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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Eric Berman

Campaign Position: Opposition Research Director

October 26, 1992

Little Rock, Arkansas

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. Eric Berman 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: Eric, what is your position with the campaign?

Eric Berman: I am opposition research director.

DB: What were you doing before you started doing this?

EB: Immediately before this, I was on the staff of Congressman John Bryant—
Washington office. Although that was a short interlude, just before that I was
Harris Wofford's research director for his campaign.

DB: Were you recruited by Carville?

EB: I've worked with James and Paul Begala on and off for the past five years, I
guess, since the 1988 Lautenberg Senate race in New Jersey, doing opposition
research

DB: Well, you must enjoy it very much. For people that don't understand what this is,
give a quick description of what you actually do. People think of gumshoes.

EB: It's a lot less interesting and it's a lot less "trench coat and gumshoes" than people
would think. A lot of it really is issue based. A lot of it is being able to pull
together a quick history, rather than an "issues" perspective, but a quick history
on the opposition. And the opposition, obviously, can be defined, you know, as
politics demand. So it can be a candidate, it can be staff of the candidate's, it can
be friends or relatives, depending on how broadly you want to do it. We've stuck,
I think, by and large, pretty closely here to a candidate's public life and some of
the campaign staff being lobbyists, and things like that. And made very careful
decisions to stay away from the personal and private—the family.

DB: Does it surprise you that the Republicans seem to have been doing opposition

research on Clinton for as long as they have?

EB: They're pretty good, and they're very well funded. That doesn't surprise me at all. They're good at this stuff. I think that's one of the reasons they've got the reputation that they do and we have the reputation for being not as good.

DB: Do they have volunteer Republicans out here collecting this stuff? Because a lot of our Arkansas newspapers aren't indexed anywhere.

EB: A lot of it, just sheerly by the modernity of their technology. They've got a fantastic computer system, a great scanner system that, I think, is called optical imaging technology, or something like that. Where they can scan in handwritten notes on a napkin and then be able to pull it up, code it, categorize it and create their own index, so that just pulling clips—if they just send the team down here to just pull clips, pull paper, pull it in. What I like to say is that Jim Pinkerton's "nerds" from 1988, really was, in large part, people who were willing to sit down and do the real grunt work of making sure that they got it in, and got it categorized. And then once you've built that great database, it's very easy to draw from it. They have the advantage of having made the investment in that system early and they're very good at keeping on top of everything. Very systematic.

DB: When did the Democrats decide that they would enter the technology age?

EB: Dan Carrol could probably speak better to that, but I think it's an important point to make that this is the first presidential race that, I think, the Democrats have really made a concerted effort, and this predates me. I'm the beneficiary of it. That Ron Brown sat down and Dan Carrol got in there with Mark Steitz and the

whole crew at the DNC and said from the very beginning we are not going to get beat like we did in 1988. We're not going to get embarrassed on opposition research. We are going to be ready for this thing. And they sat about taking the Dukakis people's stuff, which was great. But remember, the Dukakis people only had a couple of months to throw all this stuff together, taking John Podesta and everyone's basic material, building it up and then adding to it consistently. So it was really a conscious decision at the DNC this time around. You know, Ron Brown, Mark Steitz, Dan Carrol, and others there deserve a lot of credit. They've made it very easy for us.

DB: I also remember that kind of awkward time when it was clear that Clinton was going to be the nominee—he wasn't the official nominee, yet, but they wanted us to be getting ready, so there were informal, massive exchanges of information.

EB: Yes. It's kind of that time of the campaign that I think everybody looks forward to at the DNC and also dreads, in part, because, think about it, these people have put in blood, sweat, and tears for three and a half years. This is their baby. They are now unveiling all this work that they've done. And people like me walk in and immediately say, "Hand it over, thank you very much, we'll see you later. We'll call you when we need something else." It's also a difficult time for the new campaign and the nominee, which really is in the habit of keeping to itself. Tough to be able to integrate and share with an entire other operation. So in the short run it was very painful, but, obviously, in the long run, has paid huge dividends. And we've benefitted from all their work.

DB: When I think of all the work that was done on the Bush Administration—about

the foreign lobbyists, Bush's sons, and this, that, and the other—not much of that has really been used in the campaign. Does that kind of disappoint you? Is it like writing a book that nobody reads?

EB: I guess the answer is that we probably don't really want to use it. I think we've trained ourselves to be, in a sense, message-oriented. We understand that, although it might be cute to see one or two things printed in a local newspaper and get a kick out of it, that the campaign itself is not really going to be run on this. You're going to be running on what your plan for America is and your vision and your programs. And your leadership. And we understand that, but you need to be able to compare and contrast to be able to make it all seem real. And understanding that, I think we all understand pretty well that we're not going to go off and run little games. But there have been a few instances where some of the more interesting little nuggets get pulled out and we're glad we have them. But I think we approach it realistically. In a sense it's disappointing because there's a lot more that I'd like to tell every American. Why George Bush is not nearly as good as Bill Clinton. Why George has been a bad president. Why George Bush is not the kind of person we want in the Oval Office. But we understand how we have to do this, and that not every American is going to sit down for six months and learn all this.

DB: The dynamics at work this year seemed to mean that the people that went negative the hardest, the earliest, have to be punished for it.

EB: I think you're right. A lot of it is simply because the issues that people went negative on were not issues that people wanted to hear about. I think most people

would recognize that Bush's most devastating ads on us were when he showed middle class folks' taxes that, theoretically, would have gone up under the Clinton plan. That is in this year, just because the economy draws everything, that's your most devastating negative ad.

DB: And stuff about the pledge of allegiance, and gays, and everything?

EB: It's almost laughable to see Bush do a crime event this year—trying to talk tough on crime. That, four years ago, would have frightened us and now just doesn't mean anything. It's off message. In a sense, it's a relief that that's true. I'm not sure that it means now that in 1996 we won't see a repeat of 1988. I guess it depends on the background circumstances.

DB: It seems to me that the really hateful stuff doesn't go into national TV commercials. It comes in over fax machines. It's put in leaflets. And that is very hard to counter.

EB: Really there you have to rely on your field people. That's part of the critical thing that as national a campaign as you might be, you really depend on your grass roots. That's an important part. And once they start targeting—I mean, part of the joy of watching Brooks Jackson on CNN say how quickly the Clinton team responds is knowing that it's the entire operation that's been integrated, that's been able to pull off a quick response to a targeted radio ad. For example, we get a call at 11:30 from Bill Marshall in Maine saying, "Hey, they've got a new radio spot on that says we're going to jack up utility rates." We get in with the economic nerds and we crunch something out, throw it together and get it right over to the media people. They work through the night and by the next morning,

we've got something on the air, so the state of Maine hasn't even heard the Bush spot and they're hearing our response about it. That takes everybody through the whole building to be able to pull it off.

DB: This campaign has been described by some people as the most effective presidential campaign organization in history. What is it that makes it so effective?

EB: It's a good group of people. And we're all well fed on "Yo' Mama's" food. Actually, I think it's an important point that we are in Little Rock. I think it was one of the best strategic decisions this campaign made. And buffoons like myself that said, "Boy, it would be smart to be in Washington," really were very, very much wrong. This has been great. First of all, the building actually turns out to be, I think, an important, strategic building. It's set up perfectly. There are rooms where people can work together in settings. The satellite technology for me is, you know, incalculable. But being in Little Rock keeps you away from a lot of the crap that you hear. The gossip. The constant phone calls. The uninvited visitors, which would have been a disaster—really a big distraction. It really is a very fraternal feeling within the building, and that's been great. And it makes things a lot easier that everybody is in one place, that we are very much boxed in, in this building, working together. You can run down within a floor and see any part of the operation and be in touch, be it electronically, telephonically, via satellite—however you want to be tapped in. The whole radio production team is great. I mean, we could talk to anybody, anyhow, move any kind of paper, any kind of product. It's just getting the logistics down. It's turning ourselves into

Republicans, in that sense, but keeping our message and using their means.

DB: So how did this miracle of logistic cooperation come into being?

EB: Boy, that might be a question beyond my pay scale. It was pretty tough. I can't say that—it didn't happen overnight and it didn't happen early. I'm sure that you have seen that, in the early few months, we didn't have the organization like we have now. And you can get away with that in the primary, but once we went national—it was great. Everyone really pulled together. Sometime in the summer before the convention, Betsey and James and George and Eli and the whole crew sat down and, I think probably when Betsey and James sat down and started talking about the theory of the "War Room." One of the objects was not simply to have some kind of rapid-response team, but to be able to tie all the different departments together. And to me, it has been invaluable, just the idea that I have someone in there who can overhear what the latest emergency in the field department or media or press is, that somebody can look across a desk and say, "Hey, Stuart, do you guys have anything on X?" It has forced the integration. So I would point to that. And I truly believe it. Somebody in field may say something different because they've seen something else, but I really think that that idea is something that a Democratic campaign would be crazy not to use again next time. No matter what. That one-room command center—twenty-four hours, representing every department, somebody in there that has the pulse of what every department is working on—is incredible.

DB: On the one hand, you have this kind of cohesion and comprehensiveness of reach, and yet sometimes it seems like it's so decentralized. Have you thought about

that, where on the one hand we're organized, and on the other hand there's an awful lot of independence?

EB: Yes. I think that we make—our department makes a real strong effort to reach out to a lot of different people. So we try and be as centralized as possible. And it's literally something that we think about every day. It is a little frustrating that there are some departments that aren't quite into the notion, and perhaps it's because our department is almost entirely War Room focused, so the whole essence of our being is centralization and communication with other departments. But to the extent that you've got a large organization, I'm not sure that you could expect anything else. You know, things move at such a quick pace, sometimes you're so eager just to get your portion out and done that you don't think about talking to the guy downstairs. And I know it's been a little frustrating to think about on ad approval. There were some ads that had gone out that needed to be checked with states that weren't—it was just simply in trying to respond quickly, somebody just forgot to run it by a state director. And we've paid small prices for things like that. But I think a lot of that has been overcome. I think, had we opened the War Room earlier, it may have made the transition easier. By and large, I've really been impressed. And, by the way, the electronic communication internally has also been critical. Just that everyone works off the same e-mail but there is a certain time of the day you expect talking points, wire copy, schedule.

DB: Something that's not secret information.

EB: Exactly. That, as odd as it seems, the impersonal electronic computer communication has united people. I've been very impressed. Now maybe—also,

my previous experience, remember, on this campaign had been working out of the Washington office, when the campaign was extremely decentralized. We were locked in a small closet there and trying to get through into the headquarters, at the time, was a disaster. It was the worst decentralization.

DB: I just pictured you and Zach in those cubicles.

EB: It was a tiny little room that didn't always have heat. That was a problem in January. It was actually very funny how we started. But the centralization problem was real, and that's why we've split the department between two cities. We're still in touch with people in Washington. There are resources up there. We can get them and get them quickly.

DB: Who's running the one there?

EB: Dan Carrol and Zach Silverstein are working there hand-in-hand. They've got a great crew. And that has worked—the relationship between Little Rock and Washington has worked far better than anyone can imagine.

DB: What was your personal low point in the campaign?

EB: That's pretty easy. I was gone from the campaign for a short time, and quite frankly, probably with one or two personal tragedies excepted, the lowest point of my life—it was professionally demoralizing, it was personally painful, but, you know, what it means is that the rebound was all the better. I think that others might respond differently and say something about the flap over Gennifer Flowers and the flap over the draft. To be honest with you, at the time, adrenaline was pumping so fast, I didn't even realize it. I guess, intellectually, I understood that we were on the verge of maybe getting knocked out or falling out, or whatever

was going to happen, but it was tough to get low because we had so much that we needed to do that by the time the adrenaline stopped, we were out of the run. So I wouldn't call that a low point. I really wouldn't. And you want to talk about a team spirit. I mean, there is nothing like hardship to really bring everybody together. That was an incredible time.

DB: What, thus far, has been your personal high point?

EB: Oh, boy, I don't know if I should say this for the record. I mean when you do opposition research—probably our biggest coup was when we got the letter from the S&L industry to Tsongas, and at that time Tsongas was coming on very strong, and also at the same time the Whitewater issue had come up. Which has never come up again, thank God. So that—it actually was—we were not looking for the S&L letter, which was the funny thing. We were really looking for something else. And so we had a kid going through a pile of meaningless gobbledy-gook [at a library], and nothing was filed right. It was a mess. And it was freezing cold. We were very nervous about Tsongas and how he was going to really beat us up. And he stumbled across something and he went outside to the pay phone. There wasn't a pay phone inside that he could use. And he went outside in the snow and he's standing there freezing and he says, "Well, I've got a couple of little things," and he read them to us. Then he said, "But I'm kind of interested. I found this letter misfiled. It looks like it's from the S&L industry. And it was under housing or something tangentially related." And we said, "Well, what do you mean?" You know, this is a big issue; this is our big opponent and an issue that had been hurting us. And he read us the letter and it

was just this glowing review of all Tsongas had done for the industry, and he did this amendment and that amendment. And we just screamed and made him run down the street in the middle of the snow to Kinkos and he faxed it to us. We immediately pulled together a big legislative history on Tsongas's action. And of course, it hadn't occurred to us—these were minor amendments that you really would have had to be looking for. It received very little press attention. And we built a quick file and got it out to the road. It just so happened that, shortly thereafter, sure enough, Tsongas came out and attacked us on the S&L issue, and he was not too far from the ropes at the time and Stephanopoulos just walked right down the aisle of the campaign plane and handed it out to the reporters as he walked by and said, "Here is the genesis of the S&L crisis." And spawned a whole series of stories. Tsongas immediately dropped his line of attack on the S&Ls and we charged ahead. So that was probably our greatest victory. As much as it pains me to say that victory over a fellow Democrat would be our best one, that was probably our best showing. It was very improbable, at that.

DB: Anything comparable in the general election?

EB: Not as good, of course. Bush has been investigated for thirty years. It's tough to find a "gotcha" on Bush. We had some fun games.

DB: How many people have sent us the business about bailing out of the plane?

EB: Oh, the bailing out of the plane, and there are a whole slew of kind of standard stories on Zapata Off-Shore and CIA involvement and a memo from J. Edgar Hoover mentioning George Bush, CIA agent. There are all kinds of cute conspiracy things. But his record is really what gets you. I would say the most

fun that we had, simply because we felt so strongly about the issue and it was something that didn't come up, was a tiny little box that showed up in *The Boston Globe* just after the L.A. riots when Bush tried to turn everything around on the Great Society programs. And we knew someone who had been doing some work with us in Texas, and we had been taking a closer look at the Bush congressional record. And it turns out that George Bush, right about the time of the 1968 riots, was fostering in the House some kind of Republican neighborhood action crusade and great spending programs, cuts in NASA, cuts in defense and spend it on urban programs. The very programs he was now slamming. And so to us, because we were so outraged by it, that was the one great thing, probably, that I would point to that we kind of broke. It's just a tiny little box. Not a big thing. But that's the kind of thing that we felt strongly about, that everybody enjoyed.

DB: Do you think that as people become increasingly aware of this kind of effort that it's going to affect governance? I mean, are you going to govern defensively, so as not ever to leave that kind of paper trail?

EB: Well, the bottom line is, if you set out to do good for the country and you're open with the people and you stick to democratic—with small “d”—principles, you don't need to worry about us. We can't make people think that something is bad unless they, in their hearts, find something wrong with it. We can't make George Bush look bad on school choice because, by and large, there are a lot of people out there who are agreeing with school choice.

DB: But what you can do is try to catch inconsistency, hypocrisy—and that has become the big game, the lawful game.

EB: Exactly. Although one thing that's interesting to me is that candidates can legitimately come out and say, "My position has evolved. I can't say that I'm the same person." And there are some pretty obvious political flip-flops if you change your position on abortion just as soon as you're nominated as a vice presidential candidate. That, to me, is a fairly obvious flip-flop, as opposed to an evolution in a position, you know, on an issue like oil depletion allowance, or something like that, takes place over a longer period of time. So I think people are pretty much able to discern what's real and what's not. It's tough for us to hoodwink them.

DB: What do you really want the future to know about this campaign?

EB: I think of this campaign, really, as typified by our boss. That people had this idea from the beginning that this was a juggernaut, that it was this gleaming machine—like, people have some idea that Mr. Georgetown Rhodes Scholar was from a silver spoon family in Greenwich, Connecticut. And in reality, it was just a bunch of folks who really cared about changing the country that came together and did a lot of hard work and stuck together through real tough times, and in the end, are coming out pretty close to the top. Good guys win in the end. I mean, that, to me, is the story of the campaign—is very much the story of Bill Clinton's life. Hard work, dedication, and caring about the future of the country.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]