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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Nestor M. Davidson

Campaign Position: Researcher, Opposition Research

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 1, 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. Nestor M. Davidson reviewed this transcript and granted permission to make this interview available to scholars, students, and researchers. The final document may contain edits requested by the interviewee. This transcript was processed as part of the Diane D. Blair Papers and prepared for publication by the editorial staff of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

Nestor Davidson: I was working in Boston as a paralegal in a small criminal defense and civil liberties law firm.

DB: Who reached out and brought you into this operation?

ND: I would have to say that I reached myself out, but the person who brought me down was Bob Boorstin.

DB: When did you begin?

ND: It was the first Monday in August. I showed up at 9:00 a.m. thinking I was right on time and of course everything—the way things go around here, people had been working for several hours. In my old job I would never get in before 9:15 and I thought that’s a good way to start in the new position. And I got in and Boorstin said, “Oh, hang on for a while.” And about three hours later he came back. I was just waiting in the “War Room”—not quite understanding the significance of that—and finally he got a free moment and sat me down and talked to me for a few minutes and then decided that he would throw me out to Berman’s team. Where I have happily been ever since.

DB: What specifically do you do? Walk me through a day.

ND: I get in bleary-eyed at 7:00, go to the meeting. If it’s a morning one, I’ve done the GOP watch the night before. I’ll do the update usually five minutes before the meeting, and then will go over what the Republicans are doing that day. Just

basically scheduling stuff. We usually get most of it off the wire. And then during the course of the day, we'll be working on several research projects. If Bush has an event and he's likely to speak about high tech, let's say, we'll make sure that his record on that issue is gotten to the people on the ground. Or if there is a response that we're doing—the majority of what we do is respond to charges that come out—same as the Arkansas Record side of the operation does. So we'll make sure that in addition to pointing out the positive things that we have to respond with, we also have to make sure that when what Bush is saying and what Bush has done over the last four years don't match up—and that is rather frequent—we don't let him get away with that.

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

ND: Well, to sort of mouth what I think are the clichés about it—but I think they're clichés because they're true—I think the lack of hierarchy really helps. The fact that we have these War Room meetings and that there is an attitude coming very strongly from the senior brass that everyone's contribution is important and that everyone's opinion is important. I remember toward the end of the first week I got down here, Michael Waldman had a meeting and a lot of the top people were there and he brought thirty or forty regular staffers into the room to throw ideas around. I remember just being blown by the thought that all of our opinions mattered and we could all really contribute. And that has been true in every project I've been involved with. You know, during the debates people who

normally have sort of muckety-muck positions were running around photocopying. There's no sense of you answer to this person and I am more important than you are. It certainly may be what they think, but everyone that I've worked with has been very great about having it be a very open process, which is not to say there's not discipline and people working incredibly hard. But there's a wonderful cross-germination that goes on between departments, between people within a department, and I think if there's one thing that I could point to—I've never been in a presidential campaign before, so I can't compare it. I mean I've heard the stories from Dukakis in 1988, and even a few from Mondale in 1984. And the biggest contrast that people draw from what they've told me between the campaign that we've been running and Dukakis in 1988, is that lack of rigid structure. So that it's very flexible. And the flip side of that—and this I love—is that things are often incredibly intense and very crazy and people have to produce very, very quickly and you have to be constantly on top of your pool of information. There are sort of standard documents that we have in the department and we each have to make sure that on a day-to-day basis we're updating them and keeping on top of that. And sometimes between updating and doing the daily tracking—you know, the GOP watch—and then all of the research that we're doing on a daily basis, you almost wish there was a little bit more structure because you have to have a lot of responsibility for your own work. But I would definitely point to that. Also one other thing, and again, this is a little bit of a cliché but this is more true than any other thing that anyone will ever say about

this campaign, the people on this campaign are incredibly capable and incredibly positive and just some of the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. And I've been continually surprised since I got down here. I had this image that a presidential campaign would be filled with egomaniacs, turf-conscious, narrow-minded, really closed people. And it has been a constant revelation how open and how friendly and how basically fundamentally nice people have been on this campaign.

DB: And you came in late, but did you feel excluded because of that?

ND: I came in late and I felt very welcomed. There was certainly a little bit of time where I felt I had to prove myself, but that's natural in any organization. But I'd say by the time I got back from Houston—since then I have felt completely part of the team. There is an awareness that people who were on the campaign in January and who went through New Hampshire and who went through all the primaries and went into the convention and have lived through the entire experience have a different perspective on the experience. Although interestingly—it took me several months to get on the campaign—of trying and sending resumes. And when I first made the decision and I told my employers that as soon as I got something I would be leaving, it was back in March, late March, and friends were telling me I was crazy, that this was quixotic and, “What are you doing?” I had been accepted to law school and I deferred for a year just to work on the campaign, and everyone was telling me what a completely stupid

thing that was. It was kind of a letdown that, by the time I finally got hired in mid-July, we were at record highs and it was—

DB: It no longer seemed like a quest.

ND: Exactly. Although, you know, no complaints. There's been enough ambient anxiety that no one's rested on their laurels.

DB: What, in your mind, was the turning point—when we went from being third in the polls?

ND: Just from an outside perspective, not having been in the campaign at that time, I would say that the extraordinary period of time between, you know, when Senator Gore became the vice-presidential candidate—sort of that being the beginning of the arc and then the end of the arc being Ross Perot dropping out and saying it was because the revitalized Democratic Party, which I believe resonated as true then, and I think it's still true no matter how he tries to revise history.

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

ND: Oh, there've been so many. I would say the two weeks I had in Houston.

DB: What made them so terrific?

ND: It was an opportunity to be involved in the campaign in a non-generic way. I work as hard as anyone in the campaign, and we all pitch in, but most of the things we do—and I think, again, this is a very positive thing about the campaign—most of the things we do are very anonymous. Any document that goes out, any statement of George Stephanopoulos, will have about thirty fingerprints on it. And that's great, and everyone contributes, and it all gets

melded together, and everyone signs off on it. But there are very few opportunities you have to contribute in a very, very personal way. And I think the team spirit is great, but, for me, going down to Houston was an opportunity to really push myself and to see whether that would yield fruit. And I think it did. I think the two weeks we had down there were very successful, and it was at that moment that things really could have turned, that the Republicans, if they hadn't been challenged, it would have been viewed as a nasty and slightly bitter convention. But I think it would have begun the momentum towards a very different dynamic for the fall. And to be there and to see Betsey operate, and to feel like I could help her and contribute was really a high point. I get up every morning and I bound out of bed and I am just happy to be here.

DB: After three-hours sleep?

ND: After three-hours sleep. It's amazing how much adrenalin you can get when you know you've got to come in and give a report to the War Room.

DB: And also because you know eventually it's going to end?

ND: Yes. I don't know if I could do this for my whole life.

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

ND: Other than what is out there and public and everything else, I think I would really like history to know how aboveboard and scrupulous—what Berman and his whole shop have been doing. Opposition research has kind of a nasty reputation out there. And I remember when I got assigned, Bob Boorstin said to me, "Well,

go there for a couple of days, see how you like it, see if they like you, and then we'll talk.” And I was a little nervous because it has this real negative connotation. And again, one of the greatest surprises and one of the wonderful things I've learned is that it's really all about just getting the facts out there and making sure that the candidate that you're running against can't ignore his own record. And Bush, more than anyone I've seen—and I don't have vast experience, but he is a master at rewriting his own history. I think that's why the far right has such disdain for him, because he doesn't have really a lot of the core principles that true conservatives have. I have a lot of respect for a lot of people in that end of the Republican Party who have very deeply felt beliefs about limiting the role of government—I mean, history has shown how potentially damaging that kind of intrusion can be. And that as a core belief, I think, is something to be very well respected in American political culture. But Bush simply does not share it. He simply goes with wherever the prevailing trade winds take him. And I have been very proud of the work we've done, making sure that he cannot do that.

DB: He has to live with his own history.

ND: And he has made that the issue of this campaign. I mean, every flyer that the Republicans have put out in the last two weeks have been entitled “Trust and Taxes” written right across the top. And I absolutely agree with them, that those are very key issues. And on both of those issues, George Bush simply does not have a leg to stand on. And the Republicans have been doing this as long as I've

been alive and conscious of what happens in the political culture. And I've always scratched my head and I've always wondered how they've gotten away with it. And I think in many cases it's simply because we as a party, and whatever candidate has been running, haven't been very effective in making sure that their hypocrisy isn't trumpeted to the rooftops. And I think we as a campaign have done that very well, in the responses, and we've done it very cleanly and very honestly. I mean, we are obsessive about fact-checking.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]