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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Maria Echaveste

Campaign Positions: Deputy Political Director,
National Latino Coordinator

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 28, 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. Maria Echaveste 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?

Maria Echaveste: I came from New York City. I was practicing law with a New York/Manhattan law firm, doing corporate and bankruptcy law. And I started working with our New York campaign organization late last year.

DB: Then they said, “We need you all the time”?

ME: Well, it was sort of funny, working with Susan Thomases and Harold Ickes and all those people, they kept saying, “We need to get some Hispanics on staff. We need, in fact, someone who can be really top-notch to be in the campaign to work with the Hispanic community.” And I never once in my life thought about doing it. I kept racking my brains, “Who do I know? Who do I know?” And then my husband, who was also working on the campaign—he’s a lawyer—you know, to get on the ballot in New York you really have to do a lot of work. So we had to work hard. Anyway, I called him and I said, “We’ve got to come up with a name now, who do we know?” And he said, “Well, let’s think about it.” And he calls me back like two minutes later and says, “You know what? Why don’t you do it? Why don’t you apply?” And I said, “Well, can we afford it? Are you prepared? I’m going to do all this traveling. And who knows where ultimately the national office is going to end up.” He says, “Look, you were born in Texas, you grew up in California, you live in New York City—that’s some pretty good connections. It’s worth a try.” So I thought, “Well, I’ll try.” And so I ended up talking to Susan and Stephanie Solien,

and I had worked with Hillary Clinton on the New World Foundation Board, so that's why I had decided I was going to support the Clintons. And by February, I took a leave from my law firm and started working with the Hispanic community, which has been a real experience.

DB: Run through just what are the things that you do in this capacity.

ME: Well, I think there are two big differences between the primary and the general, and it's two roles. Obviously, the commitment was to get Clinton elected, but it's also being an advocate within the campaign for Hispanics and Hispanic issues. And trying to bring this campaign's attention more to the need for diversity. So in the primary effort it was dealing with each state where Latinos—like in Illinois called me fifteen days before and said, “They haven't really reached out to us. Why don't you come help them talk to us?” So I sort of went from state to state, basically holding hands and talking to them about why they should support Clinton and trying to mobilize people to feel that this campaign was going to be different than other campaigns. The postprimary experience has been more of an effort to organize our leadership and make sure that they felt that they were being consulted, that they had input or were being paid attention to. And it runs the gamut from worrying about how much get-out-the-vote money is being put in the states for Latinos, media, policy issues that deal with everything from when we did the Puerto Rico primary, which was real fun because we got all the delegates and I worked very hard on that and learned the nuances that are very peculiar to Puerto Rico. Cubans, dealing with their whole set of issues. But basically the hardest problem was that Hispanics were so suspicious of the Democratic Party. Part of the problem was [that] Governor

Clinton was from a state that does not have a very significant number of Latinos, and therefore there was a suspicion. But even more of a problem was, “Why should we vote Democratic? The party takes us for granted. They never put any money in terms of field organization. They don’t spend any time on us. And then when they get elected, they forget about us.” And so it was more trying to convince people, identifying leaders in various communities to talk to them and convince them why they should support Governor Clinton. Then also within the campaign, scheduling issues. Let’s do some things in the Hispanic community. Let’s give some interviews to Spanish-language media. So it’s an outside plus the inside.

DB: It’s hard to kind of grade yourself, but let’s start with the outside first. How well do you think you have fared in persuading these leaders to put aside their suspicions and try a Democratic candidacy this time?

ME: I think that, again if you look at it in this case from pre-convention, post-convention—I think that I did a pretty good job pre-convention. That there were a lot of people who—just based on personal involvement—that there were people involved in the campaign that were Latinos, I’d say a B+, A-. I’m kind of a tough grader. I think we reached out and we persuaded a lot of people that this program—that Governor Clinton’s plan spoke to our issues in that they’re the same issues that affect people around the country. Of course, after the convention it was a whole different arena out there because everybody wanted to climb on board. And then the task was more everyone was offering advice and ready to come to Little Rock and ready to do policy, when all you really wanted them to do is drive the vote. So it was a different task. And a lot of it is just listening to people. My way of thinking what I was doing

was trying to discern truth. Because what would happen is I would go to a community and there'd be one faction and there'd be another. And constant scheduling battles. [Interviewer's note: Tape is defective at this point, during which Maria spoke with great animation about the nightmare of having to explain to her "constituency" the repeated breaking of scheduled events. When asked what was the low point for her in the campaign, she discussed a fierce internal battle over Clinton's scheduled events in Los Angeles.]

DB: What has been the high point?

ME: It has to do more, I think, with future bridge building. That we have now brought people together with our national core advisory group of Hispanics, of Hispanics around the country getting to know each other. It could be the beginning of a network of bridges between Puerto Ricans and Cubans and Mexicans and Californians that ought to be developed because what happens is it will die and then we'll have to build it all up again four years from now. And it doesn't make any sense. I feel real gratified that we've gotten people to know each other and it could be something to build on. There are people talking about where do we go from here. Not just from the campaign perspective, but from a Latino political power development of the community. How can we use the networks that we've built to do something? And that's been very exciting.

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

ME: Oh, Illinois. Basically Illinois. I must say that New York made me very nervous. But Illinois.

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

ME: I don't know. I've kept focused always on November 3 as the final D-day. I never allowed myself to think that we could lose, but that isn't the same thing as thinking you can win. I've only really sort of allowed myself to think that we will win within the last few weeks, because it's okay now, I do believe it. Certainly the convention was just a highlight in terms of making people feel. Even those of us who have been with the campaign and have heard him speak just feel like, "Yes, there is something more happening here than simply electing a president." I truly believe that. And I think it's very historic.

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

ME: That it was a campaign that was focusing on which direction this country was going. It's as plain and simple as that. That's why I got into it, that's why I think a lot of people got into it, and I think it's why the governor and Hillary got into it. And that is what this campaign was about—the future direction of this country, plain and simple—and whether people were going to be able to choose that direction.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]