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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Mark Edward Middleton

Campaign Position: Arkansas Finance Director/Southern Finance Director

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. Mark Edward Middleton 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?

Mark Middleton: Initially, I was the Arkansas finance director. I served in that capacity until the general election, when I went to work for the DNC and served as the southern finance director. I was, essentially, responsible for raising money in the southern part of the country.

DB: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

MM: I was practicing law at the law firm of what was then Mitchell, Williams, Selig, and Tucker. I worked in the litigation section—did almost exclusively environmental work.

DB: Had you done extensive fund-raising before?

MM: No. Absolutely not. Had never been a fund-raiser, and never again will be a fund-raiser.

DB: Who reached out and brought you in for that position?

MM: The way I was brought into the campaign was I received a phone call from Craig Smith early, early on. Actually, it was prior to the exploratory committee being formed. He said, “I’m going to take a leave of absence from the governor’s office and the governor’s contemplating running for president. There is no certainty. Would you be interested in taking a leave of absence as well?” I gave it a lot of thought and took a big jump and actually resigned from the law firm. I went to work before there was an exploratory committee. That was in probably the late part of August. I joined the campaign. I went in the very first day and really what

was needed was someone to go out and collect money to pay the rent and keep the lights on. I remember one of the first meetings that the Governor had was at the Arkansas Poultry Federation. After he finished speaking, he turned to me and said, “It’s obviously going to take a lot of money for us to continue this, so why don’t you ask these guys for some checks.” So that’s how I got started. Because there was nobody else to do the job. That’s, essentially, what I did. After he would speak to a group of people, I would say, “This is a capital-intensive process and it’s going to cost us some money. We are going to need a few dollars early on. Could you write us a check for \$25 or \$50?” I think I kind of got drafted into it. It wasn’t that I was hired in to be a fund-raiser, or anything else. It was just something that was needed.

DB: It turned out that you had a terrific talent for it. How much money was raised from Arkansas, ultimately?

MM: In total in the primary we raised \$2.6 million, which is a record. On a per capita basis, it is a national fund-raising record. The people of Arkansas should be very proud of what they did. They obviously reached deep into their pockets and, for a poor state, that’s just phenomenal. Then in the general election, we raised, approximately, another \$2 million. In total we raised \$4.5 or \$4.6 million for the whole effort—from the state of Arkansas. The total number of contributors from this state in the primary—there were 14,015 contributors. That represented an average contribution of \$180.03 per person. The strategy early on, when I first sat and talked with the Governor about how much money he would need from Arkansas—at least, during the primary process—his goal was to raise \$1.5

million out of Arkansas. What we did was, he sat down one day and he gave me a list of people who were his financial contributors and very best friends for a number of years. He said, "These are the people who I think would be helpful early on and will agree to raise money for us." There was at least one person from every single county. There was a list of over a hundred people that he asked me to call to see if they would agree to try to raise up to \$10,000. That's really how we got the start. We just sat down and called people and said, "We are going to form this exploratory committee and we need some early dollars. Would you be helpful?" Then we went down on a county by county basis and just assigned an arbitrary goal of what we hoped to raise out of each county. I think almost every single county surpassed their goal. It was phenomenal what those people did. It was a real testament to how they feel about the Governor.

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

MM: One, I think that the governor and Eli and the people that were brought on early did a phenomenal job of selecting very talented people that were extremely hardworking. I think there was a unity that developed in the campaign as a result of us getting started so late—there being so much to be done in such a little amount of time. There wasn't a lot of room for infighting because everyone was focused on the very next week. When we started October 3—no resources, no political structure anywhere in the country. What we essentially had to do was start building a team, so everyone had their defined area of responsibility. There were twenty-four hours of work to be done every single day. I think it was in

large measure due to the fact that there was so much to be done and a new goal every week. When it came around to the very first primary, when we looked up and we were in Iowa and New Hampshire, it was essentially we're going to need more resources, next week. "Finance, we need more resources next week to compete in this primary. Political guys, we're going to need more people to endorse us in this area and they're going to need a stronger organization next week." I think everybody was focused on a common goal. I don't think anybody looked up and said, "We have this thing won." We always realized from day to day that there was another fight the next week—that there wasn't any room for that. There had to be a lot of unity and cohesiveness. I think that the mission alone is what made it successful. We knew that there was a huge job to be done in such a short amount of time.

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

MM: It was very decentralized, in my opinion, because I can remember going into what they deemed the senior staff meetings, and I didn't consider myself a senior staffer, but I was amazed at how open and receptive—what I felt the upper level of campaign management was—to ideas from people such as myself who had never been involved in a presidential campaign before. I think that's in large part because that's how the governor manages. He is open to a lot of different ideas and suggestions. He encourages diversity of opinion. I don't think you could have ever drawn—and I remember early on some student came down from Fayetteville that said, "I'm doing this report, and part of my report I have to

develop a hierarchical chart of how this campaign is structured.” I said, “I couldn’t give you one if I wanted to. There really isn’t.” It was so decentralized that I simply had control of my department. I would deal with my department, and no one encroached upon that. They wanted to see what the results were. It was a very loose-knit organization. It’s almost a contradiction of terms. It was also a very unified group in that we all got along very well and we all understood what the mission was.

DB: That’s a good description. When were you certain that he would get the presidential nomination?

MM: That’s a tough one. I guess I wasn’t completely convinced until after the New York primary. To be real honest with you, I never even focused on it. One of the reporters in New York cornered me one night and said, “When did you realize that this guy would be the nominee?” I told him, “I’d never really thought about it until you just asked the question.” That’s when it really hit me. As I told you earlier, people were so focused on what they were doing, and there was always another battle or another political problem. A lot of folks lost sight of the fact that four weeks before the convention we were third in the polls and \$4 million in debt. I don’t think anybody ever just looked up and said, “It’s in the bag.”

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

MM: New Hampshire, the draft—and he’s the one who salvaged it. People saw the sincerity and the conviction of that letter. Ted Koppel read the letter and did a great job of that. I think the governor did a phenomenal job of being able to explain himself. By far, that had to be the low point. It was a low point for me

because I thought that was so severe. But also, it was the only time in the campaign that I saw people who weren't lifelong friends of the governor and who were strictly there because they enjoyed politics or enjoyed playing the game that really felt like it was over. I mean, I know that there were people that convened their staffs and said, "You might want to start looking for some other things." That was probably the thing that hit me the hardest. I realized at that time when we should all be fighting, people that I thought knew a lot more about the process than I did were saying, "I'm not sure that he's going to survive this." That's what was so difficult for me. I learned a very valuable lesson out of it. I clearly learned that it's never over until the candidate himself says it's over. And that you can survive anything if you're honest with people and well intentioned. I think the rest of the country learned a lot from that.

DB: It's often said that the best polls are the contributions. The way you can really tell how a candidate is doing is whether the money is coming in or not coming in. Was this as true of Arkansas people? Did you see ebbs and flows in that?

MM: I'm glad you asked that question because this is true. Probably some reporter thinks he's making it up. I can sit and show you a list. I've analyzed all these numbers and statistics until I can't read them any more. It's amazing to me that in the most critical times in this campaign, the Arkansas people responded most favorably. You can go back to December 16, nine days before Christmas on a Monday night, when the people of Arkansas gave \$916,000. If you go back and look and see where we were on December 16, we had 5 percent name recognition. We hadn't raised any money anywhere. We had \$200,000 in the bank. I can

remember how touched I was. That's when I first realized that the people here at home believe in this man so strongly. They are so committed to him that they will do anything in the world. That was huge in itself that they contributed that much money that early on in tough political times, but when I really realized that the people of Arkansas were behind him was when we first dealt with the Gennifer Flowers issue. We had been slugged in the stomach and wind knocked out of us. You'll remember that we had taken most of the large money out of here and we put together 425 house parties all across the state and told people, "Ask for whatever you want. If you feel comfortable, ask for \$50. If it's \$5, ask for \$5." In the very worst of political times when there was no more money, I mean the country dried up. You can ask any fund-raiser anywhere. They said to Rahm Emanuel, "There's no money out there. Nobody will give us money." The people of Arkansas that night gave close to \$300,000 again. You can go through and look. You look after the draft letter surfaced, we did a couple of other events. We did some regional fund-raisers with the Governor and Hillary. I remember driving to some of those events and flying to some of those events. When the political pundits were saying, "There's a death watch on the campaign. It's over." We would consistently go to event after event after event where there would be \$20,000, \$25,000, \$30,000 that these people were giving. The people here at home believed in him all along. I truly think that they sent a message to the rest of the country because other fund-raisers were able to say, "The campaign is not over. Right here in his own backyard—that's where they know him best and they gave \$50,000. That's after they've already given a million." There were huge

national stories where people were saying—I can remember having those conversations with reporters in New York, when I flew up there to help them on an event. A guy grabbed me and said, “What are you guys doing here? Don’t you realize this is over?” I think that the scenario you presented is true. That on a historical basis—that nationwide you can tell how well you’re doing politically by how well the dollars are being raised. I think the inverse was true here at home. In the toughest of political times is when these people gave. That’s the amazing thing. It made a huge difference. Essentially, we were able to give him the resources to go out and present the real Bill Clinton to the public. I think that is why every time he goes to one of these Arkansas fund-raisers he just pours his heart out to these people. He says, and he believes with every ounce of his soul, that “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here.” It’s true. One thing—whether it’s ever recorded or not recorded, it’s something I have to say. Sure, the average contribution on there is \$180. There are a ton of \$1,000 contributions, there are a number of \$500 contributions, but people would be amazed at the number of \$5 and \$10 and \$25 contributions. I can tell you that I have literally sat here and opened the mail—with tears running down my face—from people that didn’t have any business giving any money to this campaign. They said, “I’m on Social Security and I’m having a tough time making ends meet, but I want you to have this \$5.” It could be change, or a wadded up \$5 bill that you could tell had been in the end of a shoe for months, or whatever. I really think that that’s what it was all about. I think that when those people started giving, then he was getting through to them and they believed in what he has always said, that this thing is so

much larger than yourself and so much larger than he and Hillary are. That's probably the thing that touched me the most out of all of it.

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

MM: It's so obvious. I think that the night that he gave the acceptance speech. It was the first time I realized that it had paid off, that we'd been successful in what we were trying to do. All of our work was successful. That's the obvious answer. It's funny. I said this the other night. I still know the first twenty words that he said that night. It will always be indelibly imprinted on my mind. It was like a chisel going into my brain what this guy was saying. How big this actually was. I truly believe this and maybe history is going to prove me wrong, but that his presidency can be the greatest presidency of all time because this is the time when this country needs a great president. When he says that we are at the crossroads, that's not just political rhetoric. We truly are at the crossroads, economically, politically, and every other aspect. I want to go back and think of the primary process, what was the highlight for me. I guess it's really tough, but I would probably have to go back to that December 16 event. I had never raised a dime before that. That was my first political fund-raiser. I didn't know if three people were going to show up or three thousand. I knew that I had been told and had read enough to know that the money was a very critical piece early on. If you didn't have the resources, you wouldn't survive. I think that proved to be true as you saw people drop out. As Harkin dropped out he said, "I don't have the money to continue." As Kerrey dropped out he said, "I don't have the money to compete." Tsongas—when he got out in New York he said, "I don't have the

money to compete.” Clearly, money doesn’t elect a president, but it’s the fuel for the engine and it plays a huge role in it. This country would not know who Bill Clinton was had he not had the resources to buy the media time and to spend money on bumper stickers and pamphlets and to present his agenda for America. The New Covenant speech was widely disseminated, and the whole thing. I guess that would have been the high point for me during the primary process.

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

MM: It’s really simple. It’s a larger message that I want the country to know. It’s not really just for the campaign. I spoke to this fifth grade class out at the 4-H center of lesser-privileged kids. I told them that although they were from disadvantaged backgrounds, “This is a lesson that you should never forget your whole life long. You can start from all most nowhere and have almost nothing and have all the odds against you. You can be anything in the world you want to be, including president of the United States. Here was a man who was born in a very small town in rural Arkansas, whose father was killed before he was born.” I don’t have to go on and on with all the adversity that he faced. I took it all the way up and said, “It’s even a man that, ten years ago, was unemployed. He lost his first political job. Ten years later he’s the president of the United States. I think that what it teaches you that if you work hard enough and you believe in yourself, you can be anything in the world that you want to be. I think it’s a lesson that America learned. That if you get knocked down, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and go right back after it because, if you really and truly believe in what you’re doing, you’ll be successful.” I think that’s the larger issue. If there’s

anything that I'd want them to know about this campaign it's you don't have to be fifty years old and have worked in five political campaigns to make a difference. That if you work hard and are bright enough and you believe in your candidate, that you can get involved and make a difference. I think that you'll see in four years on the Republican and Democratic side, young twenty-two-, twenty-three-, thirty-year-old people saying, "This is my country too and I want to be a part of it. I want to make a difference." I think that's part of what I want them to remember. That there were a lot of young people in this campaign that gave up an awful lot, whose talents were utilized. They weren't just paid lip service. They had substantive roles in this campaign. The second thing that I want them to know is the teamwork aspect of it was by far the thing that made us successful. I think that if we hadn't played together as a team and worked together as a team, there is absolutely no way that we would have ever survived this thing. Bill Clinton couldn't have done it without a campaign. The campaign couldn't have done without Bill Clinton. The synergy that existed throughout the campaign in totality and with the candidate in totality was just phenomenal. I think those are some of the lessons that are going to be learned. There is more than one way to win an election. That's a long answer to a short question. That's really what I hope history will remember.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]