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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Michael Lux

Campaign Position: Director, Constituency Outreach

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 2, 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. Michael Lux 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 were you doing immediately before you came with the campaign?

Mike Lux: I was the executive vice president—in fact I still am—I'm on leave from the AFL/CIO in Iowa.

DB: When did you officially join the campaign?

ML: Officially August 15, although I took some vacation time and was working down here in July before I took my official leave. So I've been down here a little longer than that.

DB: Describe what it means to be director of constituency outreach.

ML: Well, I was afraid you were going to ask me that. It really has shifted over the course of the campaign. The biggest single thing is crisis control. It's a job where if something comes up—and you never know what it's going to be, whether it's because of something the governor said that some people misinterpreted; maybe it's an ad that's being run by the Bush/Quayle campaign that we have to have constituency groups respond to; maybe it's an issue of the day for either us or the Bush campaign; or maybe it's just some little blow-up someplace between groups. But it was really a matter of sort of crisis or crises of the day was probably the most important responsibility. The second thing I would say was more a planning—kind of overall strategic function, especially earlier in the campaign—is to kind of walk through what it would take in terms of scheduling, in terms of speeches that the governor and Senator Gore were delivering, in terms of what we did as a campaign to outreach in terms of direct

mail, field targeting. Those kinds of things on particular blocks of voters, senior citizens, veterans, young people, ethnic groups of different kinds. What different configuration did we want to have? What different strategy? And sometimes they were very, very public strategies. A lot of high visibility. A lot of things that the governor himself was doing. It ranged all the way from that to very, very quiet staff to staff or staff to volunteer outreach efforts. So it was really a range of things. Those I think are the two biggest responsibilities. There are a lot of things within those two areas that I could talk about, but the bottom line was it was sort of a juggling act. I mean, this campaign made a conscious decision, and I think the right one, to not have a staff person for each subconstituency. Not to spend a lot of emphasis on that. But instead to do crisis management, overall planning and direction.

DB: Who made that decision, do you know, or was it a consensus decision?

ML: I think it was a consensus decision. From earlier on. And I think it was a good one. I mean, this campaign was about message from the beginning, and I think as a result we needed to be very focused in terms of our resources. In fact, I think it was a great decision as a person who was in charge of all that because instead of having a bunch of different staff people who could waste time and resources—dealing with every little need or every little request or desire of a different constituency group—instead, I dealt with what I thought was most important and I had staff that could help me with that. So I think it was a very good decision. And I should mention in regards to that, one of the things that we tried to do with constituency groups that I don't think most campaigns have done as well or as

much of, is that we tried to make them part of our message strategy. And I alluded to that a little bit before when I was talking about the overall strategy. But we had a real conscious effort, a real design to say, “How can you plug into the overall message of the campaign?” I mean, maybe it’s an Italian American group that wants to help, but we still wanted them talking about the economy. We still wanted them talking about change. Same with all of these different groups and subgroups. We tried to get them to do free media things in their local areas. We tried to get them to do mail to their members. We tried to get them to do things that fit into our message. And it was a challenge because people want to focus on their thing. And they should. You know, it’s good that they do. But we also wanted them to think about what the bigger picture was.

DB: Did you find a relatively high level of sophistication out there, ready to cooperate?

ML: You know, the answer to that question is obviously complicated, and it ranged all the way from people who are complete pros to the people who are real pains. We were dealing—depending on the situation, depending on the target state—with everybody from very, very sophisticated institutional, national groups all the way down to the local level. So it did range, but I think overall I would say yes. I was pleasantly surprised with the determination people had and just the hunger and desire for change.

DB: Most people would say you have done your work extraordinarily well since there do not seem to have been crises that caught the national press’s attention.

ML: I think for the most part that’s true. The disadvantage of this kind of approach as

a structural decision and campaign is that there were things that didn't get followed through that maybe should have. There were things that I missed because I was so busy with all these different areas that maybe could have been done better. I think overall, though, we dealt with crises quickly and effectively. We averted potential disasters and kept them out of the headlines, and we kept people fairly on track and fairly satisfied. So I think overall it's a strategy that worked well. There were some near misses. I mean, we had some very nervous moments at 3:00 a.m. in the morning a couple of times, but we dodged some bullets and you know, overall I think it went pretty well.

DB: Do you think this will carry over into government? Or will the separate constituencies be less cooperative then?

ML: I think it's going to be a mix. I think it will carry over into government. I think that most people recognize that after twelve years of neglect of our fundamental problems, we have such major issues to deal with in this country and everybody's got their list and everybody's got things that they want to get done in four years or eight years, hopefully. I think the thing I worry the most about in terms of that—and I worry about it because I would feel bad if they weren't treated well—but for those groups out there who were really, really pros. I mean, who really swallowed their pride when we had to go out there and we had to say we stood up against the interest groups—groups like NEA and groups like AFSCME, who have done every single thing we've asked, who've never bitched, never complained, who we hit sometimes with our message. And I hope this campaign and this administration recognizes what pros they were and how much they did. And

I hope that even though we shouldn't give in to every single thing they want and we can't, and that they need to understand there are a lot of problems to deal with in this country, I hope people like that are treated with all of the respect that they deserve.

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

ML: Well, you know, it's funny. I was talking with David Wilhelm the other day about this. And we were talking about the way decisions are made in this campaign is that it's a very odd process. It's like a pinball machine where the ball sort of bounces around and then goes down in a hole someplace. And sometimes that hasn't worked well, but for the most part there are enough checks and balances and enough different people from different perspectives are able to have their input. That sometimes we're slower than we should be, but we eventually make the right decision. And God knows that it was frustrating at times, and there were also times—and I'll give you what to me is the best example. There were times when we did the right thing but we did it later than we should have. The AIDS speech was a classic example of that. Governor Clinton personally made a public promise to give the speech, and he did it three different times over the course of the primary. Apparently, the first time he made the promise, he liked the idea so much that he made the promise two other times to different groups. And again, the groups who cared about that were being pros, were being professional about the whole thing and weren't bugging us about it. But it got to be October and we still hadn't done it, and they gradually started turning up the

heat and saying, “Look, you made this promise. We don’t want to hurt you, but you did make this promise and it’s real important to us.” And this thing bounced around and bounced around. We made the right decision. Governor Clinton kept his promise, as he should have. He wanted to give the speech. He did a great job with the speech. But we gave the speech five days before the election, and we should have given it sixty days before the election. So that was an example where the right thing was done, but it wasn’t done at the right time. I think that’s more the exception than the rule. The decision-making process worked because a lot of people had input and a lot of times campaigns get paranoid and close themselves down. It takes discipline to keep things open, and this campaign had that discipline. And I admire that. And God knows there are frustrations and problems with that approach, but I really admire that. There are certain things that will probably be done differently next time, and should be done differently, but I think it worked remarkably well. The other thing I have to say is I think Governor Clinton deserves an extraordinary amount of credit. And I have thought that watching this from a distance as well as being inside. In that, unlike most candidates in modern history—at least most Democratic candidates—he made a conscious decision from the beginning to reach out to a very diverse group of people to build the campaign. He reached out to find people who he had never met before and bring them in to very senior roles in the campaign. And I was really struck by that. I mean, he brought in people like David, who he had never worked with before, never knew before, in very senior roles. George I think is another example of that. And made them key players in this thing, and I think

that was very smart. There's a tradition even in some successful campaigns of really having this tight little group that's been with the candidate from the very beginning, and nobody else can get in that inner circle, and I think that's a big mistake. There's also a tendency to try to bring too many different big names in. I was involved in Joe Biden's campaign, and I saw that in Joe Biden's campaign. He had all this talent around him. Incredible talent. But it was D.C., big-name talent, people who had made their reputations ten or fifteen or twenty years before and were big names. And there was no discipline in that campaign. The governor picked some up-and-coming people—picked out some people who had skills, but not necessarily the big big-name reputations. And he made them key people in this campaign, and I think he deserves a lot of credit. A lot of good people in this campaign. This is the best national campaign I have ever worked on in terms of the quality of the people. The talent. And also, it's good people. I mean, I have met some of the very best, some of the very worst people in my whole life, in presidential campaigns. This campaign has a lot more of the best than it does of the worst. Not that there aren't some people I don't like involved, but I have been so impressed with the caliber on a human level of the people here.

DB: That's a commonly made observation. Who reached out and brought you into here?

ML: Well, I used to be business partners with David Wilhelm. He and I worked together on the Biden campaign and then we formed a consulting firm together. And I left the consulting firm to take what was a wonderful job back home with the AFL/CIO, but he and I stayed very close. So I was involved as a sort of

kitchen cabinet advisor from the very beginning, and really wanted to take the leave of absence and do this. So that's how I got here.

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

ML: I actually became convinced in New Hampshire after he finished second in New Hampshire. I think that just having been through presidential politics before, knowing a lot of the people—not very many people know this, but I was born and raised in Nebraska. I lived two blocks from Bob Kerrey. My mother's best friend worked for his father. I've known Bob Kerrey for a long, long time, before he ever ran for governor, and considered him not a close friend, but a friend. I have worked most of my adult life in Iowa, and Harkin I consider a friend. I knew most of the top people in both of those campaigns, plus David and some of the other people in this campaign. And I knew some of the other people in some of the other campaigns. Knowing all of that about all those people, I was convinced from very early on that Clinton was the strongest candidate with the strongest organization. I thought that even before David joined. Even before some of the others. What I knew about people—and I think the world of both Kerrey and Harkin, but just knowing them and knowing how they were getting organized, I felt much better about Clinton. When he survived what he survived in New Hampshire, knowing what he had built and knowing the kind of person he was from other people—I didn't know the governor before the campaign, but just hearing from people close to him, I felt very strongly that he would be the nominee.

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

ML: That's funny. That's an interesting way to phrase the question. I was one of the few Paul Tully converts from very early on. I had a gut instinct, and with Tully it was more than instinct, he knew all the numbers. But I had a gut instinct even at Bush's 91 percent approval rate that a Democrat, if not win, would have a very good shot at the election in November. You just see it when you're not in Washington or you're not in a big city. You see what people are going through and you see that people are getting tired of the b.s. And even in all that euphoria, I just had a gut feeling that we really had a shot at this thing. At the same time, I have never been the euphoric, like, "Oh, we're sure to win," kind of person. I've always been skeptical about the ability of the Democratic Party to actually win a presidential race. I mean, I'm of the age, I've never voted for a winning president. I was sixteen years old when Jimmy Carter won. You know, I got interested in politics before that, even, but I mean my whole life where I have been consciously aware of politics, Carter was the only winner and that was just barely. So I have never had faith that we would win this. I'm still nervous as hell the day before, even though the polls say we are. So I've never been convinced that he would. At the same time, I just have faith that people were really tired of what they had been going through. And I've always had hope that somehow, somehow, we would get it. Never faith but always hope.

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

ML: I think history should know that all of the hype and b.s. aside, all of the stuff that usually goes along with presidential campaigns—people talking about genius

decisions and all of that—aside from all that, for the most part, this has been a group of incredibly idealistic people who are really in this for the right reasons. And I've been involved in other campaigns where I haven't felt like that. I think the world of Joe Biden and Paul Simon and Walter Mondale. I mean, all the other people I've been involved with, but I have never felt as strongly about that as I have in this campaign. I have been so impressed by people being in this for the right reasons and really wanting to change this country. And I hope so much that it's this kind of people that are involved in the administration and are able to make that difference because I think we're at a crossroads in history. I think, you know, if this is a failed presidency, this country is in very deep trouble, that we're right on the edge of either doing something really great. I've always been convinced that Governor Clinton would either be Franklin Roosevelt or else we'd have a real disaster on our hands. You know, not his policies, but I mean another kind of president that would really lead us. Or if we do fail at really changing the country, I think it's going to change us. I think it's going to change it anyway and it's going to be in the wrong direction.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]