

Special Collections
University of Arkansas Libraries
365 N. McIlroy Avenue
Fayetteville, AR 72701-4002
(479) 575-8444

Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Mary Mel French

Campaign Position: Director of Administration

Washington, D.C.

February 19, 1993

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. Mary Mel French 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.

The Diane D. Blair Papers are housed in Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. Permission to republish or quote from this interview must be obtained before publication. Please contact Special Collections at (479) 575-8444 or specoll@uark.edu for assistance. A "Permission to Publish Request Form" may found at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/forms/>.

[Beginning of Interview]

DB: When did you first become associated with the Clinton campaign and in what capacity?

MMF: I have to stop and think when I started. Maybe in November 1991. At that point it was a very tiny organization that we were doing. I was just volunteering. I came over and started helping Mary Ann Salmon and David Watkins with whatever they needed to have done. Then as we got on into a little bit more of the campaign, the duties for everyone grew and I really started working with Mary Ann with the Arkansas part of the campaign. When everyone had to go to New Hampshire, I stayed and ran the offices and did that part for Arkansas—and answered the phones and took everyone’s messages. They campaigned and I kidded them, “You got to do the fun part.” But it was very interesting and I did get a great deal out of it. Then I went on the payroll and started working full time. At that point switched over to more of the operations. We lost our volunteer coordinator, and I took that on along with the other things I had been doing. Then we got down to the primaries being over and moving the whole operation. It just followed one step right after the other.

DB: So by the end of the campaign you were managing the whole Gazette building? What were you doing there? What was your title?

MMF: I’m not sure I had a title before that point. When we got to the point that we had to move and David said, “I want you to plan this move and be responsible for it.” I always felt that I sort of laughed when these things come along. I said, “You know I can move houses, but I’ve never moved a great big organization.” It is

exciting, and I found that I could do that when I got started with it. So we did move everything into the Gazette building and we were ready to operate. We started on a Friday and we kept working all through that weekend. And when everyone was at their desks Monday morning, they never missed a beat. They were ready to go right to work. So it took a lot of time and a lot of planning and a lot of work, but it was a good experience and it was helpful to me to know I could do that. So then I became the director of administration after we got into the building. That was primarily overseeing the operations of the building itself. All the maintenance, the security, shipping and receiving. It also included overseeing the volunteers for the correspondence department. I guess those were really my primary things. But because of it functioning the way that it did, and the fact that I had to know exactly what was going on in the building, it meant that I was in every department a lot and I got to know most of the people. That was the nice part of it.

DB: What was the not nice part of it?

MMF: Well, I don't know. For me, I think it probably all was nice. I think that what was hard for me were the long hours because I had not been use to that, particularly in that job, and the fact that we had to have security twenty-four hours a day. It meant that I got calls—often all night long. Or I would have to check on something. I had to be there very early, at 7:00 or 7:15, which, again, was good because I ended up going to the “War Room” meetings and became very knowledgeable about what was actually happening and going on in the campaign. It gave me a real background that I probably would not have gotten otherwise. So

it was a lot more than just my job. Then my hours at night would often be until midnight. I might leave and go eat dinner. I could do that because I didn't, at this point, have a family or children who were right there depending on me. So I learned to sort of gear my life to the campaign.

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?

MMF: I think what I saw that made it work was the fact that we had teamwork. That we were a team. That it was an entire group of people committed to a purpose. Bill Clinton showed us what the purpose was. People believed in him. The people who did not feel that way, or who were in our campaign for their own totally personal or self-serving reasons almost had to leave by their own accord because we couldn't function within that. It had to be a group of people who could work together and could talk and solve these problems. I think the fact that Bill and Hillary both worked so hard themselves. It gave other people the incentive to do the same thing and to keep focused on what we were supposed to do. All in all, there were a few people who were difficult to work with, but other than that, most of the people really pulled together and focused on what they believed in and made it work. No matter what it was. It was commitment.

DB: Specifically with respect to the campaign organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

MMF: I don't think that it was highly centralized, but it wasn't loose, either. There were levels of upper administration on every floor in every department that we had, so that people didn't feel like we had a closed executive group that ran everything.

They felt like they did have a voice in what went on. There were certain people that they could go to and talk through their problems. I think that it's hard in a political organization to keep a tight rein on everything. It's just almost impossible to do because there are too many facets or too many things going on. And in a presidential campaign, which, of course, we had never done, you have an element of a then-governor running for the presidency, going all over the country, our having to stay in touch with him at all times, and yet run this organization and keep it all intact so that the right hand knew what the left hand was doing. That's very, very difficult with that many people—and particularly with that many people who do have egos, who are extremely bright and smart—to try and pull it together. But at least we had the War Room meetings, which were completely and totally effective, both in the morning and in the afternoon. We had major staff meetings every morning, which brought everybody together and you could definitely say what you needed to say.

DB: And if you needed a decision made, you knew who to go to who could ultimately make that decision? Or did you have to go several places?

MMF: Sometimes you had to go several places. I think that what it took, at least in my position—I could go to the people that I needed to go to, to ask the question. But, ultimately, I always felt that I had the authority to make my decision when I needed to or when I had to. That if I did what I felt that Bill and Hillary Clinton would want done at that point, I was probably right, and if all else failed, I could get them, so that made my feeling and my position more secure in what I was doing. But I never did have a problem with finding someone that I needed to ask

a question; but if I didn't get the answer that I needed or the way that I felt it needed to be done, I did something else.

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

MMF: I think I felt that he would once the New York primary was over. I think that was such a hard-fought battle and that if anyone could stand up through all of that, that it would finally settle down; and that as long as he could maintain the status quo and keep coming up for air and answering questions. And that our organization as a campaign held together also, and we were a united front on what we were doing. I felt that was probably a real turning point.

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

MMF: I think my feeling was that Bill Clinton was going to be president if he could just stand it. If everybody could just stand getting through it. If he could go out and really meet the American people, himself. That was the crucial point in all of that. The one thing that sort of stands out in my mind—and I can't remember exactly which debate it was—he was going to one of the debates, and it was not an easy one; it was to be a crucial debate. So obviously, it was after the first debate. He came to the campaign in the afternoon before he left on the plane and he walked around and shook hands with the campaign people and he visited. They were just delighted and it gave such a spark to everyone because it was hard times then. And he stood looking on the first floor into the volunteer room and he really had tears in his eyes and looked at me and said, "This is really a hard night. This is a tough time." I looked at him, and it was like he had a different feeling about the whole thing. And you just almost knew that it was going to happen. It

was really going to work. It was such a nice feeling because you saw this person that you knew, yet he wasn't taking any of it lightly and it was sort of mystic, this is really going to happen. It's more than you ever thought it was. I remember the first day he came to the Gazette building, and the expression on his face as he walked through. It was like then he fully realized what a momentous undertaking this was, because it was a big step up from the little building that we had been in, and here were all these hundreds of people.

DB: What were you doing immediately before you signed with the campaign?

MMF: I didn't really have very much to do at all. I had been trying since the governor's race to find something to do. It just didn't materialize. I had gone to many people and tried to get a job, and I got to the point that I had a lump in my throat every time I did it because I thought, "There's really nothing for me to do." I have to be busy. It was almost like you had to be almost begging someone to let you do something, which is hard to do. So finally, because I just couldn't find anything to do, I thought the only thing I knew how to do to save my sanity was to redo and remodel houses. So I just took a big gulp and decided I would spend some of my money that I didn't need to be spending—but I had to do something—and I would buy a house in Hot Springs with a good location and I would remodel it. At least I would be busy. So I literally bought the worst house I could find at the best price and I started in. I hired carpenters and I subcontracted everything and I literally spent every day doing that. I was just at the point of getting finished when I decided that I really wanted to spend some

time helping with the campaign. I went back as just a volunteer and then I finished it up very quickly because I knew I wanted to get back.

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

MMF: I think during New Hampshire. That was really a tough time. We had to be very reflective, and I think we just held on in that stage. But it was hard, and you had to, with the really younger people who were there, spend a lot of time saying, “Look, you have to give everyone a chance. Don’t make quick decisions. You ride things out sometimes, and hopefully it will turn out for the best.” In this case it did.

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

MMF: For me it was going to the convention in New York. I, of course, had never done anything like that. I had watched things on television and read about it, but it was a very, very exciting time. I think standing on the floor of the convention and listening to the cheers and the sounds and watching Bill Clinton walk out on that stage was just unbelievable. It was something I’ll never forget. It was almost like when you are a child and you feel this patriotic feeling for your country and see someone who’s really going to make a difference.

DB: Looking back now on the campaign, from your perspective, is there anything major that you thought to yourself, “Next time we’re going to do this differently?”

MMF: Maybe not for me. I’m sure there are things that people could think of, but it was sort of plan and feel it as you go because we didn’t have a guideline of what you do. At certain points it was make it up and figure it out. We probably could have structured better—divisions and that type of thing. Or maybe certain personalities

could have been better, but how do you know that? You don't, and you might not know it the second time. From my viewpoint, I don't know. We won. That's a good way to put it.

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

MMF: I would say that from the very beginning it was about people. It was totally about the American people and making change for our country and doing it in the best way. The fact that Bill Clinton has spent his life in a political world but not just for himself. He has, in looking back at this, made the effort over the years to be involved in many, many organizations and committees all over the United States so that when he got to the point—and Hillary also—of making this race, they knew the good people. They knew the people who were committed to America and they knew the minds who could come forward if they would and really help our country. They not only asked in a way that made people want to do it, but these people did come forward. That's what probably will make it work because it's not just one person, it's the charisma and leadership, and he has that. He also has this ability to make people want to do it. The long hours that he spends are an incentive to the other people.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]