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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Robert O. (Bob) Boorstin

Campaign Position: Deputy Communications Director for Policy

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 19, 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. Robert O. Boorstin 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: Bob, when did you join the campaign?

Bob Boorstin: Well, I started consulting for the campaign in January, and I came officially in May on the campaign staff. I worked first in New Hampshire. But George [Stephanopoulos] and I had discussions—you know, George and I knew each other through [Michael] Dukakis, and I knew [Mark] Gearan as well. That is how I got into it. And, of course, I was interested in Clinton because I met him a couple of times at fund-raisers, and I had sat with Hillary and the governor at a fund-raiser in New York and I was totally impressed. I thought he was a “great white hope,” as they say. In New Hampshire I was there for the last three weeks and I was the communications director in the state.

DB: That was an interesting thing to be.

BB: It was fun. I was kind of brought in as a visiting fireman by George because they were very short-staffed. And [Michael] Whouley was brought in to do the field side and I was brought into the communications side. And then from New Hampshire, I went to Washington for meetings. Then I was in Michigan and I essentially ran the state for the campaign. Then I went to New York and I was a press secretary in New York.

DB: Another interesting assignment.

BB: That was horrible. That was the worst two weeks of my life. Then I was in Pennsylvania just for a few days cleaning up some fires, and then I went to

Washington for discussions and came down to Little Rock, at George's request, to do some literature for the end of the primaries and start thinking about the convention. Then I became the deputy communications director.

DB: You have had so many different roles. Can you briefly describe your major responsibility, first in the primary and then as you moved over into the general?

BB: In the primaries, it changed all the time. It depended on where I was. In New Hampshire I was responsible for making sure that there was a communications operation. I arrived there with three people sitting in the corner of a storefront. George was with [Governor] Clinton and I was the on-the-ground person, taking orders from him and making suggestions to him and working directly with Whouley to do a communications program for the state. Simon Rosenberg and Carter Wilkie were very involved as well. You should also know that I worked 1984 and 1988.

DB: And I very much want that perspective as well. So you came in as a fireman.

BB: Yeah, I came in as a fireman.

DB: Big fire?

BB: Big fire, very big fire.

DB: Twelve-alarm fire.

BB: Right. Probably the biggest I've been involved in. I remember leaving where I was a consultant and seeing [Republican Consultant] Ed Rollins in the hallway and him saying, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to New Hampshire to work for Clinton." And he said, "He's a corpse." And then about a week after New Hampshire, I came back into the office and saw Rollins and said, "Some

corpse, huh?” So it was sweet. I came in as a fireman and in Michigan I was definitely a fireman because we had Illinois wired because of [David] Wilhelm. But they hadn’t paid any attention to Michigan at all. I had spent a month in Michigan for [Governor] Dukakis and I knew the difficulties of Michigan, particularly [in 1988] when you were lined up against labor because essentially the UAW controls the Democratic Party and it is a problem. I was sent in by Gearan at that point, and in consultation with George, as the guy who could link state ideas to the national campaign. Let me just say one thing about this campaign that is my whole perspective—well, there are two things I want to say overall. Number one, the entire 1992 campaign was a response to 1988. The entire thing, the press, the campaigns themselves, everybody but [President] Bush caught on. And Bush dug his own grave in 1988, with the campaign that he ran then. He laid the seeds for his destruction.

DB: Surely, you are not saying that then his defeat in 1992 was inevitable?

BB: No, but his campaign tactics of 1988 were so vicious and so interesting in the way that they used them that they provided a road map to how to prevent against the same thing. The other thing that was very important, and I think that people miss about this campaign, is the mass embarrassment on the part of the press. The press felt they were sucker-punched in 1988. Once Bush had been elected, it was clear that the Pledge of Allegiance and Willie Horton and all those issues meant jack to the presidency. So the press was on guard in 1992 in a way it wasn’t in 1988. It was bound and determined not to let the same process overtake it.

DB: The trivialization?

BB: Right, and also the attacks that were flung without any double check. But in presidential campaigns, essentially, there are two things that are responsible for who wins: one is the context and the second is the candidate. I'd say that it was a combination in 1980 that gave Reagan his victory. The context primarily being a dying economy and the hostages, blah-blah-blah, misery index, and all those things. And a candidate who projected an image that he could change things. And this time around it is the same thing, context and candidate. No other candidate would have survived what Clinton survived, there is no question about that. He deserves the lion's share of credit. And the rest of us were very, very bit players. Occasionally, we lowered a few new backdrops for him, but if it hadn't been for his personality, his ambition—and I say that in the best and in the worst sense of the words—and his understanding of the political process, his own ability to be his own strategist—he would have been dead. I doubt whether [Senator] Bob Kerrey could have beaten Bush. [Senator] Tom Harkin certainly couldn't have beaten Bush. I think [Governor Mario] Cuomo or one of those big guns who stayed away, or [Senator Al] Gore even could have beaten Bush, given the economic situation. I still think the most important thing was the context, and the internal workings of the campaign and all of the good things that we did. And we did do it right. No question, we did it right this time. It took us twelve years, but we did it right this time. Or, in fact, it took us God knows how many years. This is the first good postwar Democratic campaign because [President] Kennedy's campaign was bought. [President] Johnson's campaign was inevitable.

DB: Carter?

BB: Well run, but it was old style. Carter's campaign was a reaction to Watergate. He ran a terrible campaign. He should have won by many more points. I mean, he was the first one to run a good primary campaign; remember it was [Hamilton] Jordan and those guys who figured out of Iowa. And so they ran a good primary campaign and they coasted during the general, and they got lucky at the end because [President] Ford essentially tripped on his dick and gave them that last weekend of bounce that enabled them to pull through, and they didn't pull through by much. And since then, it has been a series of wrong candidates, wrong time, and wrong campaign strategy.

DB: Let me go back for a minute to New Hampshire because, obviously, you've thought about this a lot. I have always fumed about New Hampshire's excessive influence, this tiny state representative of absolutely nothing. Yet, this year, I have thought perhaps it was only in New Hampshire that Clinton could have put together what he did to save himself.

BB: Yes, if it had been a large state he would have been dead meat. If it had been Iowa, he certainly would have been dead because of the morality of the upper Midwest.

DB: But the personal contact he was able to make there—

BB: That is critical. One of the most critical pieces of the New Hampshire campaign, and one of the least recognized, was Michael Whouley's decision to drop 25,000 videos. I don't know if anybody has told you this story. Whouley figured it out. He figured out there was too much crap on the TV, that you couldn't cut through

the clutter and you had to go under the radar screen, as he said, and he dropped 25,000 videos on people's doors and it was like having Clinton in your living room. And the thing about Clinton, if you put him in someone's living room, they are going to vote for him. The other thing is that it is possible that Bill Clinton touched one of every four people in New Hampshire who voted for him. At least spoke to them—certainly spoke to them and possibly touched one out of every four. And there is no better retail politician that I have ever seen. So clearly, it had a lot to do with the size of the state.

DB: You also had an influx of people, Arkansans primarily, who came to “witness” for him.

BB: Right, and in New Hampshire it made a big difference. And the other thing, in New Hampshire they related to a governor of a small state—very important, they weren't about to say shitty little state because they come from what some people consider an irrelevant little state.

DB: Why don't we move now to Michigan and UAW troubles. How do you try to advance a primary victory without screwing up what we wanted to be the New Democrat message?

BB: Michigan was our biggest challenge and the most important victory in terms of closing the nomination.

DB: So how did you do it?

BB: You have to remember the context. Illinois and Michigan the same day. Illinois wrapped up for us because of Wilhelm and all of the people [from Illinois] in the operation who were great. They moved the entire campaign. I mean, this was a

floating campaign, as you know—first they moved everybody to New Hampshire, then they moved everybody to Chicago, and then they moved everybody to New York. Stupid. Never do that again. Very, very stupid. There should always be a base of operations that is consistent, and the base was with the traveling party. We learned that during the general election. We were lucky during the primaries, very, very lucky. One of the reasons you should never do that is if you end up with two primaries on the same day, like Illinois and Michigan—all the bias is in Illinois, and everybody is looking at Illinois and nobody is paying attention to Michigan. They had basically written it off. I came in ten days out, and the Clinton campaign in Michigan consisted of two phone lines in a second story office in Lansing and one room in the NEA [National Education Association] in Michigan's Headquarters outside of Detroit, in the suburbs of Detroit. We were using their phones. We had nothing—zero—absolutely nothing on the ground. And, again, it was Whouley's conception, and I can't give Whouley enough credit for the entire campaign, but it was his conception of the difference in field organization: in Dukakis, field organization meant phone calls, it meant identifying voters. And we had voters that were ranked one, two, three, four, five. There were ones who were the solids, and those were the people you called on election day, and so forth. And we had those for every primary. Dukakis won the primaries by dint of money and organization, not by any dint of personality or campaign strength. It was a weak field. The difference between the Clinton campaign and the Dukakis campaign is massive, but the primary difference is that their organization during the primaries was great, ours stunk. Their organization

during the general election was terrible, ours was top flight. And that was really the difference. I mean, there has been better campaigns since 1972.

DB: So it was the sheer strength of Clinton that carried us through the primary?

BB: You are talking about the contrast, about working against some very difficult things. One of them being the FOBs [Friends of Bill] versus the professional staff, which is a major problem that this campaign had. Major, major problems. Because there were always two people talking in and out your ear. Anyway, Michigan—we got there and there was nothing. Whouley's conception was that you went into a media market, not into a congressional district, and you tried to get on to television. You would do an office opening. You would do anything you could to get on television. And that the local TV would bite, and they did. My job was essentially to convince them that they had to win Michigan. And I was essentially an advocate yelling at Wilhelm every day saying, "You have got to come to Michigan more." When I arrived, they had a half a day scheduled for Michigan. They had planned to spend the entire week or ten days or whatever it was before in Illinois. And by the time we finished, we had spent the better part of six days of the last seven in Michigan, and we carried the state by a margin almost equal to Illinois. So, to me, that was a great personal thing. And the way that we did it was not through a ground organization, it was through free media. Completely through free media. Through Carter [Wilkie] and Simon [Rosenberg] and those folks figuring out which TV and which radio was important.

DB: Well, what did you do to get on?

BB: Offered them interviews, basically. One of the things we did that was very important, Carter [Wilke] figured out who the important players were in Michigan in the TV world. And there was a guy, Bill Bonds, who is an anchorman for one of the stations up there, who is one of the most important. He is well known because he has alienated so many people on TV. He has had cabinet officers walk off satellite interviews. So we said the key to Clinton, at that point, was showing that he was not a typical politician, that he wasn't a panderer, that he was willing to tell the truth; that was the absolute key to winning in Michigan and Illinois. Illinois less so because it was wired. Michigan—it was the only way we could win. And so when he came into Michigan, the first thing we did was he did an event. Then on the six o'clock news he did a ten-minute live one-on-one with Bill Bonds, the scariest guy in the state. And basically, people figure if you can stand up to Bill Bonds—which he did very well, of course, because he is Bill Clinton—you can do anything. Then, very importantly, Doug Ross and Steve Weiss, who are our locals there—Ross from the DLC [Democratic Leadership Council] and Weiss who worked for [Governor Jim] Blanchard had a conception—it was more Ross's conception that it was important to do counterscheduling. And nothing was more important to our success in Michigan than our counterscheduling. We went to an AFL-CIO hall in Flint and we said we are for NAFTA. Heretical. We went to Macomb County and we talked race. Heretical. Then the next morning we went to the black church and we gave the exact same talk and the reporters started comparing it to Bobby Kennedy, which is exactly what we wanted.

DB: Did the reporters see that on their own, or were there lots of people pointing it out to them?

BB: Both, but it wasn't too hard to realize because you had this sophisticated national press with you at that point. I don't think the locals got it, but certainly the nationals got it. I mean, the David Broders and the Dan Balzes of this world were all over it, and they understood exactly what the deal was, and that was incredibly important to our victory there. You know, the other person who I would mention as critical to the victory of the campaign is [David] Watkins. I mean, if you were to pick up two people who had never been profiled and who had never been talked to properly, Watkins and Whouley were the two I would say who are most critical.

DB: Why do you say Watkins?

BB: Because he held the campaign together during the primaries. He made it work. He made sure the bills were paid. Clinton put his total trust in him because he had worked with him before. I mean, Eli [Segal] took over part of the Watkins role midway through the primaries, but never really took over. Watkins was amazing during New Hampshire.

DB: The organizational center?

BB: Right, there is no question. Without him the campaign would have collapsed, I'm convinced. And he is not recognized.

DB: The money end—Rahm was doing this brilliant job of raising the money, but somebody—

BB: Right, but somebody had to make sure it was spent correctly. Watkins never panicked, and he was never recognized for what he was. He understood what the money meant and where to spend it. He—you know, you would call David and you would say, “Here we are.” And when I got to New Hampshire he was the first person I talked to in Little Rock. And he said we should do some ads with Arkansans saying how much they like Clinton. It was a great idea. Nobody had thought of it. But, he would not only suggest it, he would actually have the ads laid out and Fedex them to us so that it would be ready to go. It was a kind of thing that we never could have done because we didn’t know Arkansas, nor did we have the typesetting and all that crap that you need—the infrastructure that you need to produce that. And that was one of my pet peeves in the campaign, that he was unrecognized.

DB: He will be recognized. He was a hero.

BB: Oh, totally. And also, you know, one of the nicest people to work with in the world, no ego, and he has been mistreated continuously, as far as I am concerned.

DB: When you say that so much of this year was like a counter-text to the Dukakis campaign, what are the most obvious examples of that?

BB: The two most obvious examples of that are dealing with the interest groups and the “War Room.”

DB: But dealing with the interests groups, wasn’t that kind of more like a counter-Mondale thing?

BB: That was one of those counter-Mondale directions. But remember Dukakis—they made big mistakes with the unions and with Jesse [Jackson]. Particularly with

Jesse. Nobody remembers how much Dukakis kowtowed Jesse Jackson. You just don't remember it, how he gave him everything. There was never any stopping point. There was never any point where Jackson was told, "This is where it ends." And the second was with the quick-response operation. The difference there is that you had two things going for you. One, you had the strategic vision of [James] Carville and two, you had the willingness of Clinton to attack and respond. Dukakis was just personally incapable of getting into the brawl. Clinton didn't relish it, but, boy, he wanted to do it if it was necessary.

DB: Now articulate for me, if you will, just how the response operation worked because, clearly, you cannot respond to everything.

BB: Well, it was very ad hoc. Recreating the Clinton campaign in 1992 is impossible. That's the first thing I'll say. George and James and Eli and David [Wilhelm]. Those are the four people who, to me, really made the decisions. I mean, other people made decisions, but if you were to have no others—obviously, Clinton and Hillary above them. It was unusual to get a quad of people who could work together and respected each other's opinions, and they yelled at each other and so forth. And Stan [Greenburg], of course; Stan [was] always in the background. Actually I would put Stan in that group. Stan was responsible for the entire philosophical basis of the campaign. He was the one who had spent his life in the vineyards of Macomb County figuring out what the hell white voters didn't like about Democrats.

DB: But those who decided what we would respond to were George and James?

BB: Uh-huh. And Ricki [Seidman] and I would present them with things and then they would come back at us and say yes or no and we would argue about it. But it was very ad hoc. It was always cost benefit. And it depended on who was in the headquarters that day, to some extent.

DB: I never saw the pattern, and that's why I'm asking.

BB: Well, there was no pattern, just so you know. The thing was that we were under direct orders at all times to respond to everything. And we issued tons of press releases that'd never get anything, but they did two things. Number one, they were a direct message across the bow of the Bush campaign that nothing they said was going to go unanswered, particularly in the beginning. It was very important to establish that. The second thing is it said to the press, "Come to us for real information." We established ourselves as a source of unbiased information to the press. And that was critical. In a way, one of the biggest errors of the general election—which was the 127 versus 128 taxes, Betsey's famous memo, or whatever it was—helped us because it said to the press, "These guys are idiots. They will tell the truth even when it hurts." I mean, it almost killed us because it was the one kind of thing we were tracking very carefully.

DB: I thought James was going to die.

BB: We were all going to die. I mean, Paul, James, George, and I all looked at it and said, "That's it. We're gone." I mean, I would never do it again, but we established [what] nobody had ever done in that way. No campaign had ever become the source of facts. And then [Mary] Matalin helped us a lot because of

the childishness and the adolescent nature of her responses because they were full of such a kind of “did so, did not” language.

DB: What do you think was the purpose of her fax-attack of the day?

BB: It was a mistake. It was a mistake. They gave up on it.

DB: Let me pursue something because, I think—in part because of the rapid-response, War Room ethic the image that went out of the campaign was of this totally disciplined fighting machine, yet, on the inside, it felt a lot looser than that. So where is organizational reality?

BB: There was enough organization to make it work, but what worked about the campaign was the fact that anybody could say anything at any time. If you thought something was stupid, you could go and tell James to his face—you know, “I think this is dumb.” And I would do that and get rejected, but anybody had the opportunity to get their idea rejected, which was critical. In most campaigns it is structured so hierarchical that ideas never bubble up. And James’s idea of the War Room meetings, where anybody could put forward an idea or comment or do whatever, was critical on two fronts. One, in floating ideas and just in intelligence sharing. And two, in morale. The one area where James was critical in the campaign was in morale; that he has not been recognized for. I mean, clearly, his strategic ideas were very, very good and that was all important; no question. But in terms of keeping the morale of the staff at a certain level. And also, he was like having the candidate in the building. A lot of a campaign is about—the only reward is touching the candidate. That’s why everybody wants to travel everywhere, they want to kind of hang on. That’s what

the clutch is all about. But having James in the building was like a surrogate for Clinton, and in a way that the kids in the press office or the policy people or whoever could touch the real thing. I think that role is very critical. I've never seen that done in a campaign.

DB: We had our own star?

BB: Very important, I think, psychologically and in many other ways.

DB: Was this accessible organizational style deliberately planned in contrast to the very hierarchical Dukakis style, or did it just happen as particular players came together?

BB: I think it was a combination. I know that James and George wanted it that way, but I think it was more a fact that people could deal with it. In other personal combinations it would never have worked. Another critical thing that was very important about the operation was that it provided a sense of—campaigns are all about comfort. The campaign organization is all about providing comfort to the one person at the top, or the four people at the top as it came to be. That's what the briefing book is about. Every time you land in an important and a strange place, you want the good feeling that there are people on the ground who you can trust. And we built that trust, we had that level of trust. So when Bruce or Begala or somebody would call, there was almost always the right thing there for them, and if it wasn't there right away, it could be there in ten minutes.

DB: So, although you said there are two critical things, the context and the candidate, still the staff can make the candidate much more effective by establishing that comfort level?

BB: Absolutely. It's really important to a campaign because you've got to think of it from the candidate's perspective. Bobby Kennedy used to always say, "Think what it's like to be in the other guy's shoes." I mean, here you are, you step off a plane in Ann Arbor, Michigan. You've probably never been there before. You have no idea what the people are thinking. You have no idea what you're supposed to be talking about, essentially. You have the instincts that are right, the intelligence, but you need the comfort; got to have it. And one of the things I concentrated on very, very carefully at the beginning was the briefing book. You can't underestimate how important that briefing book is to holding the campaign structure together. I was constantly yelling at people about it. It was a complete and total disaster during the primaries. I think one of the good organizational things that I was responsible for was putting all those briefing people in one room so the Clinton people were here, the Gore people were here, and Hillary's person was there, as well. It was critical because they could all share information.

DB: And you got such good people there.

BB: I mean, without Carter [Wilke], and Mary [Madden], and Jacquie [Lawing], and Jeff, and Jim, and Kim [Tilley], the comfort level would have never been established. And it's something that in previous campaigns has not been dealt with seriously. I would say the one huge problem in this campaign—the biggest problem—was the schedule. If you were to go to one thing that didn't work correctly, I think it was really because George didn't have the time. The one thing they did that was right was in June, they said, "Okay. There's got to be a communications czar." I didn't care who it was, as long as there was one person.

But unless you put polling, scheduling, media, and policy under one person, nothing happens correctly in the campaign. That's why George's role was so critical, because those four things all came through him. The one that really didn't work well was scheduling; and that's, one, because of personality—because Susan [Thomases] had her own ideas, essentially, and one out of every three of them was very good, but the other two were wrong. And two, because of time. George just didn't have the time to focus on it. The original campaign structure called for George to have a deputy for quick response, Ricki; a deputy for policy, me; a deputy for opposition research, which was [Eric] Berman and [Michael] Waldman together; and then a deputy for scheduling, and he never had that person. That person—that slot was never filled. In order to have a successful message, you have to concentrate on two things—the free media and the paid media. The free media is essentially done through your scheduling. So if your scheduling operation isn't doing what you want, you're out of luck. And it was that way in the last ten days of the campaign. James was tearing his hair out in the last ten days of the campaign because we ended up doing events that just didn't make sense.

DB: However, some people have noted that bringing Susan into the campaign and giving her that responsibility was a good way to address the problem of integrating the FOBs and the staff.

BB: Yes. I think that's right. I think that it was worth the sacrifice that was made in terms of pain. And there was a lot of pain associated with her position.

DB: Bob, from your perspective, what was the absolute low point and what was the high point of the campaign?

BB: Well, the low point was clearly New Hampshire, which everybody will talk about. But to me the worst time of the campaign—well, there were two worst times. You have to separate them into primary and general. In the primary, it was definitely the week after Connecticut when we were in New York—that first week. A lot of things conspired against us. Number one, we didn't listen to Debbie Wilhite in Connecticut; made a big mistake.

DB: What do you mean?

BB: She told us that we had to spend more money on media, that we had to spend more time in the state. If we had listened to Debbie Wilhite, we would have won the state. Big mistake—not listening to the local people is always a big mistake. But especially somebody like Debbie, who had run the House of Representatives in Connecticut for ten years, and is also a great political strategist in her own right. So we allowed [Governor Jerry] Brown to win by a point or two, whatever it was. The second thing in New York was the fact there was no Republican primary because [Pat] Buchanan wasn't on the ballot. Therefore, all the focus was on us. The third thing was it was New York—and the press in New York is the press in New York. The fourth thing was that it was really one of the big clashes between the FOBs and the staff because Susan and Harold [Ickes] had been sent into New York as the advance team and the staff came in and there were just—it wasn't so much fighting as it was total disorganization. So those were the kind of significant factors around New York.

DB: What was the other low point?

BB: The first part of June, when there was no structure. We were running third.

There was no structure in the campaign. I was like, “This is not working.”

DB: What turned that around?

BB: His [the governor’s] decision and Hillary’s decision to name people and put them in charge, and then once George was in charge and James was in charge and in place in the new building. Part of it was moving into the new building, so you had a new feeling. It was a bigger operation and bigger things were at stake. And part of it was just the fact that they laid out a structure. And that certain people were pushed aside. Those were key decisions because Frank [Greer] just didn’t have the aggressiveness that you needed in the general election in a presidential campaign. Mandy certainly did. And Mickey [Kantor] wasn’t the strategist. He was very important in New Hampshire in bringing everybody to the table and making them all shut up and listen.

DB: You never mentioned Wilhelm.

BB: Well, I said he was one of the most important people. What David did, which was phenomenal—the most important thing that he did was he gave his position up in June and he didn’t fight it. It was clear he was no longer the campaign manager and that he was no longer in charge. But where other people would have packed their bags and gone home or would have waged an internecine war, David said, “Okay, I’m going to do what I’m best at, which is the political.” He was the political director and the field director. He did the targeting in the field and the political stuff. That was what he was charged with. Again, it was personality.

The fact that Wilhelm was such a good personality and so easy to work with, that made it work. And Eli [Segal] was very important because he was the person who had enough contact with Clinton that if something really needed to get done—I mean, enough personal history with him—again it was an FOB, an important way to bring an FOB in, both Susan and Eli, important roles. But an FOB who knew he wasn't a professional, like a professional policy guy or a professional scheduling guy. He was certainly a political pro. He had been through the wars. But who was not afraid to be an honest broker. Very important.

DB: What, for you, Bob, was the best time in the campaign?

BB: Winning Michigan, because of the odds. And the month of August, probably, the fact that it worked. I would say one of my happiest moments in the campaign was when [Pat] Buchanan spoke at the Republican Convention. That's true. I mean, it's very true. Because it was like, all of a sudden, you realize that things are going your way. And when the War Room meetings kicked in—the first week of the War Room meetings, it was clear there was something going on and there was structure. It's funny. One of the high points of the Dukakis campaign was in Michigan. We got our butts beat in Michigan by Jesse Jackson. We got destroyed. There was a lot of voter fraud and stuff, but who cares? But we were the last white man standing. We knocked [Dick] Gephardt out and all the kids on the campaign were crying and stuff, and miserable because we got beat.

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

BB: Michigan. Definitely when we won Illinois and Michigan. No question about it. Connecticut was just a step back.

DB: When was it absolutely clear that he was going to be president?

BB: Never was absolutely clear to me. I had been through two previous campaigns, so it was never absolutely clear. I also don't trust polls like other people do. James and Stan live and die by their polls. And George lived or died by his seven o'clock numbers. The first hint—the first big hint—was the convention, certainly, and then the bus trip. That two-week period was so well done that it had to make you believe that something different was happening, for once. But I can't say I ever really believed in it until—I mean, I still didn't believe it when Ohio went for us on election night. I'm totally pessimistic.

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

BB: The most important thing is the nonhierarchical nature of it. The fact that people dealt with each other as adults and as kids together. That we had fun. Literally, there was a lot of fun in this campaign.

DB: Do you think the building had something to do with it?

BB: Yes. It was the shape of the building. There's no question about it. I used to be a newspaper reporter, so, for me, going into a newsroom was right. If I was Bill Clinton and I was going to run a re-election campaign, I would probably send it out of Washington, if it was at all possible, back to Little Rock to get a different perspective. I would also encourage that during the administration, so you don't lose that touch. I mean, here we are all wearing ties and it's two weeks later and it's ridiculous. I think another key piece of it was being in Little Rock. The

decision that all of us hated. We all wanted to go live in Virginia and Washington. It was critical for many reasons; number one, journalists and lobbyists have to change planes, so they are much less likely to come here. Number two, it was cheap. Very important. You cannot overestimate how important that low overhead was. For both staff and building. Number three, atmosphere. The fact that good things happened in Arkansas to everybody who came here. We were welcomed with open arms and treated like royalty. Four, the fact that he controls the state, so if something really needed to happen, it could happen. And five, the fact that it gave the feeling of a guerilla operation, which was very, very critical. My field is Chinese history, and it gave me the feeling of being in Yenan [during the Chinese Revolution], and we are all plotting. We didn't have any guns, but we had the closest thing to guns, which are fax machines for us, and we were standing back in the hills plotting this revolution. Putting it in Little Rock also meant that anybody that wanted to work for the campaign and work seriously for the campaign had to get their ass to Little Rock—had to move down here, and that was a big sacrifice for a lot of people. So that's number six, and that was really important because it meant, if you came here, you wanted to be here.

DB: Are there other major contrasts with your past campaigns?

BB: One other very important thing was the nature of the vice-presidential campaign. There was a moment, and it was a source of some frustration to me during the campaign, but also a source of great strength—there had never been, as far as I'm concerned, a campaign on either the Democratic or Republican side where the

vice president had the significant role that he did this time. Ever. And it went down through the staff. You could see it, physically, everywhere you looked. I mean, the Gore people were in the briefing book room. Doug Hall was sitting in the War Room, right next to Carville. And it was admittedly annoying at times because they would demand their due, and there was one point when I sat down with them and I said—with like five of the top Gore staff—“Look. Don’t you realize how lucky you are that we even consult you on these things?” And they would get all upset about certain things, like particularly the environmental stuff that we would have to get done and we wouldn’t be able to consult them immediately. But that feeling of team, both from the top—and I’m sure it was really important to Clinton, because he always felt that he had a backup, except during the vice-presidential debate. That’s the one time that Gore dropped the ball—the one time—and he totally made up for it with one line on election night, “Where I come from, that’s what we call character.” Anyway, that was critical, and that’s never happened before. When I worked for [Representative Gerry] Ferraro, we were in a different building. And there was real jealousy in that campaign, because the press was more interested in her because she was the first woman on a major ticket. And with [Senator Lloyd] Bentsen it was like there was nothing there. With [Vice President Dan] Quayle, he was a disaster. With Bush, he just was a cipher.

DB: Wasn’t the frequent appearance of Clinton and Gore together unprecedented?

BB: And also the use of the wives. Let us never forget how important that here were two people who were articulate and willing to work. And they played their roles

brilliantly. Both of them. And they allowed us to cover a lot of ground. The only problem with the bus trip is that they put all four people in one place, and that meant you weren't having the impact that you wanted in media marketing.

DB: But that was part of the magic? The double date with America.

BB: Right, and it was also generational. I was a Gore doubter—but supporter—when he named Gore. There were a lot of people in the upper levels of the campaign that were, "This is crazy." Because it didn't make any demographic sense. It worked from the first day.

DB: Anything else for history, for the future?

BB: We were always fighting the last campaign. We almost blew it this time by fighting the last campaign too much. We became so insistent on responding to everything. And part of it was a problem with Clinton, because he made so many proposals during the primaries and he knew where he stood on so many things, that there was nothing left in the arsenal, no new programs to unveil during the general election. If it's possible in the future to save programs or to be able to repackage them in some way. What was very important was the technology thing we put out, and the small business paper we put out—the community development paper that we put out during the general election—because we got—not great stories—but we got some stories. The other thing about this campaign that made it very different, and that I think Democrats will take to heart from now on, is business. I don't think that you can in any way exaggerate the impact that having those CEOs stand up with you and having them there, particularly when the message was about the economy, because they were the best surrogates we

had. We could have thrown all of the politicians out the window. And the person who deserves credit for that is Eli. That comes from his own background. He was the one who said, “What do we do with these people? How does it work?” and he put it together. We were ready for anything in Arkansas, and that was critical. But we were also very lucky. Their attack was scattered, delayed, and miserable. In 1988, they made the attack right. They picked three areas and they reinforced it in paid media and free media, in each of those areas. They did environment, to say to people that their message was two things; number one, Dukakis isn’t the great liberal you think he is, and, if you think he is such a great governor, how did this happen? And number two, Bush isn’t a crazy conservative who doesn’t care about the environment. They had an ad about Boston Harbor and the environment and then they had the event there, one of the best events ever in a presidential campaign. The second thing they did was crime. They did the Boston Police event. And Willie Horton on the air. The third thing they did was patriotism, the Pledge of Allegiance. They couldn’t attack Massachusetts as a bad example, and Dukakis managed to hide all of the shit that was going on. This thing was in collapse. Luckily, Arkansas’s economic numbers during the election—it looked like we had cooked the books.

DB: But our growth really was number one.

BB: Which was what people cared about. But the way that they attacked Arkansas was dead wrong. The only good ad they did on Arkansas was the hillbilly ad with the music. It was this kind of hillbilly music. It was people clapping for Clinton as he raised taxes. It was well done and it was funny. It was fairly accurate, as

their ads go. But when they actually launched their attack on Arkansas, they should have picked two or three things. Now, if I had been composing that attack, the first thing I would have done is, I would have said, “His image is of a guy who cares, but look at these abandoned, abused children.”

DB: The imaginary attack ad that I wrote back in April?

BB: That was it. Medicaid and the child welfare stuff was just a killer. The way they did the environment was dead wrong because they were arguing two things at the same time. They were saying “He’s the pits” and then they were saying, “He’s too green.” You can’t have two messages. Finally, what they ended up with was the ridiculous free-media fly-around, where at every stop—if you go back and you look at the speech that Bush was making—ten or twelve things. So Bush shits on Arkansas, but it was done in a way that there was no vivid example out of it. It was a bunch of statistics; it wasn’t vivid. It didn’t last. And they didn’t have any media to back it up. And then they finally got around to their media, they did the nuclear winter ad which was the vulture ad—the buzzard ad, whatever you want to call it. Nobody thinks that life is that terrible anywhere.

DB: If they had done their attack more effectively, do you think—

BB: They could have killed us. They would have raised the risk factor, which is the best thing an incumbent has going against the nonincumbent, the risk factor.

DB: If they had used the Republican Convention to effectively attack the Arkansas record instead of Hillary and—

BB: There's no question. If they had done a solid six-week campaign attacking Arkansas, we would have been meat. We would have been on the defensive the whole time.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]