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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with David Kusnet
Campaign Position: Chief Speechwriter
Little Rock, Arkansas
November 1, 1992

Overview

Diane D. Blair was an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, when she took a leave of absence to serve as a senior researcher in Governor Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. Approximately one month before the November election, Blair obtained permission from the governor to conduct interviews with participants in the Clinton/Gore campaign. In her own words, ". . . I had two major purposes in mind: first, simply to preserve for posterity an accomplished campaign organization that would essentially disappear on election day; and second, through discussions with campaign workers from all departments, to see what those on the inside believed to be the key ingredients of the campaign's success." She prepared a list of questions and began interviewing people as schedules allowed.

After Blair's death in 2000, her husband, Jim Blair, donated her personal and professional papers to Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries. David Kusnet 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 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?

David Kusnet: I was a freelance writer and consultant and I had a book out earlier this year called *Speaking American: How the Democrats Can Win in the 1990s*. And I was doing the poor man's book tour on the book. And I was doing radio talk shows from my house and some interviews.

DB: So who reached out and brought you into the campaign?

DK: George Stephanopoulos called me the Friday before Memorial Day weekend and, as it happened, I had been up, I think, until three o'clock in the morning the night before doing a talk show from San Antonio, Texas about the book. And I also—before hearing from George, Melanne Verveer had asked me to do a draft for a speech that Hillary Clinton would give at a college in Arkansas the day after her Wellesley College speech. And I think the thinking was that maybe some of that might be used for Wellesley College as well. And I had been working on that, but I hadn't finished it yet. And I got a call from George Stephanopoulos the Friday morning before the Memorial Day weekend, and I was really tired from being up the night before on the talk show. And I assumed that George was calling me to dun me about the speech for Hillary Clinton, to see when I was going to get it in there. And he didn't know about that, so our conversation was a little strange at first because I was sort of feeling guilty that I hadn't gotten something in that I had promised to get in. And he was calling about something else and he didn't understand why I was being defensive.

DB: Have you ever done political speechwriting before?

DK: Yes. I had been a speechwriter for Mondale the last time—I usually do a much shorter stint. Both for Mondale and Dukakis I had been a speechwriter with each of them starting, I think, the week before Labor Day. Starting the last week in August. So I worked for Mondale in 1984 and Dukakis in 1988 for the last ten or eleven weeks of their campaigns.

DB: Is speechwriting for a presidential candidate pretty much the same regardless of the candidate, or is it very different depending on the candidate?

DK: I think it's different depending upon the candidate, and also depending upon the whole kind of style of the campaign. With Mondale I was on the campaign plane most of the time I was with him. There were three speechwriters who would work on the plane and in the hotels in the evenings, and we would give him a draft for just about every event. He would often not use what we gave him and a lot of what we gave him was variations on what he'd already said, but we would give him a draft for every event. With Dukakis, we were in the headquarters. He rarely, if ever, had any speechwriters traveling with him. And with him, too, we would send him drafts for most events. He would or would not use them, or he'd improvise off of them.

DB: And with Clinton?

DK: Let me back up for a minute. I did about two months of talk shows on a book about political speechwriting and about political rhetoric of the Democratic Party. And what's interesting is that I think there's an assumption out there that says people have gotten almost too sophisticated and too cynical. That maybe a

generation ago people believed that every word that a candidate spoke was their own—was the candidate's own. Then they heard that there were such things as speechwriters and Peggy Noonan wrote her book and so on, and I think now there's the assumption that none of the words that a candidate speaks are his own—that it's all written by someone else. And without being overly partisan, I suspect that that almost certainly is true of someone like Quayle. That if he's at all articulate, he's reading words that someone else prepared for him. And from reading the Noonan book and from seeing the difference between a scripted Reagan and a scripted Bush on the one hand and an unscripted Reagan and Bush on the other hand, it seems like—at least when they're coherent—they are reading someone else's words. My experience with all three—with Mondale and Dukakis and now with Clinton—is that these are people who are very articulate speaking entirely on their own. The only reason they have need for speechwriters is the busyness of a campaign, and none of those three needed anyone to put—under ordinary circumstances would need anyone to put words in their mouth. I would say that, probably, of the three, Clinton is the most extemporaneous. That the words that he speaks not only are his own words, but they seem to me, from the distance that I'm at, to be words that he didn't even write for himself before getting up to the podium, but that they're words that he speaks extemporaneously. One very impressive anecdote that I heard, and I'm sure there's many like it, is from my wife who works for the American Federation of Teachers. And Clinton spoke at their convention this year. And people saw that he got up there with no notes whatsoever, that there was no teleprompter. He was just standing up there

in front of a crowd of people, and he spoke completely extemporaneously for something like forty-five minutes about education. And spoke in great detail. And they were enormously impressed that here was somebody who extemporaneously could talk in great detail and great knowledge and great passion about education in this country. I doubt anyone, Republican or Democrat, thinks that Bush—the so-called education president—could speak coherently for more than a minute or two about education. And Clinton got up and spoke for forty-five minutes in great detail about education. I'm sure there's lots of stories like that.

DB: It's true. He knows the substance, and he loves the substance. And he has educated himself, and then can combine it with a gift for being articulate and passionate and persuasive, and there you have it. Being a speechwriter for someone like that is clearly a very different enterprise from writing for someone who depends on prepared texts. So how does the process work here? Do you make assignments to others? How does it all begin? We need a speech on such and such for a particular occasion?

DK: I think the difference between Clinton, on the one hand, and Mondale and Dukakis, on the other hand, is that, with Mondale and Dukakis we would give them a text or talking points or some kind of piece of paper for virtually every public event that they were speaking at. That didn't mean that they were uncomfortable without a text, but that's part of the practice of the campaign, that you give them something for every event. With Clinton, the most that we'll be asked to give him is some kind of piece of paper for the major event of the day.

Often it's the earliest daytime event. If there's a noontime rally and a six o'clock in the evening rally, we'll give him a text for the noontime rally, not for the six in the evening. And even if the six in the evening is a larger rally in a bigger city or whatever, then what we'll give him is a text for the event that's most likely to be on network television, and he very often will discard it or improvise off of it. I think often the text is more like a briefing paper than a text. It's something that he can read and get some ideas from. Where it's different is the indoor set piece speech. Like the Notre Dame Speech or the Detroit Economic Club. I mean, there he needs a text and he'll often do several re-writes off of the text. And even there, I remember with the Detroit Economic Club speech, that speech was the day after Bush's acceptance speech at the Republican Convention, and Bruce Reed and Stan Greenberg and David Wilhelm and I worked all night on that speech. And then Clinton revised it in the morning and then I helped enter his revised words into the teleprompter. I worked with the teleprompter operator minutes before he got up in Cobo Hall in Detroit to give the speech. And the words he actually spoke were different from the words that he had written and revised. Some of it was there. It was like some kind of an outline for him. But what he ended up saying was different even from his revised words.

DB: So other people than the speechwriters are working on the speeches?

DK: The message experts, Stephanopoulos, Carville, Greenberg, Grunwald, others will give us some pointers on what we want the overall message to be. What the campaign wants the overall message to be from the speech. And he'll also get the briefing book. I think here is much more thorough than the briefing book that

Mondale and Dukakis would get. And it also includes talking points. So he'll get a briefing book, as I understand it, briefing book material for every public event he has. It's not a script for him to read from, but it's an explanation who the audience is, why it was selected, what we hope to get out of the event. With Mondale, the speechwriters had to do a site memo with each speech. We would have written material for Mondale about who the audience was, who he should recognize in the crowd, and so on. Here, the people who prepare the briefing book, Mary Madden and Carter Wilkie, play a much more important role in this campaign than their counterparts did in 1984 and 1988.

DB: How do you produce under pressure that way? That's so different from the way a writer ordinarily writes, to have the all-night stands and try to be creative under those circumstances must be extraordinarily stressful.

DK: Probably being tired helps. You don't have the energy to be nervous. You only have enough energy to focus. And if you're in a situation where a certain kind of activity is assumed to be normal and necessary, you'll do it.

DB: Are there people not housed here who are also doing speechwriting, either solicited or unsolicited?

DK: Well, we must get several dozen unsolicited faxes a day.

DB: Useful or not?

DK: Usually what you get are reasonable enough things but they're not the candidate's view. You really have to be involved in the campaign to understand what's actually being debated at the moment, if the candidate were to say it, or it would move the debate in a way that would not be good for the candidate. The other

thing. There are people on the outside who we do solicit or who volunteer who send in material that is useful. We solicited the Notre Dame speech and got a lot of people, mostly the Catholic laypeople, who had very good ideas for the Notre Dame speech. There's someone on Governor Cuomo's staff that we talk to pretty regularly. Robert McElvane is a professor at a college in Mississippi who has been sending in material—a very informed smart guy with good values sending in thoughts on what the candidate should say. It's very difficult, if you're not in the center of a campaign, to come up with words the candidate might use. What's a little disturbing—when you consider the volume of material and advice that comes in from ordinary voters. What would be interesting is how many of these people do anything in their own communities. And it's not their fault. What's happened is this glorification of the handler. That everyone wants to be a handler now. But there used to be all these ways that people could participate by talking to their neighbors, giving out leaflets, canvassing door to door, being precinct captains and so on. And I sort of hope that campaigns still have some of that, that it hasn't just been reduced to handlers. And that if somebody just feels so strongly about an election and believes, as we all do, that it's important to get Bush out of there, there's something they can do besides calling up the headquarters a dozen times a day. They could go door-to-door or do something.

DB: Nowadays they could call talk shows.

DK: Yes, that's good. You hope that there's some avenue for that impulse to participate that actually involves people interacting with people. It would be a horrible thing if the only way that someone could participate in a campaign would

be as a staffer for the campaign in its headquarters. It's just incredible the kind of hospitality and friendship the people in Little Rock have given the staff, those of the staff who didn't come from Little Rock.

DB: From your perspective what makes this campaign work? Where does it draw its strength, its effectiveness?

DK: Well, if we don't win no one will say that. They'll say it was one of the worst.

DB: But are there things—again, you're not one of the chief organizers or strategists, you're one that's helping to implement. But are there things that you see, or perhaps you don't, that this campaign does differently and better than other presidential campaigns? Or is it just the dynamics of the times, the candidate?

DK: I guess my frame of comparison from direct experience would be two unsuccessful campaigns, Mondale and Dukakis. When I talk about people doing leafleting, I mean, that was what I did in campaigns before I worked for Mondale. And in fact, I live in the District of Columbia, and they think very highly of Eleanor Holmes Norton. And when she was in trouble the last weekend of her campaign, it didn't occur to me to say I should make myself speechwriter or something. I called up and got some leaflets and gave them out in my neighborhood. And I leafleted at a polling place that they assigned me on primary day in 1990. So I mean, I believe in that kind of participation, that you should do things that interact with other people. This is sort of the Saturn project of presidential campaigns. The staff arrangement is much more egalitarian. There is much more teamwork and much less of a kind of hierarchy. Here I and others can just walk into someone's office and talk to them. It's much more informal. I've

written a lot about why experiments like Saturn are good. I'm more convinced now it's a good idea, not just in industry and government, but in political campaigns. I think it was a good idea to have it in Little Rock. It would have been a horrible idea to have had it in Washington, even though I live in Washington and even though it would have made my life a lot easier.

DB: Because?

DK: Because you just would have had all these lawyers and lobbyists and journalists—everybody would have descended on the headquarters and it would have been impossible to have gotten anything done. And here I think you've had a kind of esprit de corps kind of thing between the people who already live in Little Rock and the people who didn't move in the sense of pulling up stakes, but who spent all their time here. And it's sort of a self-contained community, which is good. My guess is that we have an advantage over Bush in that his headquarters is in Washington and ours is here. It's interesting, the last successful Democratic campaign was headquartered in Atlanta.

DB: You stay here and work some more.

DK: It really is like Springhill, Tennessee, or something. Saturn had to go to some town to create Saturn. This is the Springhill, Tennessee, of politics. Here it is the Sunday before the election, we don't know if we're going to win or lose, but it doesn't seem that leakage of strategy or secrets has been a big problem with this campaign. We have shown you can trust a lot of people with information. There's relatively few people in this campaign who have their own office—who have an office they don't share with somebody else. There's relatively few

people who have what looks like a secretary or an assistant, whatever the current term is for such a position. There's relatively few people who can talk on the phone without someone overhearing what they're saying, and yet it doesn't seem that there's much leakage of information to the wrong places. I'm sure that was intentional, that if you had that pithy a thing in public view that it would go out. So I think it was intentional that the public would know about that.

DB: And have you had a personal high point?

DK: I think it's sort of been uphill. In a funny way, activity can energize you. I feel that I haven't had any time to rest since I joined this.

DB: You must have felt terrific about the Notre Dame speech.

DK: I remember the Notre Dame speech as the absolute high point of my doing political speechwriting.

DB: You will be pleased to know that in some of these interviews I've done for a number of people on the campaign, that was the high point. It made people feel really proud to be associated with the campaign.

DK: That's great. That really makes me glad. I think it was one of the few speeches where it was not at all programmatic. It was values and beliefs. And I think the strategy, "The economy, stupid," will sum up the campaign. It's been my conviction, and I say this in my book, "The Democrats win on bread and butter issues and we've tended to lose on the social issues." Democrats also need to take mainstream positions on social issues. What we saw at the Republican Convention was almost a mirror image of what has gone wrong with the Democratic Party. In the past, we got into trouble by embracing extreme

positions on social issues and seeming to preach at and condemn the majority of Americans. And what we saw and heard at the Republican Convention was almost a mirror image of the worst things people ever saw in the Democratic Party. When we became extreme in 1972 and the Republicans became extreme in 1964, the Democrats in 1972 and the Republicans in 1964 were out of office. This was, I think, the first time in American history a party that was in office went berserk. Look at those people. You would not guess they were running the country. I mean, when you look—people who had been in office for twelve years straight and who been in office most of the time since 1968, and they're doing this fire and brimstone about the country as if they were not in office. And there was just this reading people out of this country that Buchanan and even people like Richard Bond were doing. Saying, "You're not real Americans. We're in a religious war," and so on. And my guess is that even if we're paid political workers, that we were reacting to that the way most Americans did. Most Americans reacted against the extreme rhetoric from the Republican Convention because this is one country where it doesn't matter what you look like or where you worship, you're still an American.

DB: Do you know that that was the single biggest fundraising week that we had, the week after the Republican Convention? Small contributions pouring in, which says something really healthy and good about the American public.

DK: That's right. I got to watch the Notre Dame speech when it was being given, and the audience just appreciated hearing someone speak in level tones that extremism

is wrong. You don't need a religious war; you don't need to tell some Americans they're not Americans. And this is wrong.

DB: Did they have anything like BCTV with Dukakis and Mondale where the speechwriters could sit and see what was happening at the events, or is that something new?

DK: Here you can dial 4444 and hear. There was nothing like that with Dukakis. And I don't think there was with Mondale. I thought what was very uplifting about it was there were some people who had come, as is their right, to bear witness to their opposition to abortion and to their belief that public policy in this country should reflect opposition to abortion. And they listened, for the most part, very respectfully to what he was saying when it didn't seem to bear directly or indirectly on abortion. And some of the people with Right to Life signs applauded points that Clinton was making about inclusion and pluralism and tolerance in this country. When he said we don't need a religious war, there were people there with Right to Life signs who applauded. They agreed we do not need the kind of talk that Buchanan had.

DB: Sitting here looking at the Notre Dame speech, one of the things I guess that immediately struck me was that when Hillary was introduced, the waves of applause—

DK: That's right. Everyone, including the Right to Life people, applauded.

DB: And Clinton choked up.

DK: Yes. That was great. It really was great.

DB: Did you all talk about that afterwards? Because in headquarters people were very struck by that.

DK: It was really a wonderful feeling being there. And then we drove in and there were people on the roads with signs and people outside the hall.

DB: I also was amused at the Lou Holtz story, which I think went over very well. That one when he was a young attorney general.

DK: That was entirely Clinton's. He did a lot of revising of the speech on the plane. And there, too, he spoke beyond his own revisions. And he was so—you probably know the story. I don't know the story, but he was so fired up about Lou Holtz that on the plane back, he spent—he was walking the aisles. I remember on the ride back Clinton was pacing the aisles and at different times regaling Paul Begala and me and this guy from *Newsweek* that was doing the history—Mark Miller, other people—about Lou Holtz. And he was doing—almost the entire flight—he was telling that story in greater detail. So he was really fired up about Lou Holtz.

DB: When you joined the campaign, he was in third place. When in your mind did it begin feeling like a winning campaign? Can you remember when that began to turn around?

DK: I think really the magic moment was when Perot pulled out. That just the psychology of it if he left at Clinton's moment of glory, I think it was the day of the acceptance speech, that it must have been Clinton's strength that forced him out. The convention being so successful and New York presenting itself so well to the country. I think the acceptance speech and the convention itself, together with Perot leaving. And then the bus tour coming right after it. These were the

turning points in the campaign. Just to survive in New York. This is somebody—you knock him down he keeps on getting up.

DB: What is it that you would like history, the future, to know about this campaign?

DK: I hope we win. Well, I guess what I'd like it to be remembered as is "the economy, stupid." Those three words are going to sum up a lot of it. I've always thought it was the right strategy. A lot of the substance and symbolism of the campaign has gone way beyond that. It has been the message of inclusion. And a different kind of inclusion. An inclusion on the basis of what we have in common, not on the basis of exaggerating what we don't have in common. In these times, when what people have in common is that people who work for a living have taken a beating and deserve a better deal. It doesn't matter where you live or where your grandparents came from, but people working for a living is the common denominator. So "the economy, stupid," in a sense, is a way of emphasizing what people have in common and de-emphasizing the differences that have been used to divide people. And I think with the bus tour—people forget where the bus tour started. It started in New York. So those few weeks did probably emphasize the unity of urban and suburban and rural American. I mean, we forget the convention was in New York, Clinton was embraced by New York, his nominating speech was given by Mario Cuomo, who's the voice of the urban Democratic Party. And he went from there to mostly, I guess, the cities and suburbs. It should be remembered as a campaign that united working people. Democrats win when people who work for a living in this country are united, we lose when people are divided and it was an effort to unite people, and I hope that

it'll be remembered that way. Something about [the] campaign that set it apart is literally how down to earth it was. The symbol of transportation was a bus, not the airplane. In a plane you alight people like you're a Greek god or something, and then you fly away. With a bus, you're always on the same level with them.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]