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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Stephanie M. Solien
Campaign Position: National Political Director
Little Rock, Arkansas
November 1, 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. Stephanie M. Solien 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: You began a year ago?

Stephanie Solien: Yes, November 1.

DB: As national political director?

SS: Yes. That's correct.

DB: Since to most people a whole campaign is directing politics, could you elaborate on what it means to be national political director?

SS: Well, my chief responsibility was to work with all the different organizations and interest groups that sort of make up the presidential process. And early on in the primary season of the campaign we worked primarily with traditional Democratic groups and worked to win support, particularly when we had other opponents in the primary, competed against the Tom Harkins and the Bob Kerreys and the Paul Tsongases of the world to win endorsements—to win the backing, grassroots support of labor in particularly, but the environmental community and the women's community. We worked very much with organizations and also political issues that come up in the campaign. For example, a woman's right to choose, abortion. While it hasn't been as prominent in the day-to-day sort of message of the campaign, it has been kind of a very important issue in this election, and it's been an undercurrent. So we work on political issues with political organizations. Early on worked with a number of the elected officials to get their endorsements. We were very active to win the support of members of Congress because so many of them were super delegates to the Democratic convention. So it is really kind of endorsements—building a political

groundswell of support for the candidate. And I think we did a very good job of that. We made some real inroads early on with the labor movement that surprised a lot of people because so many folks in the press and the pundits expected Tom Harkin to get the support of labor, unanimous support, and we worked early on to make inroads with AFSME, American Federation of Teachers, and pulled off some surprising endorsements that frankly started to turn the campaign around in the spring after we had taken a number of hits in the tabloid press. So I think our department early on played a more key role than the political operation played in the general, because for the most part this campaign has been more message kind of anti-politics driven. And we have really tried to avoid the stigma of being supported by interest groups. So while that effort was clearly critical in the primary, the politics, the endorsements, Governor Clinton being seen with a lot of special interest groups was something that we wanted to avoid once we were headed into the convention. Now that's changed a little bit as we're starting the last few weeks to try to pull our traditional base together and get the GOTV efforts underway. We're now reaching out again, but we've not been a campaign that's relied a lot on the traditional democratic political structure.

DB: What were you doing before you came with the campaign?

SS: Well, I have run some campaigns myself. I ran a senate race and a congressional race in the state of Washington. I had run an organization called Women's Campaign Fund for four years. I was their executive director and spent my time working to elect women to public office. So my background has been electoral, but it's also been policy oriented. I worked both on Capitol Hill and ran the State

of Washington office for Governor Booth Gardner when he was chairman of the NGA, and that's how I got to meet Governor Clinton. So my background has really been in government, in politics, trying to work to really bring change and open up the process to more people.

DB: You were working very hard to get endorsements from labor and other groups in the primary, but it was also very clear that you did not ever want it to appear that Clinton was the tool of special interests. How did you walk that line? How did you get the groups to understand that this was a different year?

SS: Well, I'm very proud of a lot of the organizations that were involved in the campaign this year because they knew as well that Bill Clinton could not be perceived as beholden to special interests. So it was a real kind of low-key type of endorsement process. I mean, we definitely advertised it within the political press and within the Washington, D.C. circles, because again, at that time we were competing for credibility, we were competing for momentum. But most of the meetings that took place with Governor Clinton were sort of after the press had filed, and so that was one. But he did meet with groups. He did reach out early on, but we did it in a very low-key sort of less-visible way, and the groups understood that it was not something that they were to advertise. And also, they did not come—to their credit, labor in particular—did not come to the meetings with a real litmus test of issues. There were a few issues of certain unions that were important, but in general they just wanted to make sure that Governor Clinton was committed to a strong economic program that created jobs, that did support the right of labor unions to exist, but there were more sort of bigger,

broader issues because they wanted to win. They knew that we could not afford another Walter Mondale or even another Michael Dukakis. That this was a different campaign, and for them to be helpful, their interests, their lobbying efforts needed to take kind of a back burner sort of position, and they did it and we've been successful. That's not to say that when Bill Clinton is elected president that they aren't all going to be back again. But I think they understand that the Democratic Party and this country's political process has changed in this election. I don't think it'll ever be quite the same, because the issues are much broader. The issues are much more difficult, and I think that labor, the women's community, the environmental community—if they think that they will be part of helping Governor Clinton solve these problems, that their views will be listened to, they'll be brought to the table. Not necessarily expecting, I don't think, to get everything they want. But if they'll be respected, if they'll be players, if they know that they'll be making sacrifices but so will other groups, I think that they will kind of form a coalition with Clinton to really push for change. And I think that's what's going to be important. I don't think that you're going to see them really beating a drum on just one specific issue that they feel is important. I think they'll be willing to buy into the bigger agenda for change, as long as they're treated with respect and as long as their voices are heard. I think that the problems are such that business, labor, the environmental community—they all have to come to the table and they all have to sacrifice and clearly they all hopefully can get something as well in return, but that's the way this country is

going to have to move to solve our problems. And I think they understand that, and those who don't understand it, I think, will not be successful.

DB: Were there any groups that didn't understand that? That just couldn't buy into that?

SS: No. Even NARAL, National Abortion Rights Action League—I mean, that issue has a lot of national support, but it is an issue that is still very controversial and people perceive NARAL as being pro-abortion. And the bottom line, they just want to kind of get the message out that women should have rights to have abortions. And they're much more sophisticated than that. They see this as a much broader issue. They've tried in this campaign to give Governor Clinton some flexibility in terms of Governor Clinton's initial support in Arkansas of parental notice. They were willing to accept that because they understood the electorate as a whole felt that parents do have a role to play, or at least adults have a role to play in helping to advise young people. They also see the important role of sex education, of preventive efforts, you know, to prevent unnecessary pregnancies, and I think that they have really tried to package their message to be one that tries to look at how to avoid unwanted pregnancies. What can the government do? What can individuals do? What can we do as a country to make sure that a woman's right is protected but that she has a lot of options before she has to make that difficult decision? So I think everybody's been fairly sophisticated. Everybody understands that there is more to these problems than just this, their piece of it.

DB: Have you been satisfied with or surprised by the role that the choice issue has played in this campaign? I mean, there was a lot of talk at the beginning of the year that this was going to be the decisive issue. We've heard very little of that recently.

SS: I think that initially I would have thought that it would have played a larger role, too. I think that the Supreme Court decision in the Casey case made it appear as if it would be much more of an underlying issue. And again, there are going to be hundreds of thousands of voters, millions of voters, who will vote on that issue, but I think that the NARAL community, the pro-choice community, like the campaign, was looking at public opinion and seeing that while it was an important issue to people, it was a factor—the economy was really the overriding issue, and that was the issue the democrats could win on. Again, the people like Kate Michelman, the people at Planned Parenthood, their bottom line is to get a president in the White House that is going to be pro-choice and protect a woman's right to choose and work with them, and they wanted to do what made the most sense to get that person elected, and so they have been very active. They've run a very effective grassroots campaign. They've run a very effective media campaign to get the word out about the differences between the candidates, but they haven't really pushed Clinton too much because they understood that it wasn't the focal point for the campaign, that the economy was. But that's not to say that there haven't been some frustrations. I think there's been a sense, even amongst people in the campaign, that this is a difficult issue for Governor Clinton and people appreciate that, and trying to help him be comfortable with it and to try to

understand, again, this is not an issue that is forcing him to be pro-abortion as much as it is to look at the whole issue of reproductive health and where the choice issue fits in. And also the whole issue of individual liberties, and the importance of protecting that individual right to make that decision. And he has seen it in that light. I think he has gotten more comfortable with the issue the more opportunities he's had to sort of talk with people about it. But you know, initially there was concern that he was not getting all the information that might have made it easier. Also he has been representing a state where this issue hasn't played such a key role, and everybody understood that. And it's not a pleasant topic to politicize, and I think he's been uncomfortable with that. A lot of people are uncomfortable with that, but I think all in all the pro-choice groups are very pleased with this campaign and our communications with them, and Governor Clinton's focus on the issue. You know, he has been there, he's been there on a number of occasions and he's made it clear where he stands.

DB: When you talk about these problems and the fact that he came from a state in which this was an extremely difficult issue—that was also true with labor, that was also true with the environment—it surely complicated your job tremendously, especially when you were first going out and trying to persuade groups that this was the Democrat's best choice. How did you deal with that?

SS: Well, a big part of it was that so many of us that worked for Bill Clinton and got to know him really believed this man had a much larger view of the world than just as governor of Arkansas. And we just tried to go out there and really communicate that this is someone who really does understand what needs to

happen to improve the environment, that really is committed to workers and to improving working people's lives. That this is somebody who respects a woman's right to choose. Because we saw that in him and people just didn't know him well enough, and he had been kind of stigmatized as kind of a Conservative Democrat, much more tied to—I mean, even the DLC I think had been misrepresented, because I came onto this campaign and I said this to Al From, really disliking the deal, because I thought it was the southern white boys' club. But then once I got to sort of better understand what their agenda's been about, better understand what they were trying to accomplish, it was clear that they were being very pragmatic and I think really were much more policy-oriented than they were political. They were trying to look at the problems and be pragmatic about solutions. And Democrats have had, in many ways, sort of a narrow view as to how to solve problems. They view big government and putting a lot of money into social programs as a way to solve all of our ills, and it wasn't. I think the most powerful part of this campaign, and it changed me in my focus—I was able to get out there and argue that in addition to being compassionate and wanting the government to be a partner with people, we also did need to demand responsibility from people and we needed everyone to understand that they have to make sacrifices to get this country turned around. And I guess I just believe so much in Bill Clinton, having worked with him with the National Governors and having had some opportunities to be up close and see how he connects with people and to see that he's driven for all the right reasons. And I think that there are just a number of us that put a lot of our credibility on the line because I came

to this campaign with a strong connection to the women's community and the labor community and people saw me as someone that wouldn't go work for a person that was not going to represent the interests of people fairly. So I think we just put a lot of our personal commitment into this campaign and really tried to get the facts out to them about who this man was and that he's not anti-environment, he's not anti-labor. And try to just present the programs, the policies, and get people to be more open-minded because this campaign has forced the Democratic Party to think differently, and it's been exciting to be a part of that. And it hasn't been as hard as you'd think because people did sense that we were missing the mark. It was tough and we clearly had some difficult months there. But I think, frankly, we didn't even get involved in a lot of the minutiae on his record so much as on his electability, and that's what we pushed more than anything. Yes, he's not going to be with you on everything. But he's got a decent record. He also has a much bigger vision for these issues, and the bottom line is we need to win and Bill Clinton is the one messenger that the Democrat Party has that can win. So I think that was a big part of it, too. Being just pragmatic and say look, if you want to win, you need to get on board.

DB: From your perspective, Stephanie, what has made this campaign so effective?

SS: I will tell you what I think has been the most important part of it was setting up that message from the first day that he announced. I mean the New Covenant. I never was really crazy about the title, "New Covenant," but the components of that message, which was, "America can do it but we all need to play a role, we all need to take personal responsibility if we want government to provide

opportunity. "I think that message was sort of the overriding winning strategy for this campaign. A New Democrat. Somebody who's going to look anew at the problems. Who's not going to take the traditional Democratic approach, the traditional Republican approach, but he's going to look at a new approach. So we started out with the right message, and then I think we brought together a group of people that were just very committed to winning and very committed to change, and very committed to what Bill Clinton was about. So I think there's been a good team-like atmosphere here. People very committed to the cause. I have found very few people who are in this for their own personal gain, as much as people who are in this because they were very concerned about their country and they really believed in Bill Clinton. And I will tell you, and I've worked with a lot of politicians and generally have left disillusioned, but while Governor Clinton is a human being and he clearly makes mistakes, he is such a unique individual and his message and his commitment to this race I think just impacted everyone. So that he kind of was the glue that held us together because he so much believed and he had such a vision and so many good ideas that he just kind of helped us all to coalesce together and to really push ahead. I think it was the early on message of responsibility and opportunity and then his ability to kind of pull us all together. That was the first part of the campaign. The second part I give a lot of credit to the quick response operation and to the research operation. I really think that we were able to respond quickly to attacks. We had a research operation, both on the record as well as on the Bush kind of attacks, the information that we were able to turn out instantaneously. We were always on the edge of our seats,

and the Republicans weren't. They were tired. They just really didn't know kind of why they were running. What their vision was. So it very much impacted their campaign.

DB: One of the things that has interested me the most is that the public sees this disciplined rapid response operation, but often inside it feels a lot looser than that.

SS: I do think this was a very exceptional campaign, but I have personally experienced a lot of frustrations with its management style. I mean, I don't think anyone quite understands how it works, but it somehow does. I guess one of the things I notice, that when I need to get anything done, there are probably half a dozen people that I have to work through to get a decision made, particularly as it relates to Governor Clinton. There is a message we need him to speak to, even a phone call to make, or a scheduling recommendation, it goes on forever. But see, the other thing I find about this campaign is, it's gone through various management phases, and each phase brought on various sort of leadership, and with each of the leadership they brought on, it kind of took away some of the responsibilities and input of other stuff, and I feel very much in that category. The War Room brought a whole different tier that affected David's job, that affected my job. While I have learned a lot and this has been rewarding in many ways professionally, it's also been one of the more frustrating professional experiences I've ever had, however, and the reason we've all been able to make it work was because we knew there was an end, we were all very committed to Bill Clinton and the goal that we had set forward. I know a number of us, I think, just decided to try to be as patient and as flexible and to try to figure out—well,

somebody's now doing this and doing this, so where do I fit in? And do the best you could to kind of carve out your niche and just go for it. And I think that because of that, because of people's commitment and wanting to win, everybody has, instead of fighting, been a good sport about it. People have been good sports. The people that have been brought in are very good, and I think we've also been willing to swallow egos to sort of make sure that the overall cause was best served. That's a credit to Clinton, that he was able to bring enough of those kind of people together that it hung together as well as it did.

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

SS: I think really the low point was seeing Governor Clinton go through the early months of the campaign and the attacks by the press. Although I know there are a lot of people who said they didn't think he'd make it through, I always knew he would because Clinton is a survivor and he is a fighter and that was another part of our job in the political department when we were getting hit. We were having to work hard to keep our supporters up, to get them to hang on. A lot of the interest groups, a lot of the elected officials were saying, "Gosh, this guy can't make it. When is the other shoe going to drop? Everybody thought there were all these other rumors that were going to come to fruition, but knowing Clinton—not well, but knowing him as I did and just having watched him go through those difficult periods and fighting back and again—the reason he survived I believe is because he was always in this race for the right reasons. He was always driven because he believed in change, he believed he could make a real important contribution to the country, and that was what was driving him and keeping him

getting up everyday and kind of taking the body blows that he did. But that was clearly a low point. And I guess that was the toughest part of the campaign.

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

SS: I think the high point was the Democratic convention and having him come out on that stage and making the acceptance speech and it had all finally come together and it was just a very rewarding, exciting time. I mean, you just couldn't help but be so proud of him and proud of the campaign for having made it through, when no one thought we could.

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

SS: I suppose in my mind was when we won Pennsylvania. We had been through a lot in Pennsylvania, and we came through Pennsylvania and it was clear we were on our way. We were on our way after that.

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

SS: I will tell you, on October 3 when he made that speech. When he announced. I was in Washington, D.C. and I watched his speech. That whole period of time. Kerrey had gotten in. From the moment he made that speech on October 3, I knew he was the one. I just felt that strongly about his message and what he had to offer. I always really believed that we would succeed, not to say that there weren't moments you didn't question it, but Bill Clinton is a very unique individual and I don't think people appreciated just how special he was. People that didn't know him in those early months, that were questioning whether he could continue, the only reason they were questioning is because they really didn't know kind of what made this guy tick. And so I will tell you from the

moment he announced I said, “I’m going to go work on this campaign,” and I didn’t take this lightly. You don’t give up a year of your life to come all this way, but I truly believed that this was a man who could really help this country move into the next century, and I still believe it today. I’m going to be crying nonstop on Tuesday if it doesn’t.

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

SS: I think the importance of being honest about the issues and the problems that any campaign addresses. I think you’ve got to look fairly and accurately at the country and the issues facing it and just be true to telling people the truth and trying to come up with policies and programs that tell the truth and are real. And I think that was what was George Bush’s failure, because he did not—he wasn’t squaring with the public and he was avoiding addressing the failures of his administration and he was avoiding really laying out a vision and a plan. And I think the public, when push came to shove, saw through that. They’re not stupid. They’ve watched this country over the last decades and our ups and our downs, so I think the Democratic Party has always got to be politically truthful and really put forward policies that make sense to the American people. I think that we need to make the campaign inclusive, and I think this campaign has done a good job with that. Although I do feel that, because of the message sort of dominating part of this campaign, that we need to do a better job of breaking up some of the message and consultant gurus to bring in other points of view. And it’s tough. Now the War Room started to do some of that initially, to try to bring in and

integrate. But I think there was a sense of more exclusivity, and sometimes that's what you have to do, but I do think there are some folks that feel that it was more exclusive than it needed to be. And I don't think that that is reflective of Clinton, because it's not the sense that you have from either him or Hillary. I think it's the nature of the game and some of the personalities. So I guess that the need for us to really have honest, policy-driven agendas, the need to be inclusive, and to make sure that we continue to work towards bringing women, minorities into the political arena because that's the training ground for them. Part of the problem that we even saw in this campaign is there were very few women, there were very few blacks, there are very few people of color that have really had the experience in running campaigns and in doing polling and doing media and doing sort of strategy, so I hope this campaign contributed to building that pool of talent, training the people, so that we can, down the road, make sure that campaigns are more representative. And the inner circle is more reflective of people as a whole.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]