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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Paul David Leopoulos

Campaign Position: Volunteer

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 10, 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. Paul David Leopoulos 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?

David Paul Leopoulos:

I started early off. My name was given out by fax and whomever as a friend of Bill's from long ago. I'm one of the "oldest friends" stuff. Did interviews the latter part of October, November, December—mostly newspaper and magazines and things. Then when all hell broke loose in January during what I call "the week from hell," it really hit me that the kinds of things I was telling the press weren't being reported. There were just a few sentences here and a few sentences there, but no real composite of the kind of Bill Clinton I know and a lot of us know. Carolyn [Staley] stated the same thing. She was telling me the exact same thing. We had a lot of tandem interviews together. Reporters would literally have tears in their eyes sometimes, the real human side of Bill Clinton. So here all of a sudden they start jumping on him with both feet because of someone who's paid to say something negative. Yet the good stuff that we were saying was being pretty much buried and ignored. So I became violently unhappy about that, and I decided that I was going to be more aggressive on my own to try to help. Sitting at home watching his slaughter was an awful feeling. One night we

were sitting there literally crying in front of the TV, my wife and I. I said, “I’ve got to do something. One guy against NBC and CBS, what can a person do?” Linda just said, “Well, go to New Hampshire.” We had talked about it, but we really hadn’t . . . so we decided that I would go to New Hampshire. Couldn’t afford to fly, so I drove. Took \$750 out of my checking account—out of savings—and drove up there. I was advised not to go—because the campaign was almost over—by a few people. I asked them, “Don’t you think that now’s when I ought to go, since it’s really the time for friends to be friends?” I went up there. Was warned that FOB was a bad term, that it meant you were up there bugging people. I got there on Super Bowl Sunday, when they did their interview. I was sitting in a little bar up there, eating barbecue, which is the wrong thing to order in New Hampshire, but I was homesick. Didn’t know anybody. I had a few names—Simon Rosenberg, Mitchell Schwartz. I was sitting in that bar, watching the Super Bowl and eating, waiting for the big *60 Minutes* deal. Halfway through the Super Bowl, I went over to the headquarters and met Mitchell and Simon. They were very glad to see me because they had heard that I was really a friend of Bill’s. I’m not putting down anyone

who says they are, I'm just saying an old friend that's known him a long time. I told them I was an FOB as soon as I came in the door. I screamed out, "FOB!" and everybody sort of laughed. Anyway, that night Bill called me and we talked a few minutes and went over to the hotel. I really felt at that point that I could do something. Mitchell said, "We need to motivate these people up here. They are all young and they don't know Bill Clinton. They're scared to death. They're petrified. Literally petrified." He asked me to speak at a meeting that Monday night. They were having a meeting of all the staff in New Hampshire. They were all driving down. So I gave a pretty emotional speech to them. I told them about the kind of person Bill is, that they needed to fight for him. What I said to the press and they had ignored it—the whole game that had gone on. So I felt at that point I could be a motivator, a catalyst, hopefully, to get the staff to believe in him. I mean, if all of them are fired up, then you have something going. One person handing out tapes is great, but I felt that I had more to give because of knowing who he is. I spent four days up there. I had to drive back. I worked, I know, twenty hours a day. I went and drove to a lot of the offices and got to know the people a little bit

better—reminisced about Bill and things. I just had a ball. Now Wednesday, I traveled with Bill the whole day. Had a ball. I was countering the press at every stop. I'd printed up my own little brochure before I left that said, "A friend for thirty-seven years." I took some pictures of us having our middle-class parties. I copied them on it. I talked about the press and how they had been ignoring who he really is. I handed those out all over there. The word sort of got around about that handout. Different people wanted to see it and things. It made some of the press mad because I'd said all of them were unethical, immoral. That was a wonderful time in my life. It was awful, but at the same time it was satisfying because I really felt that I, plus all the other Arkansans—there were several hundred Arkansans up there that week, several rallies we went to. The people from New Hampshire couldn't believe that there were two-to three-hundred Arkansans with Bill Clinton in that little auditorium. So we all, I think, made a difference.

DB: How many times do you think you have spoken to the press about the real Bill Clinton?

DL: One hundred ninety, two hundred ten. Something like that. A ton. The only ones—David Shribman of the *Wall Street Journal*, David Maraniss, David Lauter—those three guys have really been fair. C-SPAN was wonderful. They taped me just

rambling on about him. They played it four or five times during the convention. Half-hour interview. It wasn't me, it was just what I know about Bill Clinton. People called in to the headquarters. I got letters from people saying, "You look like a regular guy. You couldn't be lying about all that stuff. I'm going to vote for this guy." During the convention I did like twenty-four satellite interviews, live. I have a few funny stories there. Since the election, it's been even more. I just spent two days this week with CNN. Now they really do want to know who he is. I feel that's just as important now, even though I'm mad because they wouldn't do it then. I'm going ahead and expending the effort now because I feel that if people get to know him the way we know him, they'll be even more optimistic. They'll go out and spend their money, they'll be optimistic and they'll do positive things to help the country. It's better late than never.

DB: This campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign in American history. From your perspective, what made this campaign so effective?

DL: Bill's focus. I'm a firm believer that his priorities, his motivations, his agenda, is the right one. It's for others. Since I've known him, he has always cared about other people. His tenacity comes from being focused on the right end result. He's trying to help other people. He's not in there to make his personal friends millionaires by deregulating their corporations and all this stuff. He's not into those political games. He's into, "By God, we're going to make a difference." He doesn't waver from that. Also, the people he hired . . . Then I also believe that good people, or people in general, surround themselves with people like themselves. So a lot of the people he put together as a team were people who really care about other people. Some of

them probably had their own agendas. There are always problems that crop up here and there, but I really think that everybody was thinking the same way. There's a lot of power in that. If you really are focused, it's just like a laser beam. I personally think, and I wrote letters to the campaign about it, that they didn't spend enough time getting out who the real Bill Clinton is. I think during the convention week they did, but after that it was dropped. And if people had started buying into the Russian thing and some of these other things, I think it could have hurt real bad. But they didn't, and the Republicans were so radical and so ridiculous. I don't pretend to be a political strategist, but I just think when people get to know Bill Clinton, they can't help but to vote for him. So the strength was, "Who is this guy?" And now people still don't know who he is. I mean, they really still don't know how much he loves people, how much he cares to make a difference, how honest he is. Really, the morals he does have, all the things to make the Bill we all know.

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

DL: Well, that's interesting. I think it was centralized at the top and very focused. They stayed on the economy the whole time, they didn't waver. Even when the numbers were starting—at the last two weeks when the numbers went down—they didn't waver. So I think their discipline at the top was great. All the "grunts," all of us who were banging our heads away—not that the ones at the top didn't bang their heads away—but all the worker bees were young, emotional people that were there for their cause. They identified with Bill Clinton. I talked to a lot of them. In New Hampshire, a lot of these kids were very bright college students from Yale,

Dartmouth. You had a lot of very intelligent people who were there for a reason. Obviously it wasn't about money, because they weren't getting paid anything. They were living in substandard conditions and everything else. But they believed. To me, power is good—good is power—emotional is power. The Republicans—I didn't see their headquarters, but I can see it now—a bunch of old fogies who had a lot of money and who were very mechanical, and didn't give a damn about anybody but themselves, and who thought they could kill Bill from the personality thing. The Clinton campaign was emotional and the drive was incredible. These people would work twenty-four hours a day if they needed to. I mean, you wouldn't have to ask. I think the energy from within and the focus at the top, at least from my view. And again, it stems from Bill. The worker bees didn't get to know him as much as I wish they could. I really wished they could have just sat around and bs'd with him—really looked him in the eyes and really, really got to know him. They saw him enough to get the feel. They saw his tenacity and that he didn't give up. How hard he worked. He worked harder than anybody in the campaign. So when you have that kind of example and you have people who were self-motivated because of their values, that's hard to beat. The country was ready for it. I think that the country had had enough. I think I could have run.

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

DL: New Hampshire was the low and the high point. I mean, it's hard to explain that. Driving up there was three days of driving and I listened to Rush Limbaugh and to the Boston stations. All these stations are cynical. I didn't find one station where the general pattern—forget Bill Clinton—where the general pattern of life was

something other than cynical and negative. And then you add Bill Clinton and what the newspapers were feeding—which was crap—and let them feed on that. So I listened all the way up there, I shouldn't have, I know, but you get tired of listening to music.

DB: And you've got to listen to what they are saying sometimes.

DL: Yes. A couple of times I got to a pay phone to call. I got so mad. I never got through. I'd be out there like this. I was so mad at what they were saying. One of them said, "Bill and Hillary say they go to church, but they're doing it just for the campaign." I can remember as a nine-year-old kid watching Bill Clinton walk to Parkwest Baptist Church every Sunday. So there was so much crap. That was low.

DB: But you say that it was also the high.

DL: Well, the high was helping make the difference in New Hampshire. That was the election. If Bill was taken seriously at New Hampshire, and somebody who was thirty points ahead before the Gennifer thing—he was about thirty points ahead—and thirty points down a week before the election up there and comes back to within eight points, that shows people things. People love tenacity. They love people with guts. They love people who really care about things. Bill showed that through his actions. Whether they knew much about him or not, they saw, by God, he was out there working his tail off, no matter what was happening. That was exhilarating, going down those streets and people would say, "I don't want to talk about him." Believe me, he wasn't the topic people wanted to talk about. But then you got their imagination up. When they found out you were from Arkansas, they couldn't believe it. I gave them my little handout and I said, "Look, here we are having

lunch, having dinner.” I said, “It’s a middle-class man. They’re trying to bury him.” So when you give them the facts and their eyes go, “Well, wait a minute.” Then you think to yourself, “Well, wait a minute. If this person would feel that way, dozens of others, hundreds, thousands.”

DB: So once he won New Hampshire, you figured he had the nomination.

DL: It was over with.

DB: When were you certain that he would win the presidency? Did you think at that point he’d be able to beat Bush?

DL: I have never doubted he was going to be president since 1966 or 1968. I told several people all through the years that. I’m not trying to be cocky or arrogant about it. You got to know this guy. He’s too special. He’s like a Secretariat, a Michael Jordan, or someone like that. He’s a very special man. The travesty of this whole thing was that the press was allowed to try to bury him. They forgot all of their rules. They don’t have rules, but they forgot all of their ways of doing things. Really substantiate stories, and saying, “I’m not reporting that until—.” Boy, that night of the Gennifer thing, Brokaw and all these guys just ran with it and forgot everything they learned over all these years. The equivalent would be like a doctor going into an operation and using a machete instead of a scalpel. They all did it. And for him to survive that—again which I’m really not surprised about—it was wonderful to watch it happen. I would love to have a day-by-day description of the New Hampshire primary because those were such special days—all the people that I met up there, Arkansans that I had never known before. Watching the people’s

faces, that was a high point. And then sitting back after that, watching it unfold, knowing what was going to happen, was really the high point.

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

DL: That's simple, very simple. I want them to really recognize and remember and dig it out. Go to the newspapers, dig out the facts about how this campaign was run. I was doing interviews in Ohio the last week of the campaign, and at one of the radio stations, a little religious station in Zanesville, Ohio, this lady said, "I just heard the rumor that Clinton's Governor's School teaches Satanism." All these rumors the Republicans started. We never stooped to that. Never, ever. We never even got close to that kind of thing. The only thing that Bill Clinton said about Bush was he wasn't doing his job. He never called him an immoral person, he never called him a Communist—he never called him anything.

DB: He never called him a Bozo.

DL: He never called him a Bozo. The campaign was that way. Even the playfulness within the campaign itself that people couldn't see wasn't like that. It was playful and it was funny, but it wasn't, "I'm going to rip your heart out if I can't win this campaign." To me, again, it's Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton isn't the kind of person to say, "I'm going to get you. I'm going to win this thing and whatever it takes, I'm going to get there." He would never do that. That's what he did. I'm not surprised by it, but I still respect it. I expect that out of him. I set him to a high standard, and he had better live by it. He did that. He didn't allow the other guys in the campaign that maybe wanted to do that kind of stuff. I'm not sure that was the case, but I'm saying he wouldn't allow that to happen. He made the difficult decision at the end

to say that the Free Trade Agreement had some merit, which is true, but he didn't have to do that. He could have said, "No, I'm going to blame Bush for that right now because it's easier to blame him for stuff." Instead he said—'cause I was told about several of the meetings, a lot of guys were against it politically. Bill Clinton was for it because he thought it made sense. He said, "Well, if we lose votes, we'll have to get them from somewhere else." That is honesty. That's what they tried to hang on him—as being the opposite of, but he's not. I'm just very proud of the campaign. All the people I've met, everywhere I went.

DB: You're saying we not only won, but we won the right way.

DL: Sure, and we really did. It's not a cliché, it's not just, "Now that you're winners it's easier to say that." In fact, I had a reporter—Kit Sealey, from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was doing an article on Bill's campaigns over the years, and she said she could not find any evidence where he ever campaigned like that—negative, cynical, hatred kind of thing. Like a Sheffield Nelson kind of deal, or a Bush, or any of those kinds of things. I just love the guy. He's very special.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]