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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Degee D. Wilhelm

Campaign Position: Personal Assistant to Bill Clinton

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 20, 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. Degee D. Wilhelm 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 your positions with the campaign?

Degee Wilhelm: I started out first as George Stephanopoulos's assistant, who desperately needed help. That was in mid-November. I did that for a while, and I got restless. I get really restless going to an office every day. So then in January I started doing hotel advance. I did that through the New York primary. Then I began traveling with the governor as his personal assistant.

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

DW: I'm a flight attendant with American Airlines. I'm currently on leave of absence.

DB: What does hotel advance mean?

DW: It means going in and getting the hotel ready for the governor and the staff that are coming in—for all the press. Working with the secret service, making sure that they know where he is planning to be in the hotel. Just getting all the details ready for everyone.

DB: Was there a big change from the primary to the general?

DW: Yes, although it happened gradually. I wouldn't say there was a change overnight. I was no longer doing hotel advance at that time, but I worked very closely with the hotel advance people. In my job, I would deal with them every day. The governor got secret service protection in late February, right after the New Hampshire primary. That was a big change.

DB: What did a personal assistant do? Describe your duties.

DW: That meant that I made sure that he had clean clothes to wear. That the ones he did wear weren't all wrinkled.

DB: Throughout the day?

DW: Right, throughout the day. It may have been pouring rain and he may have had to change five times during the day, although that was rare. It meant making sure he took any medicine he needed to. He had too many things to think about to think about taking this pill at a certain time. Just making sure that if he asked me where something was, I knew where it was. Just keeping track of all his belongings. In the morning packing them up, getting everything into the motorcade. It wasn't always easy. Sometimes he'd be already dressed and ready to go with things sprawled all over the hotel room.

DB: Did you have any responsibilities for keeping him on schedule, on time? Or did that fall to someone else?

DW: Not too much. No, that was pretty much advance. It was Wendy Smith's—the trip director's—job.

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

DW: I think the most important part of this campaign is that he really is of the people, and really wanted to meet every person, really wanted to shake every hand. When we were all tired and wanted to leave somewhere, he sincerely did not want to. He was truly interested in meeting every person. Although it took a while for people to catch on to that, they did catch on. I think it was probably most evident

with the first bus trip. I think they saw him in that light at the convention. It was just reinforced in the first bus trip. They saw that he really cared about them.

DB: Other than these extraordinary qualities of the candidate himself, specifically with respect to the campaign organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

DW: I think of the organization more when I was in the office. Being on the road, you kind of get in a bubble, and you're away from the actual organization. I think those were some of the most vivid memories because it's when we were going through the hard times. It wasn't clear what shape our campaign would be the next week. It was very impressive to see people pull together and just have teamwork set in. Maybe the small amount of office infighting that was going on was set aside and people focused on what really needed to be done for survival. It was very impressive to watch the organization work together.

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

DW: I would say the Illinois primary. Right during that time, process of elimination, mostly. And you don't like to count on anything before it happens, but that's when things really started moving in our direction—the Michigan and Illinois primaries.

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

DW: Again, I think I'm really cautious and don't like to think that way until it's really evident. I'd say, a couple of months before the campaign was over. Although that whole time we still expected the Bush campaign to get its act together and everybody kept saying, "This is really going to get tough. It's really going to get

really tight at the end.” I think you stayed mentally prepared for that time. You didn’t let yourself think, “We’re really going to win this. This is easy.” We always thought that the Bush campaign was going to get their act together, that it was going to be down to the wire, but I’d say a couple of months before the campaign was over.

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

DW: I don’t know. It’s easy to look back and think of everything so fondly. Just the obvious times—last January and February when the press started being really rough on him. It was difficult, but people kept their chins up and plugging away. There really wasn’t a point where people were saying, “Oh, we’re going to have to pack up and go home. This is the end. We’d better start figuring out how to wrap this up.” You never heard that. No matter how the outside world viewed what was happening, we never felt that. But, I think the most obvious times were hard.

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

DW: I would say the first bus trip. I’m sure you’ve heard that over and over again.

DB: No. Everybody has their own opinion. It’s very interesting.

DW: At the time I would not have said that because they were so hard. We were exhausted from the convention. No sleep at the convention. But it was the first time that Senator Gore and Tipper were with us. Just to see the genuine excitement out there. Even leaving New York City that day after the convention—for blocks there were people lined up where you didn’t expect people to be. Vandalia in Illinois—there were just incredible events along that

bus trip. After that, it's kind of bad to say, but we got used to seeing crowds that excited and enthusiastic. But that's when it really surprised us and caught us off guard because it was the first time we saw the two couples together—the synergy that they created.

DB: What is it that you want the future to understand about this campaign?

DW: That Bill Clinton truly cares about people. The people in this campaign cared about people. They really were out to change America and to make things better for the individuals out there going through hard times. That's why we're working for him. I don't think you heard people talking during the campaign about what job they wanted after he won. That wasn't their goal here.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]