, "Could you believe that guy who yelled out he doesn't have any money for this." It never stopped. It's so deep in his bones, the commitment to helping people. He's got that special quality. That's what I think everyone will learn.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]