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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with David C. Leavy
Campaign Position: Assistant Press Secretary
Little Rock, Arkansas
November 18, 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. David C. Leavy 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?

David Leavy: I was a field director in Maine, for the caucuses, which was the next vote right after New Hampshire. I did that from about January 1 to February 23, I believe was the date. Then I went back to school and finished off—

DB: School where?

DL: Colby College, in Waterville, Maine. Then came down here in May and worked in Little Rock to the end.

DB: As assistant press secretary, describe what you did on a typical day.

DL: My role was basically to make sure the whole department ran. I was Dee Dee's personal assistant. So that role had me overseeing all the different arms and legs of the press operation. My specific duties, other than just sort of office manager role, was all the releases and speeches, and transcripts—all the written word, I was sort of the keeper of that. So every release that came out would come through my desk. I would move it to the states, and to the road, and to all the wires, and the press. I was sort of the funnel, the crux for all the statements and stuff, the speeches and whatnot. Dee Dee's support work, too.

DB: There was such a concern about making sure that everybody was speaking with the same voice. Did you have responsibilities just for processing the paper, or was there any substantive looking at what was being said?

DL: I proofed everything that came out. I did as best a job as I could. It was funny because one of the biggest typos that the campaign had was the typo of the date for the Caspar Weinberger indictment release that we put out. Do you remember? The date was the day before. Michael Walden actually wrote it, and it came out of George's shop, but no one caught that date. Bob Dole was running with it after the election, that we knew about it. Really, it was hard. It was an awesome responsibility. I think it is a point that I have certainly learned and tried to keep in focus. For someone who's my age—I am twenty-two—to have this as a first real working experience right after school. I mean, it is tremendous. I was so lucky.

DB: There is nowhere to go but down?

DL: I know. Seriously, I was just saying this to my mother too, or talking about going home for Thanksgiving. I will never get to do anything like this again.

DB: Don't say, "Never." But it is true—you began at the heartbeat of everything that is happening.

DL: Right now working for the transition, we are seeing an entire government form right in front of our eyes. We are here in the middle of it—the center of all the action. It is just a tremendous experience, and one that we are lucky to be a part of.

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

DL: I was lucky enough to work for Dukakis in 1988. I worked in Boston for nine months for that campaign. I had a reference point. From the day I got down there, you could just feel—it was a better-organized campaign.

DB: How better?

DL: A lot better. The first thing is, and it is really true, the candidate himself. The loyalty to the governor was a lot stronger than Dukakis. People identified with him. The staff connected with him. I don't think you had that with Dukakis. So, this time around—there couldn't be any infighting or petty bickering this time. We had enough problems trying to win as it is, that we couldn't create our own. You didn't have that in Dukakis. You had a lot of bickering at the top. I think the governor sort of set the tone. People were a lot more loyal to him. So they were going to put their individual differences aside and say, "All right, we have to work for the common good. I will swallow my pride a little bit." So from the top down, people were more focused on actually winning—winning this time, and not creating more problems. The way they brought everyone together for the meetings in the morning and the night really can't be overstated. It really can't be. When you are all there, you have that team feeling, that coming together, all being on the same page. What we are talking about. What is going on in the campaign. It really makes a difference. I think that the quality of people—I know specifically for Dee Dee and George, who I come in contact with most on a daily basis—they are just great people. Very professional, just very cool. They were good managers.

DB: You used an interesting phrase. You said from the top down. And that is one thing I am trying to explore because the impression is that this campaign was tightly organized, highly disciplined team. But inside, it felt a lot looser.

DL: It's true. It's true.

DB: So how do you explain that?

DL: Well, I think—I am sure one analogy may be when Desert Storm—everyone thought General Schwarzkopf and all the generals ran a great war, and they were all organized. I think if you were in some of those meetings before, it may have been a little more disorganized. I think a lot is the public perception. I think everyone was on the same page as far as what we were talking about. We had a message. We were running on something. Everyone knew what to talk about. Whenever anyone did any interviews, or was in the public, you always stressed a certain—you know, the economy, change versus more of the same. The same points. When everyone has that focus, and the Bush campaign didn't, the public perception was, all those guys are always talking about the economy. They are so organized. Inside, you know, it was a little more by the seat of the pants. Campaigns, I think, are generally disorganized operations. Building this huge—

DB: But let me ask, comparing this to Dukakis's, which organization would you say was more hierarchical?

DL: It is hard to say that. In one respect, Dukakis's was. Susan Estrich, who was sort of the James or David of our campaign, she had a really big office. Her desk was all the way in the back of the room. She had a big iron door, it seemed like. Every time you went in there, like going all the way back to Susan's office, it was very intimidating. James was on the couch in the middle of the "War Room." Right there, I think you had more contact with the top. Another problem was that there were so many people who thought they were in charge. Their roles were ill defined for the Dukakis campaign. You had two or three people who thought they were the communications director. John Sasso and Susan Estrich both thought they were the

top dog. So where it was rigid, it was also disorganized in that respect. You didn't have sort of set rules. Where this campaign—everyone knew when George came out and said something, he spoke for the governor. You took that. No one questioned his authority or Bruce Lindsey's, everyone knew where the orders and where the direction was coming from. There was never any question about that.

DB: What was your personal low point?

DL: My personal low point is actually a really funny story. We have so many dealings. We talk to press all day long. We have to be very, very careful about what we say, and what we do. There was a time at the convention—one of my jobs as sort of the guy who knows everything, makes sure everything runs, was running the operation at the Intercontinental in New York. It was such a zoo.

DB: I remember the pressroom. That was the worst thing I had ever seen in my life.

DL: We had ten thousand press in the city. It was really crazy. All these hordes of press would always come to the door of our pressroom. They would always be clambering for any little piece of mere information that they could get. They used to go through our trash bins looking for memos and stuff. It was that bad. One day, I was out there, and there were six or seven people around me. I thought it was mostly volunteers and staff members. The governor didn't go jogging that morning. One person chimed up and said, "Why didn't he go jogging?" I said, "I really have no idea." They said, "There must be some reason." I said, "I really don't know." They said, "You have to give me one reason why he didn't go jogging." I was very flippant. I was very offhand. I said, "Maybe he had gas." The next day, *New York Post* article, "Clinton with—

DB: Gastritis?

DL: Yes. They built the whole story around that little quote. I saw the article. My heart dropped. I couldn't believe. It was funny, Dee Dee pulled me aside that afternoon. She was mad. I clearly made a mistake. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have ever even—in that situation, it was just a big, big mistake. But you learn a lesson. You learn at an early age that you always have to watch what you say. You never want to—the good benchmark is you don't say anything that you wouldn't want to read in the headlines the next day. I was lucky to learn that at twenty-two. I think it was valuable because I never had any of those misquotes or anything the rest of the campaign. I was lucky that it sort of got buried in the whole media swamp of the convention. I am lucky that it wasn't on the front page. Knowing the *Post*, that they probably would have done it. That was the lowest point. I felt so bad the whole day, I was dragging. I was so bummed out.

DB: What was your high point?

DL: We were so lucky election night that they brought the whole staff down to the very front. I was the second person, right in front of the podium. Just to be there, at the heart, when the whole world is watching. To see him come out. There were tears in my eyes. You work so hard for so long. We were all down there in sort of a closed environment, working together, hanging out together, and socializing. You really bond with a lot of people. Hopefully we have friends for the rest of our lives. To all be down there, at that moment when they came out, was just a tremendous feeling. It really was. Memories for a lifetime.

DB: When were you convinced that he was going to be the nominee?

DL: The nominee? Well, there were certainly dark days, for a while there. I always thought he was going to win. That may sound—it is easy to look back on it with hindsight. I always thought he had something. He always connected. He had that little spark, even back in New Hampshire and Maine, he always had that little spark. I worked for Dukakis, and for a gubernatorial race in 1990, so I really wanted to jump on a campaign. I saw Kerrey speak back in October of 1991. He really didn't do much for me. But I saw the governor's speech, and I thought, "This guy—he is right on target." I started volunteering. I always had a feeling he was going to do it.

DB: When were you convinced that he was going to win?

DL: It is funny. Ethan is in there, who used to work at the press office. I told him when we were—it was June and we were in third place behind Perot and Bush, with, like, 19 percent. It was after the California primary. We were really scrapping to get somebody on the news. I said to him, "We are going to win with, like, 400 electoral votes." I always said that to him. I always said, "400. I tell you, 400." It was pretty close. I always knew we were going to win. I always felt it.

DB: What did you study in college?

DL: Political science.

DB: Was there anything that you studied in your classes that was useful in the campaign? As a political science professor, I am very interested in this question.

DL: I think the hands-on experience of a presidential campaign—you could just never learn that in textbooks. You really can't. This campaign was very revolutionary in many ways, as far as the media, the impact, the TV, and sort of the Larry King circuit. I did my senior thesis on the electoral map and what it was going to look

like in 1992. I think sort of the history of presidential races, and voting block, and where age groups and minorities—where that breaks down, where they vote, where they tend to learn. It was valuable, in sort of projecting this year. There is nothing like working.

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

DL: That is a tough question. There is a couple of things. One, I hope people will look back and see the inclusion of this campaign. This campaign was really run very well. It was a great campaign. So I hope people will look back and say that this campaign was in touch with the people, was able to tap into what people were feeling at the time. There was a lot of discontent, a lot of pain, the economy and unemployment. People wanted a change. You saw this on the street yesterday in Washington. The governor is such a people person. He really is. We were joking around about it. We are like Clinton junkies. We can't get enough of him. We were out to lunch and we missed the press conference today. I was so bummed out. I missed. You know, I see him every day. I don't want to miss anything. He is really a tremendous guy. I do think he will go down as one of the greatest presidents. I really think that. I don't know if I answered your question, though. It is hard. I think campaigns sort of get forgotten a little bit as time goes on. They are not really memorable events, the tracking points of someone's political history, or their administration.

DB: You think there was something special about this one?

DL: I really do. I mean, this was a historic time. With the ending of the Cold War, I really think this is the beginning of a new era. But also, Democrats haven't won in so long. You know, it has been twelve years. That is a really long time. This was really, I think, a positive campaign. In 1988, it was a negative campaign, generally. And I think people will look back and say, you may not have liked the governor, you may not have wanted to vote for him, or agreed with his programs, or his tax hikes, or whatever. He offered the people something. He really did provide hope. He gave people something to vote for. That is really an important point, that he offered something.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]