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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Mandy Grunwald

Campaign Position: Director of Advertising

Telephone Interview

December 20, 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. Mandy Grunwald 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: Mandy, when did you officially join the Clinton campaign?

Mandy Grunwald: I don't think it was ever official.

DB: Okay. Then describe your relationship with the campaign.

MG: Early on Frank, my partner, was working on the campaign. I helped get James involved in the campaign because he's one of my best friends.

DB: Oh, so you were the James connection?

MG: I was the James connection. Now, obviously, James had just won Harris Wofford's campaign. It wasn't a secret that there was a talented person out there the campaign would want. I think Frank and Stan were much more the center of the campaign, this was something like November or December. Neither of them had ever worked with him. He had, of course, a controversial reputation. They were sort of wary. They said, "Do you think he'll fit in and how do you think it will work?" I said, "Look, he's the greatest." And we had lunch that I set up. Everybody got along tremendously well, and, actually, James will tell you it was very influential in deciding to choose this campaign because, first, he was very struck by Clinton and both he and Paul really wanted to work with Clinton. But the second part, for him, was that he got a sense that the campaign structure wanted him involved. And that when he talked to other campaigns, their staff was wary of him and so on. Stan and Frank were very open and, "Come on in and we need you."

DB: Now, when you say at this lunch, everybody got along real well, was Clinton himself there?

MG: No. Really, just consultant to consultant—would we be stepping on each other’s toes, or can we all work together? And Paul, James, Frank, Stan and I were the only people at this lunch. That was the first thing I did. Then I would talk to James all the time because, as you know by now, he’s a phone addict. Talks to all of his friends several times a week. And Frank would come in and say, “I’m working on this spot.” Or “Do you want to rewrite this script?” Or “What do you think about this?” I’m enough of a political junkie that I was paying attention, but I really wasn’t working on the campaign. The first thing I did was appear on *Nightline*.

DB: Mandy, that was such a memorable event. You were my hero that night.

MG: You know, the funny thing was it was pure coincidence.

DB: How did that happen?

MG: It happened because the week before, when the first of the *Star* stories came out about the lawsuit—what was the guy’s name? I’ve now forgotten his name, thank God—the guy who filed the lawsuit, the first story.

DB: Oh, I have suppressed a lot of this.

MG: Me, too. It’s wonderful. But *Crossfire* invited me on. Now *Crossfire* invited me on for a fluky reason. There’s a woman who’s a producer who thinks there aren’t enough women on the show and for six months she’d been trying to put me on the show because she wanted more women on the air. We had almost done it a number of times, and she called that day and said, “Would you do it?” I said, “I think it’s a bit trashy that you’re doing a show about this. If I say no, would you

not do the show?” She said, “No, we’ll do it anyway.” So I did it and the people at *Nightline* saw it. So later, when they were booking their show—when the Jennifer Flowers *Star* story came out—they said, “We saw this woman, and she was good.” I don’t know what they were thinking, but they thought it made sense. So I was booked, not because I was part of the Clinton campaign, but because they had seen me talking about this issue—trash and tabloid journalism—the week before. That whole day was a crazy day of phone calls and conference calls and all that. *Nightline* thought that maybe Bill and Hillary would do the show, maybe they wouldn’t. I was trying to convince their producers not to do the show. And meanwhile, in Frank’s office, there was this ongoing conference call. Frank was there, Stan was there, Begala was there. James was up in New Hampshire. Wilhelm was down in Little Rock. There was this six-hour conference call that was open, and they were trying to figure out what to do. Well, it was finally time for me to go do the show. I walked in about 8:30 or 9:00 at night and I said, “Guys, I’ve got to go home and change.” I just had a pair of jeans and a T-shirt on. I said, “Give me some advice. What do you want me to say?” I mean, this was a real crucial moment in their campaign.

DB: It was *the* crucial moment.

MG: They said, “Aw, don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine.” I said, “Wait a second.” And they went back to their conference call. Those were my marching orders. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine.”

DB: By this time, had you met Bill and Hillary?

MG: I had met Bill once. I was with James and we were both on a panel. Maybe I had met him more than once. Maybe he had been at the office a couple of times, but I met him the summer before. There was a Democratic party—a big-givers party in Pebble Beach, or somewhere like that. James and I were both on a panel. Frank was traveling with Bruce and had said to Bruce, “My partner is going to be there.” I introduced myself and Bruce and I sat together actually. It was a Sunday night, because Bruce said to me, “I want you to be really candid about his speech.” Well, never invite me to be candid. I actually thought the speech was very bad, and I was very critical. I said, “This whole first twenty minutes you should throw out. And this is the good part, but he didn’t get to it until later.” And this and this and this. Anyway, apparently, it had a huge impact. I came to the office Monday morning and Frank said, “What did you say?” I said, “Nothing. I just told Bruce a few things.” He hadn’t announced at that point. And he said, “Well, we got a message this morning from Bruce saying, ‘Why aren’t you that candid, Frank?’” Frank said, “I’m going to be that candid once you’re an announced candidate.” So it was really funny. I mean, all I did was say hello to Bill. I talked to Bruce for a while, and we got along, obviously, very well. I think he appreciated the candor, which I, of course, liked. Other than that, I probably saw him around the office a little bit, but I really didn’t spend any time with him. So anyway, I did this *Nightline* thing and obviously had a huge impact. That was a Thursday night. And Saturday morning, George or James—and I had met George a couple of times—since Paul, James, and I are old friends, they sort of thought that I was

part of this, anyway, even though I wasn't.

DB: I assumed that you were there from the ground floor on.

MG: What they did was call and said that they were prepping the Clintons for *60 Minutes*, and would really like me to come to Boston and help out. I guess they figured if you can handle Ted Koppel you can handle *60 minutes*, or something. That was really the first official thing I did for the campaign, other than the *Nightline* thing. I got along with them instantly. It was obvious every bit of my involvement came in crisis. And maybe that sort of bonding experience. I missed the early heady days of the campaign, when everything was going right. He was propelled into first place. I think it affected my work throughout the campaign because it always gave me a sense of how fragile everything was. Part of it is my way. I always assume the worst and hope for the best. It made me always wary. Never just sit back and say, "Well, we got this thing won." When you get involved at the worst moment, you carry that with you. Even then, I really didn't get fully involved. I helped them with *60 Minutes* and I sort of helped with more scripts back at the office because obviously things were getting busy. Frank said, "Can you help on this?" Or "Can you help on that?" When I really got involved was the last week of New Hampshire. When—again, George or James, or Frank, I don't remember who it was—called me and said, "This draft letter just came out."

DB: So, again, you flew to the rescue.

MG: I flew up to New Hampshire, I thought for the day to help prep for this *Nightline* show and then I never left. Bob Boorstin had to go buy me clothes. Bob Boorstin

had to go to the mall because I had clothes for a day. But you remember what that week was like. It was an incredible, all-hands-on-deck, we're going to pitch in and get together and get to work. I think we all look back on that week as one of the most extraordinary things we've ever been through in our lives—in both a good and a bad way.

DB: One of the questions I'll come to that I always ask people is "What was the absolute low point? What was the high point?" I get that week for both. I think that's what you're saying.

MG: Right. I remember having a conversation with James when I was going to go back. I guess it was Hillary who said, "No, please stay." I said to him, "Are you worried? Are you scared?" And he said, "You know, I've been training for this kind of thing all my life. I know how to do this." Meaning, it's not that it wasn't hard, but when you're in a situation where action can make a difference and you have a goal, which is one week away—an election—it's easier than other situations, which are sort of in limbo, and so on. It was very clear—"We've got one week. We've got to do everything we know how to do and we'll see what happens." And he was incredibly calm. And he said, "You know how to do this. You've got to stay here." All of us who had been working at the state level for years had been in training for a week of crisis like that. And Bill Clinton had been, too. The thing that was really extraordinary about that week is what I heard about him. That's where he won my heart. I was just so awed by what he put himself through voluntarily. Each day of that week there was another test of one kind or another, whether it was a *Nightline* or the town meeting television shows

or the debate. On any one of which he could have self-destructed. Easily. I mean, it was such a fragile situation but his instinct was “I want to do more and take more risks and go out more to the people.” I’ve known so many politicians who, in the same kind of crisis, would essentially go to the most controlled situation possible—set speeches, make the TV ads do the work for you. And his instinct was so much “No, let me out there. If I can just talk to people. What else can I do?” That really set my instinct for him and my respect for him for the rest of the campaign.

DB: Let me ask something else, because you say that’s when he won your heart. One of the things I have learned from working with Clinton over the years is that he could, if he chose to, be a brilliant campaign manager or campaign consultant. How would you describe working with him on the details of campaigning as compared, let’s say, with other candidates?

MG: He understands everyone’s job really well. He’s interesting because, unlike many people, he really likes a lot of different points of view and a lot of different voices. Some people hate dissension. He doesn’t. He likes hearing debate. I mean, he doesn’t want a meeting to degenerate into factions fighting with each other, but he really wants to hear different points of view. And he really likes straight talk. I think he is suspicious of people saying, “You did great. You did wonderful.” For somebody who is blunt and candid, this is the perfect candidate. If you want it sugarcoated, I’m not your person. And he doesn’t. He really doesn’t. I found that things changed a little during the course of the campaign as it got bigger. Early on he was very involved in small decisions. A radio spot,

he'd rewrite them himself. Or "Why aren't we doing this TV spot there?" And a lot of the smaller decisions of the campaign. I found that, over time, the campaign just got too big for that. A lot of candidates don't recognize that they can't do all those things. But I found, particularly in the general, that although he was always aware of all the aspects of what was happening in the campaign or most of the decisions about media and the decisions about other kinds of things, he knew what his job was. Once he had put people in place who he trusted, he really was the candidate. Although he was very involved in discussing strategy decisions, tactical decisions, he always knew when to let go. And I would say that that's a very hard thing to do.

DB: I just wondered, for a professional consultant, whether it's easier to have someone who completely understands what is going on or whether you would almost rather have someone who completely trusts you to make the right decisions and would blindly follow your orders.

MG: No. No. He doesn't blindly follow anybody. There were times when we would recommend something—"we" meaning Stan, James and I, or Stan, James, George and I, or some combination of people—and he would disagree and occasionally, he would defer to us. Occasionally. But usually, there would just be a discussion. I don't believe in people who blindly follow anything, especially when you're dealing with the presidency. I think you lose respect for people like that. That's Reagan.

DB: So by this point you had bonded with the campaign.

MG: Yes. New Hampshire did it basically—after that incredibly intense week in New

Hampshire, where I just got completely thrown in the middle of things. Mickey, Mark Gearan, and all these other people arrived. I was given a lot of responsibility for doing things that week. Everybody was doing a thousand things. But that really sort of got me into the campaign, and a little bit after that on the way to Super Tuesday, I guess. I was a little bit in and out of it because I still was not officially supposed to be working on the campaign. I guess by Illinois everybody said, "Look, we want you here all the time. Just because you think the crisis is over and we've basically put Tsongas away doesn't mean you can go anywhere." So that got me involved in the campaign permanently. It was May when they asked me to be director of advertising for the general.

DB: I guess I hadn't known what your official title was. As director of advertising, what were your responsibilities?

MG: Well, the first thing was putting the team together. Bill and Hillary really wanted the best. They wanted to have the best both from the political world and the Madison Avenue world brought together to work on the campaign. It's very much a microcosm of what I think they did for the campaign itself, and what they're doing with the White House. It was bringing people together who don't normally work together. The first thing I did was to go interview Madison Avenue firms and talk to Democratic political consultants. It's so funny. I tried not to have the advertising written about a lot because I thought when you write about the mechanics you miss the message. So I would try to squelch a lot of advertising stories. There is a story about the advertising that I wish had been written. There are a couple of things we did, which I think of as being Clintonian.

First, the major Democratic political consulting firms, media consulting firms, that have been winning Senate, gubernatorial campaigns. For years, people have been saying that Republicans do such a great job at winning the White House, but Democrats do such a great job winning the Senate and the governorships—why don't the Democrats get it together and win the White House? Well, part of the reason is that the three major firms that have been winning for the last decade, at least, the Senate and governors' races had never worked on a presidential campaign.

DB: Why not?

MG: I think the fact that we never have a clear choice. So the business point of view—it's very hard to decide to commit to a presidential race. If you're Squier/Eskew/Knapp and you've got twelve Senate and gubernatorial races, and those senators are skittish about whether you spend time on a presidential campaign—just a lot of practical reasons like that means it had never happened. The other presidential campaigns, once they got to the general—although they turned to all of those firms, they never really integrated them into the campaign. They did it sort of under duress. They said, "Well, I guess we'd better call Squier," or "We'd better do this or that." But they never really integrated them into the campaign. I thought, "Well we're going to. We're going to get them all because this time we're going to win the White House—and forget the fact that these are firms that compete with each other all the time." So I got the whole firm—Squier/Eskew/Knapp/Ochs—involved. With Carter Eskew in particular taking the lead. Bill Knapp, also. Squier actually wound up going out on the road with Gore most of

the time. I got Mike Donilon, who is somebody that James and I had both worked with in the past and have great respect for who was at Doak and Shrum. So we had representatives and of course our firm from the three major Democratic media consulting firms working on the campaign really actively. I mean, all of those people worked their tails off and had huge amount of influence on what creative went on the air and so on. Then I went to Madison Avenue and I started interviewing people all over the country actually—commercial advertising firms in every state. I put together four different creative individuals or groups from the commercial advertising world, all of whom I thought had different talents, but whose work I really liked and who were willing to work as a team. There were other people I talked to who said, “Well, I want to do this and I want to do that, but I’ve got to be in control.” I said, “No, you’re not.” Because I knew that the political strategy and the message strategy was going to come from the small group within the campaign. First of all from Bill, but also from Stan, James, and me. And if I had somebody sitting up in New York saying, “Oh, the message from the campaign has to be X,” I wouldn’t be a happy person. So I tried to find people with great creative talents who could take our message and make it into more interesting advertising, which political people know how to do because they just have different talents than we do. We put that whole group together. It was a wonderful group. Every single one.

DB: Was the fact that the Democrats had been out for twelve years part of why people were willing to work together?

MG: No. The most interesting thing about it actually is that when I was looking, Perot

was at his high point. That's when I was out looking for these people, in June. There are people who are now kicking themselves that they said no to me, and a lot of people did say no to me because he was in third place. Because business in the advertising world is bad, and they were worried about the effect of doing the presidential on their business clients. There were people that were leaning toward Perot. The people I thought were really committed Bill Clinton people. They liked him. I'm glad, in a way, that I chose them in the worse moment of the campaign because their commitment was not trendy. And it's a wonderful group of people. Very good people. Every single person in the ad team had work that went on the air for the campaign. That's really unusual.

DB: In the aftermath of some presidential elections, people still talk about and remember the "Bear" ad or the "Willie Horton" ad. Do you feel there is going to be an ad, or several ads, that are talked about forever this way?

MG: I don't think so. I think people often remember negative ads because they tend to be the most influential. And we did a very specific thing with the Bush ads. We used Bush. And what we were trying to do was we used his words and then very factual statements of unemployment statistics, or whatever. Our theory, and we could see it working in the polling and tracking, was that as Bush was trying to recreate himself as a different person who was committed to the economy, or whatever, we wanted to constantly remind them of the George Bush that they had come to hate. Or be fed up with. To me, for instance—if you ask Stan, as we were tracking what was happening in the states, the most influential spot was called "Curtains." This was a series of sound bites from Bush saying things like,

“I don’t think we’re in a recession.” And we knew from our research that it drove people crazy to be reminded of that moment when he said that. They thought, “How could he not understand what’s going on with our lives?” But because they were news sound bites with graphics, I don’t think that they’re the kind of spots that you remember forever. I really don’t. I think they almost blended with the evening news. That was, in some ways, our intention. We could see the effect that they were having in the states, in particular on the vote. It was having a big impact—in particular, those spots tipped Bush’s job performance in incredibly low numbers at a time he was constantly trying to improve them. And he never could. We kept driving his job performance numbers down. But we had a belief, and I know Clinton shared this, that negative advertising, the Willie Horton kind of advertising, had turned people off politics and had become very controversial. And that feeling manipulated by cute, nasty ads was a real problem, so we were trying to create advertising about Bush that didn’t become controversial in that way, that was fair and even-handed, but still devastating. It was a very 1992-kind of advertising.

DB: Who invented the phrase “fact slinging?”

MG: Do you know where that came from?

DB: No, but I loved it.

MG: It came from a focus group, testing our spots versus their spots. I believe it was in Atlanta. They were talking about how ours were much better because “Hey, those are Bush’s own words and facts. That’s not mudslinging, that’s fact slinging.”

And a person in a focus group said that, and, of course, we all loved it—picked it

up and told Clinton, and so on. It was wonderful. That was really what we were trying to do. But, because of it, I don't think those ads are memorable. I don't think you think, "Oh, wow! Remember that great ad?" I just know that in terms of what we were trying to do, that they worked.

DB: I thought, perhaps, I didn't see the "hot" ads because I was in Arkansas, where the campaign didn't advertise.

MG: We didn't buy time. You asked, "What do you do when you're director of advertising?" The first thing is you put the team together who can work. The second thing is you have to make decisions about where the money goes and when it's spent. Something like two-thirds or half of the budget of the whole campaign went into advertising, so basically we spent about \$35 million, and we spent another twelve or thirteen for the Democratic Party. I was running a \$45 million dollar company for three months. Obviously, with Eli and David Wilhelm, and Stan—I wasn't doing this alone because all of this was about targeting. But we wanted to go on the air very early, so the biggest question, really, is allocation of those resources. You have \$45 million to spend; how are you going to spend it? This campaign was very single-minded. And some of this is Paul Tully's influence. I think Wilhelm, Stan, and I were all committed to this, as well. In the past, Democrats had not been very focused—well, they haven't been focused because they've always been so far behind that they've just tried to throw anything out there nationally to have some reaction, to move numbers. We were very focused on the Electoral College, which is rare for a Democratic campaign. This is how Republicans have won in the past. You ignore the

national numbers to a large extent. You ignore the popular vote, and you say, “Okay, how do we build an Electoral College strategy?” Because you win in the Electoral College. “What states are we going to focus on?” Then we had a very disciplined group of people that included Eli, David, Stan, and me at the core. Tully used to be there, and several other people who would float in and out of it, making the decisions week by week about where to spend the money and how to allocate it. We actually made a very risky decision. Two of them. One was to go on the air before Labor Day and the second was to not run national advertising.

DB: Tell me about both of those decisions.

MG: Let me do the national advertising one first. Well, in a way, they pair together. We were worried right after the Republican convention that Bill Clinton would be defined by George Bush. This is sort of the classic question of advertising, especially when you’re relatively unknown. “Who is going to define what the election’s about? And who is going to define your candidate?” Bush was pretty well defined already but Clinton still could have been redefined by a strong attack from Bush. And we assumed they’d go negative, so we wanted to define Bill Clinton our way first. We looked at the cost of what it would be to go on the air nationally before Labor Day. It was exorbitant. And James, in particular, was very set on—and Hillary was too—not spending so much money early that we didn’t have the resources at the end, when it was ugly and we’d need them. So we said, “Wait a second. Why don’t we just pick some target states which we know are battlegrounds?” We divided the list of states—and I’m sure Wilhelm will tell you—into three basic categories. There were the “Top-End” states,

which were those states we thought we could win without advertising—places like New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, or West Virginia and even California was on the list. Places where we had twenty-five or thirty-point leads, past Democratic performance, and a whole bunch of other factors. Saying, “I bet we might win these and never might have to spend a lot of money in them.” Then we had a group of states which were their states, states that we didn’t think we would win in our lifetime, no matter what we spent there. Places like Utah, Virginia, South Carolina. Of course we were doing this when we were ahead in every state in the country, but we had to project what reality would be. Then there were the battleground states. We had several categories of them where we thought, “If we spend money, we can win.” We started out with ten of them and expanded to about twenty—Michigan, Connecticut, Colorado, Ohio, North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana—states where we thought that Democrats haven’t won. We had anywhere from a two-point to a ten-point lead, but we think, “If we make an effort, we can win. And we should focus our resources there.” That’s what we did for the rest of the campaign. What we would try to do, I kept thinking, was like microwaving these states. You zap them in the oven with a cup of thousand points of advertising and build up a twenty-eight-point lead. They’re done and you can go off the air. Connecticut was a perfect example of that. When Stan did his first baseline poll in Connecticut, we were six or eight points ahead. We had built up a lead in three or four weeks to twenty-two points, twenty-four points. We went off the air. We said, “It’s done.” We put in Democratic Party advertising to hold a message there. Illinois—we were on for a

couple of weeks and we said, “You know what, it’s done. We’ve got a twenty-point lead, let’s get off the air.” Our whole goal was not to spend money, so we could spend the money in places like Michigan, where we shouldn’t have been able to win. But because we kept such a huge percentage on the air what that enabled us to do was outspend the Republicans deeply in every state that was a battleground because they were buying national time, plus local time, times as many spots on the air in a place like Michigan.

DB: Why were they doing the national advertising? Because they were behind?

MG: Because they were behind. Or so they thought. I’m not sure it was the smartest strategy for them. It also, by the way, is incredibly labor-intensive to do what we were doing. A woman named Annie Burns, who is the chief operating officer of our company, and Ann Lewis, whom you met, were the key people in setting this up. We set up an expanded media part of our company in a separate office with fifty people who had worked for us before. They were divided by regions. We had people who only bought the west. Or only bought the south. Or only bought the Midwest. They were there night and day. Fifty people. Nobody else on the campaign knows a thing about this. If you want to buy network time, it’s three phone calls. If you want to buy every state, it’s more. We were buying hundreds of markets every day, so it was an incredible operation.

DB: Are you talking radio as well as TV?

MG: Radio as well as TV. It really is numbing how much detail—and, of course, we would make decisions relatively late. We’d want to see that week’s numbers in Ohio to decide, “Do we continue this week in Ohio? Should we decrease the

levels this week? Or increase the levels this week?" Not just by state, but by media market within the state. This is how detailed the conversations were. Stan had people polling in each state. In the battleground states, we gave them media captains, so that Carter Eskew or Bill Knapp or Mike Donilen would become the Georgia expert, or the Michigan expert. Then Skip and Rahm and Richard Mintz from the campaign point of view all took responsibility for a couple of states.

DB: These were the SWAT teams.

MG: SWAT teams, exactly. Because I was convinced, and so was Stan, and Wilhelm agreed with us, that these were essentially like running killer Senate campaigns, in that they needed that kind of detailed attention. We started doing spots targeted just to Ohio, and just to northern Ohio or southern Ohio. We'd made spots just for Wisconsin or just for Colorado. Sometimes radio, sometimes television. Because we thought if we were going to focus so with laser-like intensity, as Bill Clinton would say, on this small number of states, we had to do everything in our power to win those states. The reason this was so unconventional is that the conventional wisdom after 1988 was you never let an attack go unanswered. Well, by not doing national advertising, we were leaving attacks unanswered every week, both in our top-end states, our base states, and their base states. So that if you lived in Massachusetts, or if you lived in West Virginia, you were seeing Bush ads every day that were attacking Bill Clinton and you never saw a Bill Clinton message. If you lived in Virginia the same thing. Now, we were not so worried about Virginia because we knew we were going to lose Virginia. But what was happening in our base states is that twenty-eight-point leads were

becoming sixteen-point leads. Now the sixteen-point lead is still a very pleasant thing, but as those numbers drifted down, our national numbers changed. And in the last three weeks, one of the interesting things that happened was that they started advertising in their base states, so that in a place like South Carolina or Alabama, where we had an eight-point lead after the convention, we had a two-point lead with three weeks to go. They went on the air and attacked the hell out of us. Suddenly, they had a ten-point lead. Well think of those three categories. We were holding our own in our battleground states, but in our base states, our leads were dropping from thirty to fifteen. And in their base states, their lead was going from one point to ten points. When the national numbers started looking like four or three, that's a large reason why. And we couldn't explain to people, in the places that mattered—where we were trying to put our Electoral College majority together—we were still in good shape because we would look at our Kentucky numbers or our Wisconsin numbers or our Michigan numbers and say, “We're fine.” But the national numbers were changing because both base numbers were changing.

DB: You said the most fascinating thing because what most people will say about the Clinton campaign is, “We won because, unlike Dukakis, we never let a charge go unanswered.” You're saying that's not true.

MG: We did in terms of the free media. We were aggressively responsive, and we knew if you looked at Massachusetts you would watch the evening news and you would see Clinton or George or whatever out there dealing with the charge. And in states that were deeply contested, they never saw a charge go unanswered, but

in places like California, Massachusetts—that we essentially had put in our column at the beginning—those charges went unanswered in advertising. And there were a number of times we *made* a response to every ad they put on the air, but we only put very few of them on the air because, frequently, it was our assessment, although we were ready and we believed in preparedness—we had this extraordinary satellite tracking service that enabled us, within five minutes of a Bush ad airing anywhere in the country, to have a copy of it. So we would know in five minutes if it had aired in Detroit. Somebody would call us and say, “The Bush campaign just aired a new ad. Would you like to hear it?” It would be satellited to us within the hour. It was incredible. We would make a response. We would decide, “Do we need to air this spot?” And frequently, our assessment was what we were doing with our advertising was more effective than their new negative ad, so we would just stick to our strategy.

DB: Did you ever have trouble persuading Bill Clinton that it was not necessary to respond?

MG: At the very end. The hardest decision was, in some ways, from an advertising point of view, was the final four or five days—when they put that anti-Arkansas ad on—the “Vulture” ad. We made a response. We actually made three or four different options for a response, but we also had an ad which was a continuation of a fifteen-second ad which we had done. It was part of the tradition of using Bush’s own words against him. This was built on something he had said in his final address right before the election in ’88 when he said, “If you elect me president, you’ll be better off four years from now than you were today.” We had

done a spot called “How You Doing?” Carter Askew wrote it. We always believed in having options, but the question was Bush is ending his campaign talking about Bill Clinton—what they had on the air in the end—the “Vulture” spot. And we had a choice: we could either respond by talking about Clinton, and therefore, make the entire last question about Clinton, or we could say, “No, this campaign is about George Bush and what he hasn’t done to the economy,” and put the “How You Doing?” spot on the air. We all argued—Stan, James, George, and I, to have the Bush spot on the air. Clinton was very uncomfortable—not responding—but he deferred to us. I said that there were moments when he deferred, and he did. We did two other things. First of all, we released the “Arkansas Response” ad to the press, so that they would write about it and it would become part of the free-media coverage—what the actual answers were—the Arkansas Record. So that we wanted that out there, and we also did some radio that dealt with the Arkansas attack. But our belief was we wanted to end the campaign making it a referendum on Bush and his handling of the economy. We felt with four days to go we couldn’t do both. It was a very, very difficult moment. He was very afraid. It was against his instincts not to respond.

DB: Well, it was his life and his record and what he had accomplished. It was such a travesty, that ad was.

MG: Part of what we thought instinctively was it was so overdone, that ad, so almost a cartoon, that it didn’t have a lot of credibility. So that was part of our assessment of whether or not to respond. It was a very hard decision. When you win, you assume every decision was right. I think instinctively it was right to keep Bush at

the focus of what people were thinking about. And not Clinton. It was hard. It was very hard.

DB: Are there any decisions that you look back and think, “That’s one I would change”?

MG: Really small things along the way. It had to do more with how long a spot was on the air and things like that.

DB: But not major strategic decisions. Well, that’s great.

MG: One of the things we did that really came from him on a regular basis was the “different kind of Democrat” message. We thought there were three things we would try to do with the advertising. One was keep Bush and his economic failure at the focus, and I think we did that very effectively. The second, to reassure people about Clinton from one point of view or another. There were a number of spots that did that. And the third was to talk about the plan, and give people the sense that here’s a guy that knows what he wants to do. On the reassurance front, one of the key things was this is a different kind of Democrat. And he really had a strong sense throughout that it was going to be very easy to portray him for the Bush people as a tax and spend liberal, because people expect that from a Democrat. And he was very single-minded. He wanted us to do this with Democratic Party advertising, which was hard to do. But with his own advertising to constantly remind people that he just wasn’t like the rest of the Democrats. I think Stan will tell you that probably the most powerful spot we ran in terms of moving votes was the first spot we did on welfare, which was the second spot we ran in the campaign. It was a really boring spot. It really was. I

remember showing it and saying, “This isn’t art.” But we had tried eighteen different creative ways to talk about welfare reform, and really this is the most effective. Everything else just didn’t work as well. It was an incredible workhorse of a spot. For weeks afterwards, because we, of course, included these statistics in other places, people would walk into focus groups and say, “Well, look, he moved 17,000 from welfare to work.” Of all the statistics, and from all the people, welfare reform was a big part of it. We also did a spot really continuing the same tradition, called “Leaders,” which was about Clinton and Gore, which sort of alternated wonderful footage from the bus tour with kind of red-meat facts about balanced budgets, support of the death penalty, support of welfare reform, which was our way of saying—and we literally said, “They are a different kind of Democrat. They are not like the old party.” Especially in the south, but really throughout the country, I’m convinced that that had a big impact on people saying, “You know these aren’t the same folks. We never heard Democrats support the death penalty. We never heard Democrats for welfare reform.” Especially in our battleground states, obviously, that had a big impact. You could see it in places like Tennessee and Kentucky, just literally changing people’s opinions. And reinforcing it. He was very clear-minded from the beginning that that was a critical part of the message. That’s, obviously, who he is. I think some of his most frustrating days came from Tsongas because he never anticipated that anyone would run to the right of him and make him look like a traditional Democrat.

DB: Well and then to some extent, Perot renewed that threat.

MG: Yes. That's exactly right. It was such an irony. I mean, here's a guy who is a maverick in the party, who was, in fact, dismissed early on as a non-viable candidate because he was such a maverick of the party. No moderate Democrat is going to win the nomination. He isn't liberal enough. All those battles between the DLC and the DNC and all that. The irony was, because of Tsongas and, to some extent, Perot, there was a moment, particularly in the late spring and early summer, where he was seen as a traditional Democrat. It drove him nuts. And for reason, I mean it was the ultimate irony. But that kept us very focused in the general on reinforcing what I think he did very well at the convention, which was showing that it was really a new Democratic Party, and that he and Gore were just not like past Democrats.

DB: There seemed to be a time, the doldrums of June, when Clinton seemed to feel very frustrated. That the message was not getting out there, and the numbers were not moving. Do you remember that time?

MG: Deeply. I mean in a way, that was the hardest time. The difference between that time and New Hampshire is in New Hampshire we could do things. And there was a deadline. There was a timetable. There was an election. If you could get it together, we would find out on Tuesday, did it work or not? The hard part about May and June is that—and he was so frustrated by this—here he had won more primaries, I think than any other Democrat since Lyndon Johnson. Certainly, I don't remember another Democrat to win every major state. And he survived his obituary being written twenty times. And he was in third place. People had a cartoon image of what he was. It was all for nothing. Or it seemed it was all for

nothing. Now the other part of what the frustration and the sense of opportunity was the Manhattan Project that Stan, James and I, and others had been working on, is that we did see the road out. We found in the research, when people knew who he really was and what he really believed, it changed their opinion of him. This is not always true in research. One of the things that was so interesting about providing biographical information—they had such a cartoon image of him as a rich kid—who else could come from Arkansas and go to Oxford? It was sort of southern chauvinism. Here's this guy, he's young, he must have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and he was given everything in life. It's wonderful when the truth actually works. From a political consulting point of view, it's a whole lot harder when you tell him who the guy really is and they say, "No, I really don't like this." It completely changed their opinion of him, to know his life story. Because a forty-six-year-old who had sort of come too fast, too far, with too fast a mouth is just totally slick. A guy who'd worked for everything in his life, whose father died before he was born, who'd had the extraordinary kind of life that Clinton had. We took the same information through that filter and it's changed completely. When we saw that, it was exciting because you knew, "My God, we have to find ways to tell them that." And it also changed their opinions of everything he was proposing. They put it in a totally different context because if that came from somebody who was one of them, well, then all of that stuff made sense in a totally different way. The frustrating thing then was, "How do we communicate this? It's June. The primaries are over. Ross Perot is the only story anybody wants to write about. We can't do advertising, we don't have the

money. We can't advertise, really, for three months." So what do you do? That's when the *Arsenio* strategy was formed. Because there was no other way. And also, if you think about what the networks cover and what the networks do, and even what the newspapers do: proposals are covered. If you say, "Today I'm proposing a new plan to—," they'll cover that, if it's big enough or interesting enough. Or they'll cover attacks. If you want to go out there and attack Ross Perot, there will be a group of people, but if you want to tell your life story, every newspaper, television network in America had already done their requisite one bio of Bill Clinton. And they had done it six months earlier, or three months earlier, as we were looking at what kinds of information we wanted to convey, and the fact that we knew that every time he was with an audience, the audience was won over. This is not always true. We're thinking, "What do we do?" It was just very clear that the longer the format the better. The more people got a sense of him, the better. The more he could tell his life story, the better. That's when we started booking him on every talk show in the country. And structurally, the problem was solved then, too. A lot of decisions had been made. George's position in particular was a critical decision. We had all been frustrated. You know, during the primaries, there was this sort of floating crap game.

DB: Called a conference call?

MG: The conference calls and all that. And it had worked fine, particularly through the hard primaries because we would essentially set up a "War Room" in each city— Illinois, New York, and so on. But with the primaries over—or the primaries less intense—in May, that structure obviously wasn't working anymore, and everyone

was spread out. Decisions weren't getting made. I think everyone was kind of frustrated. He was frustrated with everything, and then a series of decisions were made, structurally, that enabled other things to happen.

DB: When you say "a series of decisions were made, structurally," can you be more specific about that?

MG: Being in Little Rock, which was the best decision of the campaign—which not a single one of us agreed with—all knew we were dead wrong. George . . .

DB: You mean his being made official communications director?

MG: Yes. From my parochial point of view, I had been arguing since April that Clinton should have been booked on these talk shows, and it didn't happen until George was there to do it. Nobody disagreed with me. Nobody said, "Oh what a horrible idea." Everybody said, "Yes, we ought to do that," but it didn't happen. Now, part of the reason it didn't happen is that there was a primary, and if you're floating between California, Ohio, and New Jersey, you can't take an hour and do MTV. So, part of it was just the schedule we had, but, also, the whole press operation was largely on the road, and there was just nobody there to make those decisions. So to me, George being there made a huge difference, because all of that stuff started happening. And I think Eli taking a more active role. My sense was all of the structure of the campaign really got into place in June and July. And, of course, James coming down and running the War Room. My sense of that is nobody changed jobs in a major way, except George. But with James added to the War Room—the War Room was something that should have been there, but wasn't. I think it freed up David to do all the political and field stuff

better. It freed up Mickey to do all of the big stuff, like the debates and the commission, and all of that. I thought everything really started clicking in June and July, from an organizational point of view. I think everybody, at that point, was in the right place. Before then, I think people had to pitch in to kind of get other things done, or something didn't happen. My sense was that once the primaries were over, and he and Hillary focused on how this was really going to work and what do we really need—I thought all of that fell into place really well.

DB: I think what you're describing is that there was a lot of shared responsibility, but everybody finally ended up in the right spot.

MG: Right. That's my sense. My sense is that everybody wound up in the right spot and respected each other in that spot. So that who was going to run Michigan, David Wilhelm decided that. James didn't care. And he gave David all the room in the world to make those kinds of decisions. What's the debate strategy going to be? Mickey was in the middle of that, and he asked and respected everybody's advice, but he dealt with it. I had free rein to make decisions about advertising. I consulted everybody. Everybody had opinions, but nobody second-guessed me. I would give people three options for an ad, and I talked to them about it, but I just did it. In that sense, I thought, an extraordinary situation. I've never seen a campaign—and what I know of past presidential campaigns—that didn't have factions. I mean, the Dukakis campaign degenerated into two campaigns.

DB: Which was, by the way, highly disciplined and hierarchical on paper.

MG: This was not hierarchical at all. In fact, one of the smartest things James did was to institute those War Room meetings because it gave everybody a feeling of

importance and shared ownership of the campaign. And participation. I thought that was great. It really made a difference. I don't know if you ask the younger folks in the campaign, or just the ancient folks like me, I'm sure those made a big difference. It put in kind of a team spirit—all of us in this together, and there were no closed doors. It was very unusual for us to disagree about anything. When we disagreed, we just disagreed. It wasn't like this faction around this person or a faction around that person. We had a decision to make, and we'd talk it out. Maybe a couple of people thought we should target Florida, or we shouldn't target Florida, but there was no animosity about it. It was just, this is a reasonable thing for us to be discussing. It's a hard decision. People had different points of view. I really think that's a reflection of him, and a reflection of putting us in the right jobs.

DB: Let me press you on this a little bit. Some people have said that this might not have worked so well if we were losing; that this shared-responsibility, team deal worked because we were winning, and because we weren't really pressed.

MG: Possible. We all talked about that from time to time. It is possible. When things go bad, people panic and point fingers and attack in different ways. That might have happened. You never know. I'd like to think it wouldn't have happened.

DB: You think it could have worked?

MG: Yes. Because of the respect that people had for each other. I can't imagine that, especially in the general. I think during the general everybody was in the right place and all of that.

DB: Do you think that this is an organizational style that reflects Clinton himself?

MG: Yes. I do. I think he has a good sense of what everyone's strengths and weaknesses were and put them in the right place and let them do their jobs. It's interesting. There was no one person in charge of everything. There were people in charge of big chunks of the campaign, and it worked well that way.

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

MG: You know, I don't know. In some ways, I kind of thought the whole thing was inevitable all the way through, once I knew how good he was. And that was New Hampshire. In other ways, I didn't believe it until the last vote was counted.

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

MG: Exact same. Even in the dark days of June, I thought, "We're going to figure this out." On the other hand, I didn't let myself believe it until election day.

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

MG: I guess it was May and June when I was very frustrated. I was frustrated before the campaign with Perot and all of that, and everything we'd all done seemed to add up to nothing. But I was also frustrated that there were so many things I could see that needed to be done—from planning the convention to pulling the states together, in particular my pet thing—the pop culture shows that I kept talking and talking about.

DB: And everybody agreed, but it wouldn't happen.

MG: And everybody agreed, but it wouldn't happen. To me, as long as you're doing things and things are happening, it's not frustrating. You can be worried, you can think "Did we do this right, or not right?" But you're working. It was the sense of limbo, of knowing that things had to be moving and they weren't, was really

frustrating to me.

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

MG: There were a lot of them, which is one of the wonderful things about the campaign. I guess the moment we'll all remember was election night at the Camelot. When we went over the top, and CNN announced that Ohio had put us over the top. Ohio had been a pet state of all of ours. Many people wanted it off the list, and Wilhelm was determined that it was going to stay on the list. I had spent a lot of time with Bill Knapp and Carter Eskew, kind of targeting Ohio. That it was Ohio that put us over was particularly sweet. We all kind of jumped on each other. It really was like those great locker room scenes out of football. I think I lost an earring or two. I don't think anyone poured champagne, but we just jumped on top of each other. We had been through so much together and it was just this great release. So that's the moment that was sort of sweetest. There were other little sweet things along the way. I came to love a lot of the people I worked with. I got to the point that I wasn't home unless I was in Little Rock. That's probably the easiest moment, the easiest shot to remember.

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

MG: That for all of how proud we all are to be a part of it and proud of anything we did, he would have won without us. That the campaign success is attributed to how good he is—not how good we were. He is an extraordinary man, and he's an extraordinary candidate who really had a gut instinct for a moment in history, and how people were feeling. I don't want history to think, "Boy, that advertising

strategy—that was brilliant,” or “That James Carville was one of a kind.” Or any of those things. I want them to think Bill Clinton was a rare man.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]