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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Steven M. Rabinowitz

Campaign Position: Director, Press Advance

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 2, 1992

Overview 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 M. Rabinowitz 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 is your name and what was your position with the campaign?

Steve Rabinowitz: People called me “Rabbi,” but I never really said how I felt about it. I’ll tell you a story. Before this campaign, about five people in the world called me Rabbi. Apparently, one of them introduced me into this campaign because, before I knew it, everybody called me Rabbi. Before I resolved in my mind how I felt about it, I decided that if I didn’t like it, the people would be uncomfortable with my saying anything about it and would feel awkward whenever they accidentally used it. I still say nothing.

DB: You did no circumcisions?

SR: My job was spiritual leader of the staff and press corps. No, it was overseeing the press advance, and I tried to help generate pretty pictures of the Clintons and later the Gores.

DB: When did you join the campaign?

SR: In late April, around the Illinois primary, I went to Chicago from Washington to help out the weekend before the Illinois primary. I stayed through primary night. A week later went to New York for two weeks. Worked on the New York primary and then went full time with the campaign a week later. Traveling part-time with Governor Clinton, jumping ahead to oversee the press advance a couple of days a week, spending some time in Little Rock. I started traveling

full-time in June. Have traveled with them everywhere he's gone, except to one funeral, since June.

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

SR: Was making a lot of money. No, I had a consulting firm in Washington. A communications consulting firm that specialized in media strategy—how to better use television and radio. This has been a wonderful opportunity to use whatever skills I might have acquired doing that.

DB: What does press advance involve?

SR: Press advance and my job, in particular, are a combination of trying to facilitate the press coverage possible, without allowing the media to interfere with an event or with the governor's space. It's a very fine line. Sometimes the best picture of him is one taken quite close, or, at least, that is the photographer's opinion. I spent six or eight months walking a very fine balance between accommodating what I thought were photographers' most important, but reasonable, needs, and protecting the Clintons.

DB: Would you describe your relationship by the end of the campaign as comfortable, friendly, hostile, or what—with the press that you worked with most?

SR: They are, literally, all of those things. They are comfortable, friendly, and hostile. We are friendly as people, but antagonistic by job description. I believe I made their lives easier, but I'm sure that I've made it difficult. But I don't work for them. I want to facilitate them, but not at anyone's I care about expense.

DB: You're speaking primarily in terms of visual images. Was that your particular responsibility?

SR: Yes, and some would say specialty—visual images—how the Clintons and the Gores were pictured—were photographed in still photographs and television. While, certainly, sometimes other press would be with us—radio and pencil press—my greatest concern has always been visual press. We had a pretty good campaign.

DB: I would think most people are still walking around in their heads with these beautiful, loveable, gorgeous images of the Clintons and Gores, so you must feel terrific.

SR: Yes. I'm very pleased. I didn't create any of the visuals, I just helped facilitate them. I didn't make Bill or Hillary Clinton or the Gores look the way they do, I just might have helped create the environment in which they were photographed. Or facilitated the position from which they were photographed.

DB: Is this something you can train someone to do, or is part of it perception and instinct?

SR: People say you have to have an eye for it. I don't know. We have a lot of good advance people. Different people see images different ways. It's very subjective. It's art.

DB: Who brought you in?

SR: A combination of Regan Burke, who had been our scheduler early on, and

Richard Mintz, who had been the temporary press secretary in the beginning.

But, since then, it's been Dee Dee Myers and Jeff Eller.

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

SR: That's easy. It started at the top with Bill and Hillary Clinton. They were just great people to work for. Not only directed in what they wanted to do, but genuinely good people. I didn't know them at all before the campaign. I'm sure everybody said the same thing. But it's a reflection on the Clintons' personally, and on the combination of the staff and the staff attitude. It was a young staff, aggressive, determined, and directed. There seemed to be virtually no self-service or self-serving motivations manifested in people's work. Who cares why people are working on the campaign? Clearly, everybody did what they did to further the same goal. There was little infighting. Almost no one jockeying for themselves. That's the kind of thing that holds a campaign together. That's what happened here.

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

SR: I think that what might appear internally as disarray is not seen so on the outside, if loyalty is maintained at the same time. Nobody, internally, in this campaign would have confused us with the finest-tuned organization that's ever worked, but we were very well directed and very loyal. That means cohesive. From the outside, that can be confused for extremely well organized, even if it might not be

so. If you had to choose between extremely well organized and highly loyal, that would be an easy choice to make.

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

SR: The night of the New York primary. I was fairly sure before it, but I was getting nervous. I never really bought into the brokered convention stuff or the last minute Cuomo scenario, or Bentsen, or anybody else. So many of us have been on so many losing campaigns, that even when you have a winner looking you in the face, it's hard to acknowledge it. First of all, it's hard to recognize it 'cause you've thought you were going to win before and didn't. Then, even when you really know deep down it's true, you still don't have a willingness to admit it to yourself. Not because it's unsafe to. People always say, "Play nervous," but only because you just don't know how.

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

SR: In the general election, this was even more true—way more true. The general election—I thought we were going to win the last three weeks, but I didn't know we'd win until the day before the election.

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

SR: I wasn't with the campaign during the Gennifer Flowers thing, although I empathized and felt low for the campaign, even though I wasn't associated with it. For me, personally, it was the New York primary. We were slipping. Jerry Brown was getting far more attention and public support, I'm sorry to say, than I thought he deserved—certainly than he merited as a candidate or person, saying

this as I worked for him in 1980. It was a lifetime ago. The press—for two solid weeks, it was really impossible for the campaign to discuss the issues, to engage in legitimate debate, even though the two of them debated each other frequently. To compete on an even plane. I don't know if it was the lowest point, but it clearly was the most frustrating point. I never felt a really low point. The draft stuff, as I saw it, too, was, for me, very frustrating, but not very low. There were a couple of days during the New York primary where I thought there was a scenario where Jerry Brown might win the New York primary, which really would have been awful. The clamor for Cuomo, Bentsen, or a brokered convention—I'm sure that Clinton would have won, but it would have been a mess.

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

SR: I had good fortune to be on the corner of this stage at the convention on Thursday night, the night of the acceptance. And Wednesday night, too, when Clinton made a surprise appearance. Both were truly wonderful moments. They were really high moments, but I thought some of the greatest were the first bus trips. The first bus trip was unbelievable. Coming out of the New York convention, which had been a terrific convention—politically, emotionally, visually—the energy that came from that, if you could possibly get higher than that, you did during this bus trip. Each day seemed filled. To those of us who traveled the whole bus trip, it seems incredible that that first bus trip was only five and a half days long because some of the bus trips at the end would be a day and a half long. On the second day we were beat. If anybody walked into this office right now

and said we were going to do a three-day bus trip, we'd think they were nuts. We couldn't possibly do a three-day bus trip. The first bus trip was five and a half days long! Yes, it seemed long but nobody thought it was crazy. It was unbelievable. The emotion in people's faces. The crowds. The crowd sizes. The time of the day that crowds would come, at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. At 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning there would still be hundreds of people in the parking lot. They had waited hours for him to come. Hundreds of people who had driven to or sat by a roadside, just to watch the motorcade drive by. It was really an awesome spectacle. It was unparalleled in anything I've seen, personally, in American politics. Unbelievable.

DB: The people who were on the first bus trip talk about it as though it were a religious experience. I just did the Florida one, and people by the road were holding up babies as though they just wanted them to be somehow imprinted with this wonderful thing that was happening. Let me ask a more global question. What is it that you really want to make certain that the future understands about this campaign?

SR: That Bill Clinton was a different kind of candidate. He really was. He was a person who genuinely wanted to touch people and was himself touched by people, emotionally. That he did not hang with people, hear their stories, shake their hands, hold their babies because it might look good on TV. It did look great on TV, but it clearly was not his motivation for doing it. There were so many times that he saw people and touched them, and they him, that he would have been

perfectly happy it there were no cameras in sight. Sometimes the cameras would get in the way. But that's how I know that this was something that he wanted to do. There were so many times when he stayed late or shook more hands, saw more people, spent more time that had zero political benefit. It had no additional net benefit. It was clear to me that it was something that was important to him. I don't know if we've ever before seen that in American politics. I don't know if it's ever existed before in American politics and has certainly not existed since our ability to see it—since television. For background for me, I forgot to mention the other thing I did in the campaign. My business organized all the campaign satellite feeds and all of the DNC satellite feeds—of which combined there were probably about 100 to 150—which was a wonderful thing that we were thrilled to do. It was completely separate from the travel that I did. Also, there was another thing that struck me a lot, personally, only because I had the good fortune to be there and be involved in its set-up. That was the announcement of the selection of Al Gore to be vice president. Gore was not number one on my list, to tell the truth, because I didn't know him. I didn't know him at all. I had some personal vested interests, that I did nothing to further, but that I was hoping against hope, anyway. Guys I knew—I had my business clients coming into the campaign—Paul Simon, Harris Wofford, Jay Rockefeller, Bob Kerrey. They were all clients of my firm and people I knew, personally, which is a fairly new thing for me to know these kinds of guys at all. But when I saw the Clintons and the Gores together—even before they went outside—but when I saw them outside together,

it was an incredible thing. Having seen them together so many times since—it was an extraordinary choice. It was *the* right choice. There is not question in my mind. That event itself, seeing the two of them in front of the brick wall on the back of the mansion. Their families together. The reception they got. I thought it was a great, great moment in the campaign.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]