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

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

Interview with Bruce N. Reed  
Campaign Position: Policy Director  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
November 18, 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. Bruce N. Reed 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 before immediately you joined the campaign?

Bruce Reed: Well, I was at the DLC for about two years. I came on in January of 1990, shortly before Clinton took over as chairman, with the understanding that Clinton was going to become chairman; that was a prerequisite for my joining. I had been with Al Gore for four and one-half years before that as his speechwriter.

DB: So this is truly your dream ticket?

BR: This is my dream ticket. Seven years in the making.

DB: If you would briefly, please, outline your responsibilities. First, during the primary, then during the general election.

BR: Well, I was the policy director for a candidate who really didn't need one. He was his own best policy director. And my job in the primaries was more to funnel good ideas to him and to keep track of all of his smart friends—make sure their ideas got to him, and make sure that bad ideas didn't get in the way of good ideas that we had been working on for the two years leading up to the campaign.

DB: You were kind of the defender of the faith, in some ways, weren't you?

BR: That is right. The morning of the announcement, after we had stayed up all night, Frank, Stan, the governor and I, finishing his speech—he asked me if it had stayed true to the faith, and I told him I thought it had, and it was very good. He talked to From and said that I had been there to keep him politically correct.

DB: Wasn't the contrary pressure more acute in the primaries, when you were

competing against the more traditional Democratic candidates?

BR: Right, all the pressures in the primaries were to abandon all the things we had been fighting for. There were two. On the one, we had to convince the other Democrats that they really didn't have to be afraid of what we were pushing—that the kinds of new ideas that the Clintons had come up with, and the DLC was working on, didn't have horns and were just different ways of achieving the same ends. And, at the same time, to keep all of the traditional pressures from rounding the edges off of what we were trying to do.

DB: When it came to the platform, did that have to be fought over again, or was it pretty clear by then that Clinton was going to be the nominee?

BR: I have always felt that the reason our strange coalition held together and the reason that even the people within the staff could get along, was that everybody knew who was in charge; that it was Bill Clinton's agenda, that these were his ideas, and that there was no sense in trying to put a label on them if he was not going to. And we fought more over means than we did over whether or not we were going to do them. That was the only way that people who would otherwise have argued themselves to death could get along. That sort of culminated at the platform when, by some miracle, Al From and Rochelle Horiwitz became friends, and everybody sort of swallowed their differences to get behind the nominee.

DB: Do you think the twelve lean years made people more willing to grow up?

BR: I think everybody had this strong desire to win, and they knew that this was our best chance in a long time. There were a lot of people from across the ideological spectrum that looked at Bill Clinton and saw things that they liked. I think that

that was the ultimate proof that we weren't just pushing a conservative agenda, when liberals were fighting to claim him. An interesting part of this story is that Clinton had helped the DLC to evolve from being a narrow, moderate organization, which had mostly a primarily political end, into a real cause that rose above traditional ideological boundaries. He always reminded us, for one thing, that we weren't just out to save the Democratic Party, we were out to save the country, and that we couldn't win that battle by fighting the last war.

A typical thing that we did, that his presence made happen, was before Clinton was chairman, the DLC published a magazine called *The Mainstream Democrat*. All the emphasis was on the mainstream this or mainstream that, which had the effect of simply driving the people who weren't moderates up the wall because they thought that mainstream was a synonym for conservative, not middle American. After a few months of Clinton's leadership, we decided to change the name of the magazine to *The New Democrat*, which ended up to be the real label under which the whole campaign was waged. It was a more accurate label, for one thing, and it better symbolized what we were trying to do, which was to change the party, to move it. We said over and over again that we weren't trying to move the party to the right, we were trying to move it forward. And Bill Clinton really meant it. He was able to pull together a lot of competing interests who would otherwise have fought ideological battles.

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?

BR: It certainly didn't look like that at the start. Bill Clinton proved himself in so

many ways. Back before he entered the race, the big questions were whether he could put together an organization or whether he could raise any money. There were plenty of skeptics, but Rahm Emanuel came along and did a magnificent job at raising money. As it turned out, the governor was able to attract the best talent at every position, and it didn't really matter what kind of organization we had—proof that bureaucracy and hierarchies didn't matter, because David did a great job of pulling us together early on and winning an organizational battle in Florida and proving we could do it. And we were winning the money battle. But we never really tried to organize ourselves in traditional ways.

DB: Have you ever seen an organization chart?

BR: No, none. There was never a reason to develop one, because it was clear that Clinton was going to listen to the best advice he got, whether it came from his campaign manager or elsewhere.

DB: Someone described this to me as a meritocracy.

BR: Well, that is a highfalutin way of describing it. I don't think anyone else could have gotten elected president the way he did. Nobody is better at synthesizing diverse agendas and opinions. I always felt that reporters would say, "What exactly do you guys do?" because I was a policy director for a guy who didn't need a policy director. I wrote vote speeches for a guy who didn't need them. George was a communications director for a guy who could communicate better than anyone.

DB: How about a strategist?

BR: James was a chief strategist for a guy who clearly had developed his own strategy

long ago. And I guess, what I concluded was that we had a campaign of people who were very good at what they were doing. But if something happened, and if a neutron bomb had fallen on Little Rock and all of us had been killed, the candidate up in the plane would have kept on going and still won.

DB: What for you, Bruce, was the real low point?

BR: Well, the most vivid memory I had, and the thing I kept shaking my head over after we had, in fact, won, was a memory of a bunch of us, who got it together in the second headquarters, gathered around the table, reading and rereading the Holmes letter and wondering how on earth we were going to survive this, even though—I mean, we read it and read it and read it, and it showed why the guy had the talents to become president. But we never thought the people would see that. We just assumed that it was going to be another traditional campaign year where the Republicans would use that to destroy us. And so that was the worst. And I am sure it must have been for the candidate and the road show, but then he went on *Nightline* and turned things around. But it was like that so many times. Every time we thought we ought to be dead, we were dead; Bill Clinton would wake up the next morning and say, "No, we're not." He just never contemplated the prospect of failure, never, never gave up, never let anyone around him give up. And I can remember from January to March, when I was living in Little Rock, Bonnie would tell me that she couldn't go to parties in Washington. She couldn't set foot on the streets. She was so tired of defending what we were up to. The entire city—the entire political staff totally had given up on the guy, and, mercifully, we were down here away from it all, not knowing that we were

supposed to throw in the towel. Bill Clinton was up in New Hampshire where he wasn't prepared—and the people weren't prepared—to throw in the towel either.

DB: Do you have a personal high point that you remember?

BR: Let's see, I guess the moment that I will never ever forget is the point about three or four days into the bus trip, when we were in Illinois and everything had been going very well and we were overwhelmed by the crowds and struck by the response. And then we pulled into Sandoval, Illinois, not expecting to stop, but there were so many people gathered in the street and the town had just rolled out the red carpet—and there were so many people on the street, we just couldn't go through. They just wouldn't let us pass. To this day, I don't think that advance work had anything to do with it. I don't think it was planned. We stopped, we got out, it was just at dusk. They had the microphone waiting on a flatbed pickup. Everybody in the town had American flags they were waving and they were playing Lee Greenwood over the loudspeaker. Parents were holding their little kids up over their heads. And I never have been so happy to be an American. Then we got back into the buses, and still, I think, that everybody was stunned. Clinton got up there in Sandoval and said, "To the day I die, I will never forget this moment. I'll be able to tell my grandchildren that Al Gore and I were here in Sandoval," and I'm sure he will. And we got back into the buses and we were on our way to Vandalia and we passed a combine with a big Clinton-Gore sign. Then we passed kids lighting our way with sparklers. It was just such an American scene, the sort of thing that felt like, finally, America was identifying with us in the way that, you know, we thought it should and we knew it might, but

we just never expected that it would in that way. And then the bus trip continued to Vandalia, where 11,000 people gathered in a town of 6,000 to hear Clinton and Gore speak in front of the statehouse where Abraham Lincoln had served as legislator. And Clinton got up there and said, "Abraham Lincoln would roll over in his grave if he saw what had happened to the Republican Party." The crowd went nuts. A little girl got up and sang the national anthem. It was like a dream, so I think that was the most memorable.

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

BR: Well, I remember that the first time that I was convinced that we would win was after the first Georgetown speech. It seemed like that he would be very, very difficult to stop. Then everyone assumed he was going to win, and we were just asking ourselves, "What could possibly go wrong?" His face was on the cover of *Time Magazine*, and then it all crashed. The next time we were congratulating them and declaring victory was after Tsongas had struck out, just before the Connecticut primary. But I remember thinking that we were just not ready to be the nominee yet, and that this was just coming too soon, and that it was a bad thing. I had no idea that we were going to lose Connecticut, but it just didn't feel like it had happened yet. So I guess it was one of those things which had never sunk in. So as it became apparent that we were going to win, we kind of ground it out. But we were all used to the rug being pulled out from under us, always taking things one week at a time. I don't think any of us let ourselves believe anything positive. I think the moment when I realized that he was going to win the election was when we were standing in the backyard of the mansion at the



announcement of Gore, when he and the two families came out on the steps.

DB: Had you been advocating Gore?

BR: Well, about three months before, as soon as it was obvious that we were going to win, I started telling friends that Gore was the perfect choice because he balanced Clinton on the environment and on so many issues—national security. I also knew he was unassailable. He struck me as the perfect choice. Of course, nobody believed me because I used to work for him. Also, I thought, “How could they possibly overcome the fact that they are both from nearly identical regions and backgrounds?” But I kept my fingers crossed and I cooperated with the vetting. I was very excited when I found out about the Gore choice the night before, and I never had so much fun staying up all night, writing things for them to say about each other.

DB: How incestuous. You must have just been thrilled at the way they took to each other so.

BR: Oh, it was great. Because I watched Al Gore for so long and had known what a fundamentally good guy he was. And I knew how it had been hard for others in the House and Senate to truly be friends with him, because there was so much ambition floating around in that atmosphere, everybody eyed everybody with suspicion. Finally, Bill Clinton came along, competent enough and comfortable enough in himself to not feel threatened—and Gore didn't feel threatened either. The big question that people who were looking into the decision beforehand asked, was whether the two of them would get along and whether Gore, who has such a strong personality, could fit into the role of vice presidency. I knew that he

would be a perfect gentleman—that he would play the role perfectly and that he would be strong—but still respectful of the position, because I had seen him be that way. And I had been disappointed for him in 1988 when he had gone down the wire for that same post because I thought that he'd be very good at it.

DB: One more question. What would you really like the future to know about this campaign?

BR: Well, the story of my child is a funny story in and of itself—quite apart from what this administration will bring for him or her. Bonnie and I didn't see much of each other during the campaign. She was wonderful to put up with everything. I broke every promise to come home, and I kept telling her it wasn't going to get worse and it kept getting worse. Then I ended up spending the last four months on the road, on the plane, and only seeing her every couple weekends, if that, but she came out on one trip to travel to Seattle with us. It was great to see her and we had a terrific time. We actually had one night where we didn't have events until midnight, so I got to have dinner with her. Then we stayed at the Red Lion near the airport, which, instead of carpet in the lobby, it had astroturf and all kinds of video games all over the place. It was generally regarded as one of the worst places we'd stayed. Then she came and told me about a month and a half later that she was pregnant. She got to come on a bus trip and she told me in Cleveland. The day after the election the governor was giving me a hard time about where I found time to have so much fun on the campaign. And Gore was teasing me about the Red Lion in Seattle and what a romantic place it was. He said he had stayed there himself. But I guess that all of those times when I heard,

and when I sometimes repeated in speeches, Bill Clinton's reason for running—which was that he didn't want his child to be part of the first generation of Americans to do worse than their parents. It sounded so forceful when it came out of his mouth and so strange when I would try to write it myself, because I always felt kind of odd talking about how we were in this campaign, because of our children—when I didn't have any. And when, if I didn't get out of politics, I might never have any. So I guess I'm happy, not only the children of America have a chance to have Bill and Hillary Clinton make their lives better, but, by some miracle, Bonnie and I are going to have a child who can reap the benefits.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]