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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Ricki L. Seidman

Campaign Position: Deputy Communications Director

Little Rock, Arkansas – November 1, 1992

Washington, D.C. – April 27, 1993

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. Ricki L. Seidman 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 is your position with the campaign?

Ricki Seidman: Deputy communications director and I run the “War Room” and coordinate quick response.

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

RS: I was the chief investigator for the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

DB: When you say you run the War Room and you coordinate quick response, can you elaborate on that? What are your daily responsibilities?

RS: Well, I think my main responsibilities are to make sure that we’re up on everything, including what’s happening in the world and what our candidate is doing and what the opposition is doing, and to make sure that we respond appropriately in every instance.

DB: I guess one of the key words is “appropriately,” because, clearly, we don’t respond to everything. So, there has to be some selectivity about what and how and what form the response will take.

RS: I think the most basic thing is that we have a consistent message throughout the campaign. And it’s to shape the response in a way that keeps us hewing most closely to the message: “The economy stupid.” And to do that, we not only respond, but we counter. You’re aware, at least as well as anyone else, of all the hits on the Arkansas Record. And there have been very few pieces of paper that have gone out of here just about the Arkansas Record. It always compares that to what Bush has done nationally to the economy.

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?

RS: What I think has made it effective is that there have been a number of really talented people from the top to the bottom who have walked into this campaign and put aside their personal agendas for one common purpose, to elect Bill Clinton. And I think that Bill Clinton really just filters down through the people who work on the campaign. He represents an ideal to people. And that has made a tremendous difference. Does that make any sense?

DB: You said something in a War Room meeting one night after the debate nights—which were incredible operations. You said, “I have never known so many talented people to work together so cooperatively.”

RS: I think that’s the crux of it. But I think that’s very rare, and I think it’s because of Clinton that that’s happened. I don’t think it’s by accident, and it certainly wasn’t by design. I think that while a lot of what will be written is that people were voting against Bush, what we had here was, to me, a sense of people working not just to win, but for Bill Clinton and what he stands for, which is to change this.

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

RS: Well, the one thing that’s really interesting to me is that—and this is another reason why I think that some of this has worked—and this is supposed to be frank, right?

DB: Absolutely.

RS: Is that people—I can't think, except again with a couple of exceptions—that to a remarkable degree people have done their own jobs and not tried to do other people's jobs. So that, for example, here a lot of the big picture came from James, but he did not participate in so much the day-to-day, certainly not at all in the preparation of the product or in the shaping of it. He set it in motion and he gave a lot of general guidance, but he did not feel like he had to micromanage each piece of paper. People did what they were good at doing and didn't overreach, and that's another really unusual thing.

DB: It's not accidental that that much talent ended up in this one place. Who reached out and acquired that talent?

RS: Well, that's hard for me to know because I wasn't here from the very beginning. My sense is that Eli hired a lot of the original staff and my entry into the campaign was through George and other people in the communications department. Nancy, Gene, and Bob all came in through George. My sense is that Eli hired the original core of people, and I think that speaks incredibly well for him.

DB: Would you describe your vision of the major purpose or purposes of the War Room? You were managing it. What was the end goal?

RS: I think it had several goals. The overarching goal was to be the message core for the campaign. That being the goal, what was most important about the War Room was how we went about achieving it. That was to have a central clearing house for our internal communication and our external communication, to ensure

that we were responding to just about anything and everything that came up during the day in the context of the campaign. The other piece of it that had to do with communication was that you could have someone sitting there doing the response to anything the Republicans said. And if you didn't have the means to move it inside so that everyone would be on the same page and then move it outside so that everyone would know what the response was, the fact of the research didn't really matter at all. That was the beauty of it. It also enabled people, throughout the campaign, to feel really engaged. The example that I use when I talk—which is not very frequently—about the War Room, is the example of the tax ad. The one thing that was really threatening to us was this idea that Clinton was tax and spend, or as they polled it, “too willing to tax.” When the ad came out that had the families with those fictional numbers saying Clinton's tax policies would mean that this family would pay x amount in taxes, that was the first ad that had the potential of a hit. It was the first serious thing that really could have nailed us. So what we did was a really good case study for how the place worked, which was we collected the facts about it and refuted it on a factual basis. Then everyone did their part to make the story that the ad was wrong. We did it through James and George and their general contacts with the press. We did it on the road with the president. We did it in one of our rhetoric/reality pieces on it. We worked really hard to make the next day's stories about the ad reflect that it was inaccurate. We stayed up, which we always did, and waited late at night for the following day's papers for quotes we could use, so we would have

independent validators. Then we made our own ad using the independent validators saying that the ads were false, and put it straight back on the air. We had a free-press strategy and a paid-media strategy. We used the facts to get outside validators supporting our position. That to me was the textbook example of how it worked. There are a lot of different ways in which it operated, in which it functioned as a quick response. The debates were a good example of how we literally turned out paper that was available within five minutes of the end of the debates. On a regular basis, we nipped a lot of fires before they really got started. In a campaign like ours, which was really a battle to win the evening news every night, it was really important to stay in the news cycle. What we were able to do was for any particular issue that came up, we could call on research, on Arkansas Record, on political people—the field people. We put surrogates out saying what had to be said. Everyone had their part. It really worked well. It also worked symbolically, in that way of keeping people in touch. I can think of a number of times when we aired television spots, a couple of which never ran. We would show them in a room with eighty people in it. Not a word ever leaked about what was in them. The difference between the campaign and the administration is mind-boggling, from that perspective.

DB: As people talk about the War Room, they seem to have different views of what it was all about. It acquired a mystique. It became a pep rally. It became the soul or psychological center of the campaign. I just wondered how much of that was by design, and how much of that evolved?

RS: I can give you my view. I don't know what the larger intent was. I think that one of the main things—and I know one of the things James said to me before I came to the campaign—was that you have a lot of really talented people who were stretched out in this big building. You had a lot of fiefdoms—no central communicating function, other than the senior staff meetings, which you know the times you attended were more administrative in terms of orientation. You didn't have a connection. You didn't have an energy in the building. One of the things I remember talking to him about here before I ever went to Little Rock was, "There's no maps on the wall. How can they have a campaign without maps?" I remember when I moved down there, I brought half a dozen wall maps of the United States with me. Part of the strategy was to create energy inside the campaign by creating this place where you can't put seventeen people in a room and not have energy. But a big part of it was to enhance communications so that everyone who was really good at doing their job could get their job done in a larger context. I think that this happened prior to my getting there, but the sense I had was that there was extraordinary sensitivity, whether this was just a vehicle for James to take over the campaign or to build a campaign inside a campaign, which would have been, I think, very destructive. The problem with the campaign was not that you didn't have a lot of very good people working in it. It was that they were focused out in a number of different directions. And information had become a valuable commodity, to the extent it brought power, so people really didn't have a reason to share information, because they thought they would somehow lose their power. That's really common in any organizational

setting. This was a way whereby you could ensure that, yes, you were going to be giving information into a group, at the same time you were guaranteed you were going to get information. That's what made it work. Because there was payback.

DB: That clarifies a lot. When were you certain that Clinton would get the presidential nomination?

RS: The morning after the New Hampshire primary. It was just a gut feeling. I felt if he could come back from the pummeling he got in New Hampshire, he could come back from anything. Personally, I supported him prior to that, but I wasn't involved in the campaign at all. I was involved, of course, in all the Anita Hill stuff. I wasn't that much focused yet on the campaign, but, really, the draft issue, and the way that was treated, and, to some extent, the issue with Gennifer Flowers—my reaction was the reverse of a lot of people. I just wanted to go work for him. I just thought that it was so ridiculous. Those issues were so stupid that it really drew me to him.

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

RS: I think around Labor Day. How can you ever say with certainty? I never felt certain until election night, in that sense, but did I really think we would win, or was I really strongly hoping? Around Labor Day.

DB: Just because traditionally around Labor Day things had taken hold?

RS: Yes, and that the Republicans had their best shot at the convention. They flubbed it so badly, and they were so clearly not interested in going in the right direction, I was really gaining confidence about our own ability.

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

RS: Right now it's hard to think about the low point. From the point at which I started, which was in July, there weren't that many low points. There was sort of a low point or a lull after we announced that 127 taxes. There was a point at which the draft was really worrisome. When that *LA Times* reporter was working on those pieces and it was a question of veracity. That was a pretty bad moment. That, from my perspective, was totally unnecessary for reasons that are unnecessary to discuss now. To me, the lowest personal point during that time, was when Paul Tully died. But that again sort of renewed my faith that we were going to win because you could look and see—it made you focus on the difference that he had made, how much things had changed, and how prepared we were.

DB: Changed from? What was your comparison?

RS: From prior Democratic campaigns.

DB: You had worked in which?

RS: I worked in Dukakis in the general in California. I worked in 1984 in some primaries for Mondale. Then managed a senate race in that cycle.

DB: Had we learned that much more? Were we smarter about what we were doing?

RS: I really think it's the candidate. Sure, every campaign you work on teaches you something. It has to, and if it doesn't that's a real problem. The candidate was the key. This whole idea of quick response. People would say, "Aren't you just doing this because of what you learned from Dukakis?" George was in charge of quick response in the Dukakis campaign. He knew how to change it for Clinton.

I think in terms of the mechanics, we had some really smart people. In terms of having ideas about how to respond broadly and promptly and we worked very hard. Our people did a great job, but the impetus came entirely from the candidate and his style, the sort of exuberance with which he took the campaign with him.

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

RS: The second debate. That was a real high point. Also, you could just see that if there were any justice in the world, here was a man who was so totally engaged in the people, in direct contrast to one guy who was totally out of it, and one guy who was demagoguing everything.

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

RS: I think history will get it right. It's not something I'm really worried about. I think that the thing that's so extraordinary about Bill Clinton is that people believe that what he says comes from his heart. After the inauguration, the most vivid example of that was the joint session address, up to this point. That it's not like people will look back and say, "Well this guy was ambitious and he saw that a path to winning was through the middle, so he positioned himself." The campaign really embodied who he is and what he believes in. I've seen, since the inauguration, him wrestle with issues that were commitments he made during the campaign, that were based on his personal beliefs. That's really what I think the campaign was about. I think that the concern I have about history is that it will be written as, "Bush lost the election." I think, to a certain extent, when you look at

the polls they will say that people were voting against Bush. If we didn't give them something to vote for, we wouldn't have won. I really do think that was what we did.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]