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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Ann McCoy

Campaign Position: Administrator of the Governor's Mansion

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 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. Ann McCoy 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 association with the Clinton campaign?

Ann McCoy: I am the administrator of the Governor's Mansion. I have been here a little over seven and a half years. I work very closely with the family in the organization of their home. As far as my contribution or efforts in the campaign, I continued to maintain what I consider the stability of the home life—the creature comforts. Making sure that their clothes were ready to go when they had to leave again, that they had the food and items that they liked when they would come in—at all hours of the day and night—readily available for instant visitors and guests, meetings, etc. The numerous, wonderful people that we've met—part of my job is to greet them and make them feel as comfortable here in the mansion as possible, which is the most fun. I love meeting people.

DB: Before you became administrator of the mansion, what were you doing?

AM: I sold real estate for ten years here in Little Rock, which is a fabulous training ground. You work with people, their money, and their emotions. It is a balancing act. You deal also with professionals—plumbers, contractors. As far as my job as administrator, I needed all those involvements, or the ability to work with all levels of people and situations. Yesterday we had to call the plumber for the toilet. I know anybody can call a plumber, but I do deal with all kinds of maintenance problems—landscaping, decorating, etc.

DB: Obviously this is a very demanding responsibility under any circumstances, to be

doing this for the first family of the state. How would you describe the degree of difference being in the midst of a presidential campaign? Were your hours longer? Were there more visitors? What happened to your responsibilities as a result of being part of the campaign?

AM: Without question, the hours were longer. The weekends just blurred into the weekdays. The schedule was not exact. The visitors were more numerous. In 1991 at the Governor's Mansion, I documented over 25,000 people who came through the mansion for tours, receptions, etc. We discontinued a lot of the tours and meetings. However, we had a different category of people. We had campaign workers, press people, exciting visitors of all sorts. The demands were different. Different numbers at different times. So we had to really be on our toes to move quickly into a new situation—situations that we were not familiar with. We had press people come in and literally transform a room into a set to tape an interview that took perhaps five hours to develop and fifteen minutes on the air. The people were really, I think, very, very easy to work with. We were very cooperative. Now, I have to admit that we learned that we did not need to be quite as cooperative. And we really did. I mean, our southern hospitality and our basic naiveness about working with all these high-dollar folks. I had to learn that we could set our limits and they were willing to cooperate with us.

DB: Didn't the whole communication system at the mansion have to be updated?

AM: Absolutely. We had to bring in additional telephones. The volume of mail—we had to have a system of documenting everything that came into the mansion, to make sure that it was answered. Telephone inquiries coming in. Everything had

been magnified.

DB: Do you have a part in patrolling the line between what parts of this facility are strictly personal, and which parts are semi-personal, and then which are public? That must have been extremely difficult.

AM: Yes. This is something that always had to be maintained. People sometimes think when they come to the Governor's Mansion they can go anywhere. We have always had to restrict the private quarters and even the office areas downstairs. In other words, just leaving open the public areas. That has had to be policed a little heavier with the people coming in who really felt that they might have access to the private areas. I'm speaking of campaign workers, who were a little bit closer to the family but still had to be reminded of the restriction of the private quarters—on a delicate basis 'cause we didn't always know who should have access. The kitchen is the most prized room in the mansion, and everybody thought they could go to the kitchen. We had to restrict the kitchen to some of those who were very close to the family and to the campaign. What a year! The most exciting year.

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?

AM: From my perspective, I think it is so successful because you've got two highly intelligent people who I think were more prepared for a presidential campaign than probably anyone in the history of the world. They coupled themselves with people who had like knowledge and ideas. They had sense enough to listen to these ideas, to filter them out and to take the best of all that knowledge. I

remember one of the most interesting comments that I heard when this campaign first started. We'd have these campaign people—I am speaking of the higher echelon of the campaign, close to the family—and I refer to the Clintons as family. I would compliment them when they would come in. I'd say, "You all are doing a terrific job." They said, "Let me tell you, Bill and Hillary are running this campaign." These people have worked on other campaigns. They said they have never been in a campaign where they were working with people who knew what they wanted to do, what they wanted to accomplish, and knew how to go about doing it. They said, "We are just working with them—following their lead. It's all coming together." I think we all knew that because we knew Bill and Hillary, but it's been interesting to see all these other people realize it. They are very hands-on, to the point that it may have been a little frustrating and they thought it slowed things down, but look at the results. One of the things that I thought was very interesting—and I got a lot of calls from around the country—I had people telling me that they were frustrated. We'll say an older generation, maybe sixties, were saying that they were frustrated at the campaign headquarters because it was full of poorly dressed, smelly young kids. Now, I am saying this with all respect, but that was reported to me. I said, "Oh, my lands. I'll bet you didn't ask them their education level." I would say, "I know what you're talking about, but it's working." These were business people who worked with a lot of Republicans and they would say, "This just isn't going to change the Republicans. It's going to turn them off." See, that's what they thought they had to do, was change the Republicans. Evidently it worked.

DB: It is true if you walked through it looked like a high school. Anne Pride and I would laugh about forming the AWC, the Adult Women's Caucus, because we were about the only mature women down there. There were a few others, but what looked like scruffy kids were brilliant, hardworking, creative people. They could take a problem and go out and solve it. Let me ask again, from your perspective, specifically with respect to the campaign organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

AM: A lot of times no. Of course, I am fortunate to be over here in this beautiful sanctuary. That's another thing. I really felt like for years that this Governor's Mansion was Bill and Hillary's sanctuary. It was one place that they could come and get away from the masses, and the people that just felt like they could be touchy and talky. We lost that. It really bothered me because I felt like they needed it. They had to get up in their own bathrooms, practically, to get any privacy. I'd have to say that I felt like, from what I could judge, there was a great deal of disorganization or lack of organization. In fact, we would have people coming over here to set up press conferences and it was almost absurd. Every time we had a little group coming over—and I'd say little and young—a brand new crew would come over. They would come to me and they'd say, "Now, can we do this? Where do we get that? Where is this?" About the fifth group came over, I said, "Why don't they send the same old crew who knows what to do over here?" Then I thought that they wanted them all to know how to do it in case they had to do it some place else the next time. I didn't understand that, and still don't know why. I know they did have a lot of people coming and going. It was almost

like they would train here and go out to work in the field. In that respect and even till this day—even yesterday, there was a great deal of disorganization in whether or not we were going to have a live filming or just a voice filming. I had all kinds of different messages all day coming from different sources. To tell the truth, I've gotten to where I just work with them and go along, and whatever they want, I'll do it. I have heard that we are not doing this visually, that it's just going to be voice. They've not heard that. I just learned to go on and work with them because I never know which way we're going to end up. I find it better to be prepared in every area, or to be cooperative to get it done. To tell the truth, there seemed to be a lot of lack of organization; however, maybe they were overorganized. They had two or three different groups. I just tried to cooperate the best I could. Seriously, we used to laugh and say that it was mass confusion. But it seemed to work. We always turned around and said, "Whatever it is, it's working."

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

AM: I'd have to say the minute I saw all those men all lined up in a row. I am very prejudiced and partial. But, to me, there wasn't one man of the original seven who could articulate like Bill Clinton, or who looked like a president. I always felt that if anyone met Bill Clinton, they'd vote for him—and certainly if they shook his hand and looked him in the eye. Bill Clinton at first came across as too intellectual and he would lose the average person. I think he listened to advice and he learned to consolidate his information so that more people could pick up from it. He had to learn to almost give the sound bite. He never did, really.

DB: He wants to explain and treat people like adults.

AM: Right. I would train myself when I heard him talk and I would say, “I will come away from here with a phrase.” I could with a lot of the others, but I couldn’t come away with a phrase. But I think he finally got to where he cut down.

DB: So when you saw the field, you knew he would be the nominee.

AM: I really felt that way.

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

AM: I think when I really realized that President Bush was not listening to his advisors. I think the Republican convention was just the worst thing that they could have done. I think the general feeling out there was of meanness, desperation—to attack Hillary was absurd.

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

AM: All the trash that came out in New Hampshire. The fact that these—in my estimation, these generous, giving people had to go through that. Just had to go through the scrutiny. In a way, it will set a new precedent with campaigns. Something has got to happen, I do think. There are not many people who would subject themselves to it. I think that they perhaps knew that something would happen. I don’t think they realized to this extent. I think they handled it so well. Just to get up and read the paper every day—to read that garbage turned my stomach, but I think they handled it beautifully. I’m so proud of them. They overcame.

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

AM: It was at the Democratic convention at Macy’s that night. I’m telling you the

truth, I had goose bumps that night. When Bill and Hillary walked into that room and looked at all of their friends—the look on their faces. They hugged everybody and just said thank you and I love you. It was the most emotional evening. Chelsea was so happy and so precious. There isn't anything to top that.

DB: I don't know that there's been anything quite like that in previous campaigns.

AM: Well that's another thing about this. This campaign was so unprecedented with its warmth and its involvement of so many people going out and knocking on doors. The Arkansas Travelers need so much praise and recognition. They went and spent their own money and their own time. There are so many people that did so much for nothing but just wanting Bill Clinton to be put in a position to help the country. I think there was more genuine feeling and effort in this campaign. Naturally, I've never watched one as closely, but I just don't believe the feeling—and the calls I get. All these thousands of calls that come to the mansion. People who are just so excited and say, "Oh, I just feel so good. I just know it's going to be so wonderful." The people who would call during the campaign and say, "I want to do something. Please let me do something." I think it was special. I keep saying, "Wow, Bill Clinton has a responsibility now." And he does, and he knows it.

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

AM: I think it was the effort of the little people. I know that the money had to come from the big people or the rich people, but there were so many middle- and lower-class people who were involved, and even with money, certainly with time. I think that the sweeping of emotions was very genuine. I think that was very

rewarding and will be hard to define. I think that these people will continue to meet when you get a wave of feeling. I think we've got that right now, and if we can keep that momentum going—I just hope the inaugural will be where all these people can really feel involved and they won't be priced out of it or excluded. I know that's difficult to do, but there are so many people who are straining to be there, financially and every other way. And I think they are trying to make it that way.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]