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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Gloria Cabe

Campaign Positions: Manager, Washington D.C. Office;
Congressional Liaison

Washington, D.C.

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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. Gloria Cabe 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: Please describe your association with the presidential campaign. Where did it begin for you?

Gloria Cabe: It began, in limited sorts of ways, years ago. The most apparent and specific that I can describe was going to New Hampshire in 1987, and going up with a list of a half dozen names and pulling together a reception and working from a handful of people Bill Clinton knew. Pulling together a huge reception for him that weekend. It was sometime in March. I remember well that I chose, as I remember, the wrong Holiday Inn. Did not know that there was a swell spiffy one downtown—never got that far. Got a car at the Boston Airport, drove into Manchester, stopped at the Holiday Inn and allowed myself one meal a day in the restaurant. The other days I just stayed in my room. New Hampshire—I call presidential politics their cottage industry. It's really pretty easy. It does take hours on the phone, but it's not tricky to pull together a huge crowd. Of course, after that, he decided not to run. But we saved all those records. After having spent that time there, I happily turned it over to somebody else. I knew that I did not want to become the resident expert on New Hampshire. It's a really bizarre place, in my view. Then we made some decisions in the campaign of 1990, with the notion that there might be a presidential race in 1991 or 1992. I think the most important ones were working to find both a media consultant/political consultant and pollster from the national scene because everyone that Bill worked with to that

point he had not been happy with. His pollster was a Republican pollster who had promised the Republican Party that he would never again represent another Democrat, except Bill Clinton or Hillary, if she ran in Arkansas. He'd extracted that extra little piece there, so that if Bill ever ran for a national office, he couldn't work with him. We decided then to, really, at my urging, that we try to find some people and begin to see if he could develop a trusting relationship with somebody that might prove useful later. Of course, he did. He did use the same pollster for all the polling, but he used Stan Greenberg for some focus groups, and used Frank Greer peripherally. Frank came down several times and met with us. David Watkins still had the major responsibility for the media, but Frank was part of it. Did the shoots and David would often pull it together for the air, and so forth. Then coming out of the session, he was head of the DLC and he started seriously thinking about the campaign. So there were those sorts of preliminary, but, nonetheless, intentional things. There were a lot more things, of course, that went on in 1987 that you know about. It was a piece of that larger effort. Then when we first started talking to folks around the country—putting together some of the stuff that we sent out, working with Stan and Frank, they really became the leaders in that consultant piece. On the front end. That was late spring to summer.

DB: That was when Bush was riding so high in the polls and it seemed to many that he was going to have a walk. To what extent, when a decision was made to go for it,

was it seen as a serious race for the presidency and to what extent was it seen as a positioning race for the future?

GC: I think it was always a serious race because every time someone would suggest to Bill, “But even if you don’t win, it would put you in really good shape for next time,” or, “You can’t think about running next time unless you do something this time,” he would always say, “But I’m not in this for that. I can’t get into this race with anything other than a serious intent to win.” I don’t think for him it was positioning. Clearly, on a rational level, he knew what people were telling him, that it could be a positioning effort. But I don’t think for him it was ever was. And certainly for me it wasn’t. That’s my mind-set as well. You just can’t go into something in the back of your mind having sort of fallback that even if I fail at something this huge, there would still have been some benefit. Maybe that’s a comforting thing to know, but I just don’t believe for Bill or Hillary it was “let’s pretend.” It was really real. Unlike almost everybody else, they really did have a feel of what they were going into. I’m sure that they had experiences that they had not anticipated—and maybe more harassed and exhausted than they anticipated—but they didn’t go into this as babes.

DB: Give me your take on his pledge in 1990 to be governor for four years.

GC: One of these days I’m going to figure out a way to express what I’m going to say to you. I think that Bill is, like most people, a fairly complex mixture of absolute honesty and political acumen. I think that was a decision that was both. On the one hand, he felt he had to make the pledge—polling indicated that he did. There’s no question in my mind that if he hadn’t had to make the pledge, he

wouldn't have. But he knew he had to, but he also felt like there wasn't any way he was going to run. He really could sit right there and—I've seen him do it many times—convince himself that it wasn't just a political decision, that it was really honest. And he really meant to be honest. We had a number of very explicit conversations with my insisting to the end that he shouldn't do it—that he should not make the pledge—but he felt like he had to, and that Bush was riding so high that this would not be the time, that he could not run for the presidency. I'm also convinced that is the reason he ran in 1990. So he could run in 1992. That he could not run if he didn't hold an office. It kept him visible.

DB: And also continued his access to his Arkansas political base?

GC: I think that Bill probably thought he could recapture that. But he also knew that for two years, or a potential six years, that if he left the state for that long he would have trouble recapturing the base, but I suspect he was not too concerned about two years.

DB: Let's come back to you, Gloria. You were part of that early small group that was meeting and deciding. Then what became your role?

GC: Early on, I was the person in the office, sort of the in-house political person. Clearly Bruce was a major player, stemming from the campaign in 1990. Bruce had always been an advisor from time to time, but it wasn't until the campaign in 1990 that he was there for every political meeting. So after that Bruce was there, but he was not down the hall. Calls to folks—the earliest ones—I made. I was really more of a convener, or the person who placed the calls and looked over the

polls and the access to Bill most often was through me, or to what we wanted to do in the earliest days before things really began to pick up steam.

DB: Before the exploratory?

GC: Even some time before that. Once things really began to pick up steam and they were sort of looking for folks. A lot of activity here with Greer, maybe more than Greenberg, but both of them put out a lot of feelers. Clearly, I didn't know people on the national scene—all the consultants, that business. Those kinds of things were being done by a lot of people. Also, at that point, I had pretty much made the decision that I wasn't going to leave the governor's office early on. But I just couldn't go do another campaign yet—or maybe ever.

DB: You had been manager in 1990.

GC: And had gone right into that legislative session which I had organized and run. I never slowed down.

DB: After the campaign started, what were your responsibilities?

GC: Well, let me begin by saying that I felt like I was going to stay on staff as long as possible, and, frankly, felt that was going to be difficult, to keep all of that going while the campaign was going on.

DB: Let me get for the record when you did leave the governor's office and under what circumstances?

GC: I left January 15, 1992, or I came to Washington January 15, 1992, so it was roughly the same time, and I really left for two reasons. The biggest was that it just became too unpleasant to be in the governor's office because Lieutenant Governor Tucker—maybe November, early December, after the exploratory

committee had met and Bill was clearly a candidate, probably after the announcement—we were making appointments. Well, we had previously reorganized the governor's office into two teams, we were doing quality management, and the chief of staff was going to function quite differently. And I had the responsibility for what was considered political—press, appointments, that sort of thing. And the person who'd been in charge of appointments for maybe two years had already gone with the campaign. Things were really in a mess between trying to straighten out the paper mess, the number of appointments that had been illegally done, and then trying to preserve Bill's ability to make the appointments that were really important to him. A lot of appointments come up the first of the year and the staff was working like crazy—really a yeoman's effort—getting lists for him, and, of course, most of the people working on that had done it long enough that they could put together pretty good lists for him. And most of the appointments—there are hundreds of them—were not that difficult and Bill could deal with readily. But, of course, there were some that were pretty thorny. And Tucker did make an appointment, in his absence, and it was one that Bill had made a commitment on, and we were in the position of trying to explain to the person Bill had made a commitment to how in the world we had let that happen. We were determined to work out a system so that didn't happen again. Bill had told me two or three times to work out an arrangement. Bill was perfectly willing to have Tucker make a number of appointments just so that on the really important ones Bill got to make them. What we typically would do is have them ready and watch his schedule, and then when he was in town

make the appointments. We'd do all the paperwork and all the phone calls, and then do the press releases ready to go when he was in town. Well, one weekend we did that, and we specifically discussed whether Bill should do it, and I said, well, you're the governor and you decide and I think it's perfectly appropriate. If you weren't running for president you wouldn't think twice about doing it, but there's a chance it's going to anger Tucker. But he just decided that he was governor and he was going to do it. And they were released. On Monday, I got to my office—I usually got there about 7:15—and Linda Dixon was standing in the door to my office shrieking and there were wheelchairs going down the door to my hallway, and they chained themselves literally to the governor's office. It was an amazing experience, and they brought their food and water, and for a couple of them, toilet equipment. And we immediately notified the lieutenant governor, because the governor was out of the state, and during the day talked about a number of possible responses. And in about the middle of the afternoon, Tucker called me down and told me how angry he was that Governor Clinton had made the appointments, that I was responsible because the people who made the appointments and issued the press releases worked for me under the new structure. And I have to say, it's the only time in my life anybody's ever yelled at me in anger. He gripped the side of his desk, the blood vessels in the side of his head started just pulsating, bulging, his face turned absolutely crimson and he started just screaming at me and I really thought he was going to explode. And instinctively, I just started talking real slowly and real softly. And he said, "The problem with you people is that you don't think I can fire you." And I said, to the

contrary, I really thought he could fire me. And so he said, “You’re fired.” In the meantime, you understand, there were fifteen people chained to the governor’s office. The press and cameras were all out in the hallway, the press was in a dither, it was really nuts. By the time we finished the conversation he decided that I wasn’t really fired, but he was really angry and he just had to think about what he was going to do about releasing those names. I did tell him that he should understand that I wouldn’t do something like that unless Governor Clinton had told me to do it, and that he was, indeed, in town when those appointments were made. So after that Tucker came up with a number of potential schemes to diminish what I would do in the office because he didn’t trust me. And it was really funny, I heard it from two different sources, Bill and Bruce were talking in the car—and this was during Gennifer Flowers days—and Bill was really defending me, except not by name, and the driver of the car thought it was Gennifer Flowers. Bruce was able to clarify that one. But it was really clear that for me to stay in the office was going to be unpleasant for me, was going to create problems for Bill, so I went in to open the Washington office, and there were two or three things going on. One, folks in Washington were really feeling left out. They thought the campaign ought to be here, that the single thing the Dukakis campaign had taught was that you had to have a D.C. office. So, you not only had the problems of all the Washington people thinking they’re the center of the universe, but you also had all the Dukakis people saying, “They’re right, it needs to be here.” Secondly, it was about time for the D.C. elections—it goes in two or three stages—and this city is truly Byzantine in the way it works and the Clinton

campaign had done no work here at all. And then the work for the superdelegates, Congress. My original task was the superdelegates—getting an office up and going—a Clinton presence—but we were also doing delegates in Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. And D.C. was really the complicated one. All the Virginia and Maryland people needed was a person and a place that they could relate to. They were good political people and knew how to work, but the D.C. piece was really thorny, and it was also then when New Hampshire almost blew.

DB: What was it like to be working on superdelegates at the time when Clinton's character was being trashed so ferociously?

GC: I told him I could always tell how he was doing by looking at my date card. When he was doing well I always had tons of invitations to lunch, to dinner—when he was not doing well, during the days of the draft and Gennifer Flowers stuff, it was pretty quiet. And Democrats wanted a winner, and Congress is like everybody else, they wanted to win, and they were willing to sacrifice a lot, at least in their terms, to have a winner. Look at Kerrey—one of them—and he only got one or two delegates. They just didn't have anybody. They wanted it to be Bill, but they wanted to be certain. They were always receptive. I was never treated badly.

DB: And then your responsibilities changed again?

GC: There were a couple of metamorphoses of the D.C. office. It became apparent that we had an enormous volunteer force that wanted to be used. The economy was quite bad, and we had an enormous number of young attorneys—their offices had been cut way back—a couple of people who had worked for other governors,

who had worked in quasi-governmental positions, had some very valuable skills. Very skilled, very able people. We finally had, when I left the Washington office that summer, something like 800 volunteers. And we didn't make it easy. We were on the ninth floor of an unmarked building. We made people come in, fill out a form before they were called upon. That was our way of limiting who we had to work with. But it was just amazing. And in those early months, too, we thought that in the general election the campaign would move to Washington, so we were positioning ourselves for very active participation by people who had been around the Democratic politics a long time and considered themselves key to any victory, as well as the cadre of Washington lobbyists who wanted to participate. And I have to say that the whole notion of Washington lobbyists took on a different meaning for me because most of these people were folks who had been in the Carter Administration—had been in government for all the right reasons—lost for twelve years—had stayed in Washington, but were in a position to be very, very helpful. But they were also in a position to be very, very harmful. So, a goal for me became to do the best by Bill Clinton, but to remember to keep his options open for four years later if he didn't make it this time. Dukakis absolutely could not have been nominated again because they so badly mishandled Washington. And while Washington cannot elect you, they can certainly deny it to you; they are so powerful within the party apparatus.

DB: At what point did it become clear to you that the campaign would not be headquartered in Washington, and looking back upon that decision now, what do you think about it?

GC: I think it was unquestionably the right decision, but it barely was.

DB: Did you argue for it to be here?

GC: Not really. I could make the argument for it, but I also knew Bill Clinton and knew that, for him, it was either going to be a three-headed campaign, because he absolutely had to spend a lot of time in Arkansas—

DB: Are you talking about the need for him personally, or because he had to run the state?

GC: For him personally—absolutely. It was already clear he wasn't going to spend nearly all the time and energy running the state he had anticipated. But for him, personally. And it was clear it was going to continue to take a toll if he didn't have time to go back and talk to real Arkansans, real people. We've known that in previous campaigns. After he'd been out on the road three or four days, he'd just get real unhappy, so I knew that we just had to do it. And I could argue it either way, but having the campaign in Little Rock created lots of problems.

DB: For example?

GC: I think it created a lot of the distance we're seeing right now with Congress. The people who were pulled together to work Congress were out of one wing of the party. I tried to talk to people last summer about where this was headed because it was thought to be important to keep Washington at bay. I always felt we could do both, but we did not do a good job of working Congress last year in the election. The time for building those relationships was then. The good so outweighed the bad, but it created huge problems with the constituencies. They never felt like they were listened to. I can't begin to tell you the hours I spent,

even after I was no longer directing the D.C. operation, talking to people who couldn't get their phone calls returned. Clearly if it had been here, maybe they wouldn't have returned the phone calls quicker, but the distance would not have been so great. There was a lot of trust that Clinton never quite got there. There wasn't any question that these groups were going to support Clinton, but the kind of trust that really builds for the long haul just wasn't done.

DB: After directing the Washington office, what was your next role?

GC: My next role was as a congressional liaison, generally right after the convention, there was a weird transition time. What we did was only a small portion of what we should have been doing. What we primarily did was get surrogate speakers and keep them informed of Bill's schedule—when he was going to be in their state—which is important, but woefully inadequate.

DB: Many people have described this campaign as the most effective in recent presidential campaign history. From your perspective, what made it so effective?

GC: Well, purely and simply it's because he won. The single most important, critical piece of that campaign was Bill Clinton. His energy, his talents, his persistence, his whole personality. You couldn't bring that group of people together, with that organizational structure, and win another campaign, and if people set out to replicate it, they won't be successful.

DB: Are you saying they won in spite of the organization?

GC: Absolutely. Bits and pieces of the organization worked very well, but it was never well orchestrated—it never had several pieces working well at once. A well-run campaign is well orchestrated because the various components are

complimentary to one another, they work together, and a good manager knows when to focus on which one. Clearly enough good happened that we won.

DB: In accounts of past presidential campaign organizations, there was so much infighting and backbiting that the internal fights became the story. That did not seem to happen here. Was it because we were in Arkansas?

GC: To some extent, but I will tell you, that's all I dealt with here. Slight exaggeration. But much of my time—and I saw it, it was vicious—they turned on each other. Why didn't it become the story? I think a lot of it was because it was in Arkansas. There was a lot of street talk. And there was a fair amount in the press. Why did Rahm's fistfight only get on the "Style" page? I don't know. But it was known by lots of people.

DB: If you are saying that the campaign was a triumph of Bill Clinton's persona overwhelming a terrible campaign structure, how does that square with Bill Clinton, who cares a lot about quality management? Where was it here?

GC: I'm not sure you can apply "quality management" to a campaign. You can run a campaign of good quality. People who are good managers are fairly rare, and enterprise that huge, dispersed over such a wide geographic territory, you would have to have a number of good managers. There are so many things about a campaign that make it difficult to manage. A lot of the practices that were put into place for a lot of enterprises, you don't have the time to put in place for a campaign. But there was nobody in a leadership position on this campaign who had administrative experience. They had talents and skills and they did some things very well, so I don't want to make it sound like I'm trashing the whole

group. But Bill said that he knew that he couldn't really put the power of this campaign in their hands because they couldn't manage. They hadn't done it before, and they didn't know how. And they couldn't figure it out. It was too much for them. They didn't even implement some fundamental management practices. The flow of paper, the flow of information—there was so much that anyone who had run an office or a staff of even modest size would have done that would have made life so much better for so many people, and would have eliminated a lot of the strife, a lot of the problems. Were there good political minds? Absolutely. I, unlike others, would not say there were just one or two, it was the blend. Any one person could have disappeared and the campaign never would have missed them. I think that the wisdom and the brilliance came from all of us, from time to time, and I think that everybody also had some horrible ideas. I really have trouble seeing one real hero. And, of course, when you are in a Bill and Hillary campaign, it's really their strengths and their brilliance and their acumen that make it work. When you put a campaign out anywhere but Washington—out in the middle of the country—a campaign that most of the pundits, the politicians, didn't think had a chance in hell—you don't really get the best in terms of consultants, managers with real experience.

DB: When were you convinced that Clinton would be the nominee?

GC: Well this may sound Pollyannaish, but really from the very beginning, I just knew that he would do it. I had seen him go through all that stuff before.

DB: And the presidency?

GC: Well, from the beginning, I just never doubted it. I knew the Gennifer Flowers stuff was not true. I just knew he'd win. And I'm one of the world's biggest cynics, but I have watched him for years, talking to hundreds of people who didn't want to believe him, but had to. I've seen him walk in and tell 1200 teacher educators that what was wrong with American education was teacher educators and they stood and applauded him for ten minutes. And then stood in line for an hour to shake his hand. And just like every campaign he's ever been in, I just felt if he could get around and see enough people—and though I don't believe everything everybody says about the campaign, the decision to go around the regular media and get him connected more to people was positively brilliant because of the way he is.

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

GC: The lowest point, in terms of fearing that it might be a fatal moment, or the kind of issue we might have trouble climbing out of, or just couldn't, was when Hillary came under such serious fire, after she made the comment about “Should I have stayed home and served tea and made cookies?” I think that was largely colored by where I was at the time, which was sitting in Washington, and for many people trying to call the campaign, it was Washington they called. For all the angst in the campaign about where the headquarters should be, and in my view finally reaching the correct judgment that it should be in Little Rock, still for a lot of people around the country, they thought it was in Washington. So, we got lots of phone calls, and once I realized what was going on, I had the staff log the calls. So we heard from a lot of people who were bold enough to pick up the phone and

tell us what they thought of what was going on. So I knew that it was not only my perception of what was going on, and perceptions from those going in and out of headquarters, but what we were hearing from a lot of folks. And it was apparent to me that not only were we hearing from traditional women who had chosen, for whatever reason, to stay at home with their children, but we were inundated with calls from professional women who felt it had insulted them who had made the decision to take a few years off—and many of them talked about baking cookies. And of course lots of cookies were being baked and mailed into us—I know you were getting them in Little Rock, too. And the trouble was, I felt like we could overcome the traditionalists, the women who were suspicious anyway of who Bill was and who Hillary was, but when I realized it was eating into our core of support, that's when I really got worried.

DB: Did you communicate your fears, and if so, to whom?

GC: Well, communication between the Washington headquarters and the people in Little Rock was often very difficult. Often, we didn't get calls returned at all, or if they were returned it took days, so if there was something I really needed to communicate, I'd just call Bruce, but I was very cautious about that because there was a limit to what any one man could carry. But I did talk to Bruce about it because it was clear from the polling that part of the problem with Hillary, as an issue, was not Hillary herself, but that she became another layer that people had to get through to see the real Bill Clinton. So at that particular time, when people were still trying to figure out all the stuff about Bill the candidate, here comes this. And there were still a lot of people who were already troubled about Hillary,

so trying to figure out what all that really meant. So that problem seemed to linger, and in this city, where there are so many professional women, it suddenly began to hit me in the gut. I then discussed it with Celinda Lake, who had not only done tons of polling on women and women's issues, but had focus groups on Hillary, and I found all that fundamentally troubling—I just couldn't sense the way to pull out of that.

DB: But we did pull out of it.

GC: Yes, we did, and that's to Hillary's credit. Celinda called me one night, and was very troubled by what she was finding, and was wondering whether she should take the raw, unvarnished truth to Hillary. I urged her that there would be nobody more interested in and concerned and wanting to see the raw data and try to reconstruct than Hillary. And that's exactly what they did do. But the concern for me was when I realized that this was eating into our base, our core—the women who Hillary had actually brought in—because a lot of women were really concerned about Bill, and how he had treated this woman. This was early enough that all the Jennifer Flowers stuff and the draft stuff were still swirling around and people were not at all certain that he was okay. For women, Hillary had made him okay, but when those folks started to drop off, it was very troubling. Also, I worked with a lot of lobbyists—would see them week to week. A lot of them were left over from the Carter Administration—that's where Democrats go when they're not in office—and these folks were excited out of their minds. They'd come on early for Bill Clinton, and they also were really panicked.

DB: So you thought that was the most fragile, troublesome time in the campaign?

GC: I really did, and maybe because I'd been through the kinds of battles I'd been through before with Bill Clinton. The Flowers stuff—we'd been through the things like that before, and survived, so maybe I'd developed a little scar tissue.

DB: What did you see as the absolute high point?

GC: Personally, the high point was the nomination at the convention, when in a very visible way, it all became so real, seeing Bill Clinton on the podium and knowing that this was it.

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

GC: Well, this is a position that I spoke of confidentially to people during the campaign, and somewhat more since then, and now I can say that I was right. I read a lot of stuff about how wonderful the campaign team was, and I say this without wanting to take anything away from the hard work and seriousness of purpose that all the people around Bill Clinton in the campaign offered him, but no one should lose sight of the fact that the campaign was successful because of the sheer enormity of Bill Clinton the person, and how that finally got through to people. It clearly was not the best-organized campaign. It was not even the best-focused campaign. And in spite of what we know to be his personal weaknesses, the people of this country began finally to see him as a real person and began to have a lot of hope. It just was not that this was one of best campaigns in history.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]]