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## **Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)**

### **1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews**

Interview with John T. Monahan

Campaign Positions: Co-Field Director; Coordinated  
Campaign Funding Coordinator

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 5, 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. John T. Monahan 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?

John Monahan: I'm not sure what my title is. I've never really had one since I've been here. What I did during the general was I coordinated all the budgeting and funding for the coordinated campaigns, making sure that the right types of money got into the right states to do the field programs.

DB: What were you doing before that?

JM: Craig Smith and I were co-field directors during the primaries, and before that I volunteered. I volunteered going back to the announcement speech. Did a couple of background memos for Frank Greer and James Carville when they were just putting it together.

DB: And before all this started?

JM: With David Pryor. That's real life before this. So I started doing memos during last fall for the Georgetown speeches and for the announcement. Then they needed somebody to do some targeting for the early primaries. I worked with the Greer people on media buying and worked with Wilhelm and Bill Morton, who was the field director at the time, and did a bunch of targeting stuff. And I came down here for three days with a small bag and stayed here through the whole primaries.

DB: Then did you go back to D.C., or had you done all your work here?

JM: I went to D.C. I was here through May, and then once it became clear we were the nominee, I went—I was the first Clinton person to go to the DNC, so I was the day-to-day person in the political department at the DNC in May and June during the

transition when we took it over. Then I did the coordinated campaign money stuff all through the general. It's fun. This is an amazing experience.

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?

JM: That's a good question. I think in some ways the thing that's most striking is the openness to ideas that the structure, or lack of structure, provides. I have to admit when I first came down to the campaign in February, I thought, "This is a really loose deal." I walked in and within an hour I just strolled into the campaign manager's office, sat down, hung out with him for a while. People just said, "Oh, we need to do direct mail. You do it. Here's the vendor." I thought, "There's no way you could win this way," but I was actually entirely wrong because they gave people responsibility and let them run. And there are risks with that, clearly, but it puts faith in people doing the job right. And I think that that translated on an operational level to letting us do some creative things in the areas that I work. I think you can also see it in the message part of the campaign. Obviously, the message was a product of a lot of different ideas, and not the ideas of a handful of people really close to Clinton. I have to admit at first I thought that it was like the Achilles' heel of the campaign, but it turned out to be the real strength.

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

JM: Well, I contrast this from '84, which was the last time I worked for, like, a year and a half on the presidential campaign. The Mondale campaign was highly structured, and was really effective. In a sense, the structure in the organization let us go

through the tough parts of that campaign, like when Gary Hart came out of nowhere. It was the organization that kept the political leaders in line and let us survive Super Tuesday and move on. There wasn't that type of incredible hierarchy like you had in '84. In '84 I was a field organizer. I could only talk to the person who worked above me, and if I talked to anybody else, I'd be fired. It was that strict. And here you talked to everybody. It was very open. I think this is better—well, clearly the result was better. But I think also you don't need to have this structured like an army because it's really not an army, it's more like a team. It's more like a basketball team than like an army because you really need five people who are playing well individually, as well as a group. And you don't necessarily need to have a captain calling all the plays every minute of every game. I mean, clearly Clinton is the guy who set the tone for the whole campaign—there's no question about that. But I think that there were opportunities for people to take responsibility and hopefully do well, and I'm not sure I did, but I know a lot of other people did. I think it's a lesson, except—it's funny, because you think most people would like to be treated like that themselves, but when you give them a chance to do an organization, they rarely set up systems that will permit them to do that.

DB: Do you think it was designed that way or do you think it just happened?

JM: I'm sure it wasn't designed, or at least I never saw anything that suggested it was designed, but maybe it was. Creating an organizational chart would have been a virtually impossible task. I mean, even if you said, "We're not going to try to restructure things, we're just going to try to graphically describe how the thing works day to day," I don't think you can do that. I was in one meeting once where

they showed a chart and they collected it at the end of the meeting, but it wasn't really helpful because I knew where I was supposed to fit in on this chart, but I knew that as a practical matter, that wasn't how it worked. So it was interesting.

DB: How many deputy campaign directors do you think we had?

JM: There seem to have been five, ten, fifteen. I can't—I mean, I knew a number of them well, but I'm not sure how it all worked. But that's actually a smart idea—you give people a spirit in which to learn, and it was great. I never had a title, so I don't know. It must have been better to have one, I suppose. On the other hand, lacking one you could kind of do whatever needed to be done. The only thing I thought, actually—I was looking at putting a résumé together. It gets more complicated, but that's a small problem. This is all us in this whole—it's an amazing effort of people who weren't real structured and there wasn't a pecking order in the normal sense of campaigns where having a chart and where you fit on that chart meant everything. Are other people saying that?

DB: Yes. Now there are also some people who found it extremely frustrating to get a decision, because you had to go to so many different places and so many different people.

JM: It was time-consuming, and in a funny way there were times at which it was a real problem. And getting sign-off—ultimately, it wasn't clear who had the sign-off. So if things really had to get done, at least in the areas where I worked, we just did things if there wasn't time to get everybody to sign off, but that's not necessarily a great way. I think there are substantial risks there to the campaign and the candidate.

DB: We may have just gotten lucky sometimes?

JM: I'm confident we got lucky from time to time, but, you know, it makes you wonder. It is time-consuming to go around and get everyone to sign off, but most of the people that I've worked with are really smart people who, when you went and talked to them, talking to them was helpful in making what you're doing better. Obviously the internal politics of that are very complicated.

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

JM: Well, there are two things. One was the night just before Clinton went on *Nightline* on the draft. I'd only been here for about two weeks, and it wasn't all clear to me that we were going to survive, but I went out to dinner with another staff person and we said, "Well, you know, it was great." But that was great. There were so many ups and downs in the primaries, it's hard to even think. There were a lot of low points. When we lost Connecticut, that was horrible. And I knew it was going to happen, but everyone was so fixated on what had happened the week before in Illinois and Michigan, and were so excited about winning. But in field, you know, you talk to every state, no matter whether it's on the radar screen or not, and I just knew from talking that we were in trouble. We didn't have the resources to do it right and that people weren't focusing on what we had to do, and that was horrible. And being at the DNC at first wasn't the greatest, but it got better. It was kind of lonely being the only Clinton person there.

DB: How long were you the only Clinton person there?

JM: Well, until the beginning of June. I mean, it was several weeks I was there and was the primary person. It was a strange transition. I missed being part of the team here, but it got much better at the end.

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

JM: Oh, Tuesday night was pretty amazing. The last time I did this, we barely won thirteen electoral votes and no states got lit up—and then to see us win the thing. That, and then I think going back to the—oh, the convention was incredible, and to be on the floor when he was speaking. But then in the primaries—I guess the Illinois and Michigan primaries—it was to the wire. That was when we could win the nomination.

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

JM: When we won both of those states. At the end, it was very field intense. We were flying him back and forth from Illinois to Michigan. I really felt like we were on the line and we won it, and the night we won the Illinois primary was such a clear signal of declaring that we'd won the nomination. As a practical matter, we didn't win it until we won New York, obviously, and we had to win Pennsylvania. And New York was intense, but at that point it wasn't in my mind that Tsongas or Brown was going to get the nomination. Maybe there was a chance that somebody else would come in, but it was hard for me to imagine Jerry Brown becoming the nominee. Even at the time, even though he'd beaten us in a couple of places, it was hard to imagine he would get the nomination. But I thought then we had turned it around and we were on a roll.

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

JM: Of course, I believed all along that we could do this, but I really didn't believe that it was a done deal until about three or four weeks ago when I realized that they didn't have any stuff and that really they weren't getting through and that we were. And

that unless something dramatic happened, which almost did last week, they weren't going to be able to break through. Then I stopped saying it so loud, because it's bad luck. I've been convinced since the beginning this is the right thing to do. George Bush is a very bad person, and we needed to win. And I think Bill Clinton really is a remarkable guy. I thought so at the beginning, but this campaign—he has never let us down. He's really an extraordinary figure. And when you think about that, at least I think he's the first president in my lifetime certainly who has the potential to be another Franklin Roosevelt. Somebody who could change the government's role in society. He's that type of person. It's amazing the stuff that he's gone through and survived. But I knew that the odds were long at the beginning. I wasn't sure that we could do this. I knew it was the right thing to do, but I really didn't think it was a done deal until about three or four weeks ago.

DB: Going back to the beginning when you were co-field director, any particular innovations that you're proud of or that you think . . . ?

JM: Well, I don't take credit for this, because I wasn't the one that dreamed up any of this stuff, but I feel like—one, the free media emphasis of our field program, and it was hardly by design. It was necessity, because the campaign had made a conscious decision to put as much of its resources as possible into paid media and to scheduling in advance, which I agree with, actually. Given our type of financing, we had to focus on using field as a way to create free media to drive home the message—using local surrogates, using our staff, using anything we can to take advantage of that second and third tier of media that's out there. And I feel like that was really an innovation. The other thing is we did some delegate targeting at the

beginning when we didn't know if it was going to be a delegate game or if it was going to be a state-by-state win game. I think we were thinking about how you can max target our resources—the way to maximize our accumulation of delegates. In the end, it was winning those states was the strategy. That turned out to be necessary because we didn't have a principal challenger, really in the end. Tsongas fell away. Brown. We just showed that we could win and he couldn't. I feel good about that. I'm not sure in the end it ended up being the decisive factor, but I feel good about that.

DB: In the general, after you target, how do you deal with state directors that are in states that are clearly not playing?

JM: We dealt with the DNC with them in all the states, because the DNC put money into all the states.

DB: Are they told the truth?

JM: Yes. The state director is. They're told the truth because there are several things they can do. One is to the extent that they can get people on TV, talking about our message in the state. It helps all the candidates there. That's a benefit. Bill Clinton's got to work with the senator, like the senator from Utah, who hopefully would be a Democrat. We have to be fair players in those places. We had relatively few of those. Even in the states that we had to write off, we were competitive.

DB: We still had a presence?

JM That energized people. In the states that were totally out, it was hard. But there were so many states this time where you could make an argument to somebody, "If you can work really hard and draw Bush or Quayle or a surrogate—any type of

resources into the state—it's a victory for the whole campaign.” Originally in Florida we never thought we'd be as competitive as we turned out to be. Just send somebody down there and had them run and do free media stuff—anything that would create a sense in the Bush/Quayle campaign that they had to ideally spend candidate time or media money because, as you know, in the general it really is quite competitive. We have equal resources to a great extent, especially between candidate-specific media and candidate time. To the extent that we can do anything that draws them into their base, which we did a lot of, that's less time in Ohio and Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina and places where we ended up turning up to be the battlegrounds of the whole campaign. California turned out. Anytime George Bush spent in a “Top End” state was a victory for us. That was fewer TV ads in the “Battleground” states. You motivate people with that too.

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

JM: Well, that's interesting. From the standpoint of the campaign, I like to think that this was different—coming back to the things we talked about before in terms of the management structure being different and somewhat more open and loose. Also, the extent to which the campaign kept fighting back—it wasn't just the candidate, people who worked for him believed. And all of this doesn't mean anything if Clinton doesn't turn out to be a good president. That's why I got involved in this. The truth is that some people will hopefully have better lives as a result of all of this. I've been pretty lucky in my life, but hopefully some kids are going to have

opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise. If that's what this is all about, then it's great. He has a chance to be huge. This could be a really incredible presidency.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]