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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Nancy Hernreich

Campaign Position: Governor Clinton's Scheduling Secretary

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 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. Nancy Hernreich 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 was your position with the campaign?

Nancy Hernreich: Actually, I did not have a position with the campaign. I'm the governor's scheduling secretary, and I did scheduling with the campaign. I took leave from the office and did it until around the first of November. Then Regean Burke came in, and I went back to the office. I was supposed to do the Arkansas scheduling but he really ended up not being here very much. About mid-month, Gloria Cabe had asked me if I would consider coming out here—doing my regular job here. They felt that the governor's time wasn't being orchestrated properly out here, and if I was here then it would be somebody to kind of control what was going on. The governor was constantly being interrupted, and it would be somebody who knew the folks and could make some judgments about what was important or not important, so that he wasn't constantly being interrupted. That's how it started, and it just grew from there. I think, as we went along, I would see other things that needed to be done for him. One of the first things I tried to do was get his phone lists under control out here. There were constantly people making requests for him to make calls to different people. I worked with Stephanie Solien and Rahm and others on that so when he was in town the time we allowed for phone calls had some structure and some reason as to why he was making the calls

he was making. Then, as it grew, I ended up just trying to take care of things that he would need. It seemed to me that often when he was in town, that he really needed down time, but I might be the only person he would see in that time. He would mention something, “Oh, my letters. I don’t think letters are getting answered.” That was a big one, it took us months to work out with the campaign.

DB: The correspondence system?

NH: It was terrible, but basically, what was happening was that he would see people out on the road and they would say, “Well, I wrote you and I’ve never gotten a response.” He wasn’t seeing any of his own mail. He really needed to know. I started working with the campaign and trying to get that particular project underway. We eventually found someone to write personal letters for him and a way of doing it back and forth so that there was somebody there who would be looking for personal letters for him and then responding, so that he was constantly kept updated. I think the other thing I ended up doing a lot of was just controlling his paper flow. He would get a lot of stuff in, and there was no organization to it. I just added that to my other things.

DB: I have been around enough to know that out on the road people just hand him notes and things. He’d empty his pockets with notes on napkins, and everything. Did you become the first repository of that?

NH: Actually, what happened is that the briefcase got so bad, it sat up here on the kitchen cabinet for the longest time. He really wouldn’t do anything about it.

He'd come in and out, and it got to where he couldn't take the briefcase with him. Finally, Hillary said something to me. I said, "I'm just going to do it." So I just started going through it, and that became a routine thing when he'd come back into town. I'd just take it upon myself to empty the briefcase out and start finding everything—forwarding things where they needed to go. Periodically we'd have to ask him again. Most if it was pretty self-explanatory. Kind of just kept track of his things—his personal notes and things he wanted to say, which we kept downstairs.

DB: This is an enormous responsibility. His personal contacts are so important to him.

NH: They are. But the year has really been fun. A lot of people probably couldn't say that, but it's really been fun.

DB: Eight different functions going on at once, and the phones ringing, and crises underway, and you just seem as cool as a cucumber.

NH: It's been a wonderful experience. The kinds of things that, because of the proximity to him, I got to see. I would wake up every day and pinch myself because it was a wonderful experience. I got to see and participate in things that were beyond my fondest dreams. There were just wonderful things going on.

DB: You're saying that this was a little bit more rewarding than scheduling the Prairie Grove Battlefield picnic?

NH: And less stressful, too. Even at times, when you had to be here early in the morning and work late at night and a lot of things were going. It still to me was always less stressful than the everyday scheduling. People would say, "How do you handle all that?" It was never as stressful as that. The hours were basically

the same as scheduling. So this was kind of a year off for me, as far as I was concerned. It wasn't a year off, but it was an easier year than I'm used to having, stress-wise, I think. So to see all of this on top of it was wonderful.

DB: That's amazing. So many of the really important decisions in the campaign had to be made here on the rare occasions when he was home. When Hillary was home. The "A-Team" would gather. So you really were here at all of the key junctures of that?

NH: Absolutely. And I got to help orchestrate those days, as I get to help orchestrate his days now. To really be a part of this and to help prioritize his time is just wonderful. It's hard in a certain sense. I have to think of everything we do, but he would come up with things and I would try to listen to what he would say when he'd be in town. I'd think, "Well, that's a problem. I need to work on that and see what we can do about that."

DB: Make his life easier.

NH: Yes. And, frankly, the campaign was not organized very well. It would bother me, and I would take it upon myself—although I'm sure there were a lot of other people doing it too—to try and bring some structure. I know that's a little inflated because I certainly didn't take that all on. But I would see that for him, and sometimes he would say, "I think some things are going in that black hole down there." So as we went along I would try to do things for him, and I think it did get a whole lot more organized for a lot of different reasons. People were brought in who were more organized. From his side, he would just say things and he was really uncomfortable with the organizational structure there. I would do what I

could, being out here, to convey that—to try to follow up with people and to make sure that things were being taken care of. But, you know, it's been fun.

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

NH: Probably Hillary, honestly. If I had to say it as honestly as I can. I think that she just has a way of cutting through to the core of something—knowing how to solve a problem. She can see what the problem is and she can make a decision and find the right people to come in and make more effective. Bill listens to Hillary. He's obviously very bright and creative. I would say the two of them. But even more so Hillary. They both are smarter than anybody else. The bottom line is, there isn't anybody as smart as they are. They are going to know more than other people. It's just the way they are. They can't help it. They just have wonderful ideas. They knew how to go about it. Plus, their own persistence. I just have to go back and say they're the reason it was so successful. I think the things that always bothered me—also him and her, and all the people who are close to him—is this whole integrity thing. He has more integrity than anybody I know. That's why it always bothered me. Here's a person that I've seen over the years who in his soul is the “goodest” person I know and being attacked like this. I think that it was his integrity and his persistence that allowed him to continue through the really tough times, when a lesser person would have quit. His integrity is basically the thing that pulled him through. And the American people will see it. There's no doubt in my mind that they will see it and know it as well. I think there's still a trust factor out there that's with him. It won't take long. I think

they're already beginning to see it.

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

NH: It developed. At first, there wasn't an organization, frankly. David Wilhelm came in and he is a wonderful person, but he had a loose style of management. I think there is something to be said for that. At that time it needed more structure than he was able to give. He had wonderful Martha Phipps working for him, who is organized, and she, honestly, was able to provide what structure this campaign had for a long time. She was really in the middle of everything. As we went along, eventually and it must have been the fall before I ever could see that people felt their roles. Knew what their roles were and fell into those roles comfortably and were able to work. Thank God it happened by September. Up until then, you didn't see it. There wasn't a structure. People were still, in my opinion, fighting to run it, or to be *the* person in charge. In my opinion, a power struggle was going on. Eventually, everybody settled very comfortably into what their roles were. They were able to work together. Frankly, what I always found about this was that it was the nicest group of people, overall. The campaign people from the very beginning were the most cooperative, the nicest people, easy to get along with. Even though there were some power plays in there, had it not been for the basic wonderful personalities people had, and their basic niceness and goodness, it probably wouldn't have worked as well. I think, eventually, they were able to feel comfortable in their roles. They were able to get through all that because they were just nice, good people. For me, it was just fascinating to watch how it

moved—how it became structured. The “War Room” business became a real key point. I think that Betsey was really a key person in a lot of this. I think she had the record and she knew. And when James came in—whatever his part was in that, in trying to get that organized. I’m not sure about that because I was more on the outside than on the inside. It just seemed when that became organized also, then there wasn’t this sort of vacuum. In terms of just winning the campaign, that was really a key element of it. We weren’t being attacked and letting it go. At first that’s what would happen. What happened with the draft thing in February—there was nobody ready to respond.

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

NH: I have two answers to that question. One, he said to me once, “Can you believe this?” And I said, “Oh, absolutely. I knew the first time I met you that you would be president one day.” That’s part of the answer. However, I really questioned whether this would be the year, at times. I really thought when the Gennifer Flowers thing came up that it was a done deal. The draft response—that was a done deal. But I think frankly, it became very apparent that when he got through New Hampshire. I knew from that point we had it. I knew that he would win Super Tuesday, that he would win Illinois, Michigan. It was a done deal then. Basically, once we got through New Hampshire and came in second, I knew it was over. I think somebody took second place finish for victory. I mean, the Comeback Kid. Whoever came up with that was brilliant. The perception then was he won it. He didn’t come in second; he won it.

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

NH: I think once I knew he was the nominee, I knew he would become president. Even at his lowest. I've been in too many campaigns with him. I had the utmost confidence in his ability to win. Those months or so before the convention when we were third and polls were terrible—but even with that, I knew we'd prevail. I can remember thinking, "We're going to win this. There's just no doubt."

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

NH: The Gennifer Flowers thing. That was the day I thought it was over. I can remember feeling like someone had hit me in the stomach. I didn't know about it until I saw it on television. I just thought, "It's over. It's done." But it wasn't, obviously. A lesser person, it would have been. Anybody else, it would have been. They would have given up. But he didn't give up.

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

NH: I'm not sure. There are some obvious answers, but I'm not sure that's the obvious answer. The convention. I worked so hard that week, I didn't know where the hell I was or what I was doing. I'd like to say it was the high point, but—and, you know, the same for election day. It was almost anticlimactic with me. The first debate—having been a part of that, having been up there and working on debate prep. Knowing we got through that as well as we did. In retrospect, there were people who said it wasn't, but he did what he needed to do that night. I've watched him through many debates, and he was as good that night with what he had to accomplish as anybody. He did what he had to do. It was a real high point. I think the second debate, especially, was a hard one. Both of those, to me, were just—he did what he had to do. There were a lot of high times. I think the

aftermath of the announcement of Gore—more than the actual thing, but to see the feelings, to watch the bus trip on television, to see what was happening with the American people. What I saw was the real person—the person I knew, and how the people were finally seeing and being touched by that person. Those were the things that really stick out in my mind. The times I saw him being the way he is.

DB: What is it that you want the future to understand about this campaign?

NH: What I'd really like them to know is what kind of person he really is. I think they'll know that he's as good a person as he really is. I don't know that there's anything about the campaign, per se, that I want them to know. I think that they know enough about it, probably more than most people ever want to know. And what kind of person Hillary is. I would want the people to know what a part they played and what kind of people they really are. Rather than whatever they've made them, which sometimes is what bothers me. You have to put up with it, but it bothers me.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]