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

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

Interview with Mark E. Steitz

Campaign Position: Communications Director,  
Democratic National Committee

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 31, 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 E. Steitz 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: Mark, what is your position with the campaign?

Mark Steitz: I am the communications director for the DNC. That has been my position sort of all along. As the Clinton/Gore campaign became more and more the entire focus of the DNC, I've concentrated more—first when I came to Little Rock—on setting up the surrogate operation and, particularly, concentrating on the satellite side of it. And then after Paul Tully died, trying to keep the targeting operation running and functioning on a daily basis.

DB: Your name frequently comes up as someone whose ideas and concepts have a lot to do with what's going on now. Why don't you tell me what the communications director does? Clearly a lot of the campaign is communications.

MS: In order to understand what's happened over the past couple of months of what I've done and the communications operations of the DNC and how they've helped in a small way contribute to the Clinton/Gore operation, you have to think about what we were doing over the past four years. The reason Paul Tully and I and others came to work at the DNC when Ron Brown was made chairman was that we were very skeptical about his pledge to turn the DNC into, not a bureaucracy, but a campaign organization. When he ran for chairman, that's what he promised to do. And a lot of us were skeptical, saying that we would just be eaten up with the normal fighting over vice chair that, over state appointment this, over committee that, over rule this, rather than concentrating on the actual building of tools that would help the presidential campaign achieve victory. One thing that a

lot of us saw in 1988 was that the campaign was so wildly incompetent on the most basic of levels, the most basic sense of targeting information, the most basic sense of media information. Eli Segal talks about how, in one of our slide shows, we showed a slide about how the Bush campaign targeted its media resources on the states that it was needed in and the Dukakis campaign didn't. And when he told me that that slide had had a big effect on him that made—in many ways—three years of work worthwhile. That was the idea—to try to pull together the materials ahead of time. Now I started as research director of the DNC and then moved into the communications position. So while my background had been in policy and economics, I started focusing more and more on what Paul Tully was doing, which was how to target resources. After the Persian Gulf War, I had to spend pretty much six months going around the country with a slide show convincing people that we could still win, but only if we raised money early—both items of which I think were to some degree true. I think Bill Clinton would be winning in almost any circumstance, but particularly as the race tightens up, the value of having targeted the resources, and knowing where we need to do what, helps a great deal.

DB: What does it mean when you say targeting the resources?

MS: Well, it means the notion of you start looking at historical vote patterns, which is what Paul Tully and Mark Gersh at NCEC, the National Committee for an Effective Congress, spent a lot of time doing. Arguing long into the night. I knew that I was in trouble when I started finding myself at 2:00 in the morning on a Saturday night, a year and a half before the election, arguing about turnout in

Illinois in the 1990 and 1992 cycles. That was the point where I felt my ankles being pulled and all of a sudden I was completely underwater, but you start by looking at historical voting patterns and polling data on a media-market by media-market basis. I brought these maps to sort of refresh—they won't show up on the tape, but basically you start—and this again, I should emphasize, all of it was Paul Tully's work. Paul Tully pulled me into presidential politics. Paul Tully taught me on the Gary Hart campaign the beginnings of presidential politics. It was his constant obsession in every aspect of the campaign. He used to have a chart called "boxes" about how to design a presidential campaign, which he'd go over with Eli and go over with all the campaign managers. He knew every part of it. And the thing is, he saw every part of it as part of the same endeavor. So one of his lessons—one of the five lessons or six lessons—was view the country as media markets in Electoral College blocks. So instead of seeing just state by state, you'd see a map that looked like this where you'd have the states and then the media markets broken out. Then you'd start wondering how many persuadable voters, ticket-splitting voters, are there in each media market and how important are they in terms of how important is the state strategically.

DB: Is there a mathematical equation then?

MS: Yes. This we worked out shortly. Paul had been doing a series of maps. This was a different approach I got developed probably shortly after Labor Day. But it was to look at—it was again based on Paul and Mark Gersh's work for a year and a half, but you'd look at each state and say, "How big a share of the Electoral College is it?" Actually a better way of looking at it, you'd look at every media

market within a state and say, “How important is it?” TV and radio—primarily you do the maps in terms of TV and then you look at the radio market separately. You’d say, “How important is this market?” Say Nashville. Well, how big a prize is Tennessee? How strategically close is Tennessee? How important is Nashville to Tennessee?” Both in terms of how many persuadable voters are there and how many GOTV voters—voters that might or might not turn out. You do the mathematics and come up with an evaluation that ranks the persuasion value of media markets in the outer weeks. Say week five, this is five weeks out. And then as you move closer in, say at week four, we started including GOTV. And you’d be increasing the share. Now at that point you get the markets shown on these maps, but also ranked numerically. So you’d watch week by week—shifts as some states came into play and then went out of play. There’d be the weekly states meeting and you’d see Kentucky in play, out of play, out of play, but then as the polls started tightening up again, Kentucky came back into play. And so you’d see the persuasion value of those markets that would be immediately used, and this is just sort of a targeting site. Two sets of people used it a great deal. One was Susan Thomases and the scheduling operation. What we then did is we said, “Okay, if that is the map, if that’s the value of going to places, let’s look at where we’ve been.” And you’d do a map of where the team had been and then allocate where we need to go.

DB: Are these computer generated?

MS: Yes. So then Susan would look at these maps and say, “This is from here to the end where we need to go.” And she’d have it as a guideline. Susan has a great

line. I don't know how this is going to be used, but there was a great point where she was going, "This is wrong, this is wrong." And I'd go, "Yeah, Susan, of course it's wrong, it's just a tool." And she goes, "Yes, it's a tool. I, however, am not a tool." And at that point I realized that one thing had come about perfectly, which was that people were seeing this as things to use, not autopilot. One of the big goals of using statistics and math in politics is to not turn it into autopilot, but to turn it into something that just helps inform the decisions, that helps make the process run better. So then each week Susan would see that the map would be getting lighter where she had been. See progress until by week two it's a very light map. And it's informing. That was one place it was used. The other place it was used was in targeting satellite. Jeff Eller and Steve Rabinowitz and Dave Anderson and the incredible satellite crew deserve all the credit in the world. What I was able to do was help get them involved in more closely targeting where they were going, to the point where the maps that show where they satellited Clinton and Gore as well as surrogates almost identically match our targeting map. And indeed, I did a calculation on what it would have cost to buy this satellite time. Clinton/Gore spent about \$250,000 on satellites for Clinton and Gore. The DNC spent about \$250,000 on satellites for surrogates. For that \$500,000 we got over \$2.3 million worth of TV time had we had to buy it in exactly the places that we wanted to go. This was the thing at the debates. The Republicans were awed by what Jeff was able to pull together. And what they weren't seeing—in some sense they weren't seeing the half of it. Because, in fact, not only was it six chairs running all the time, but it was six chairs going to

exactly where we needed to go. That's a typically long-winded way of explaining targeting resources. When other people look at win/loss and "did we do it," are you immediately going to go to work looking at voter turnout, looking at margins—

DB: Yes. There's a post election analysis—

MS: Again, such a large part of the proper judgment in this business is figuring what is in fact valuable and what isn't. There are going to be no simple answers, but the first way to look at the election will be to do what Paul did in 1988, which is he looked at the growth from 1984 to 1988. Said, "Where are we at in Democrats?" and started trying to add more. There's a memo he did for a top secret retreat that I came across the other day from September of 1990 where he pretty much had the states that we're in now. But largely by having studied 1984 and 1988. Now in terms of how to win again you'd also look further back and you'd look down—what's happening. One of the things that this election has helped teach us all is this is not about left and right, and one of the electoral ways of explaining that is to think about the Metzenbaum/Dukakis voter. The same time Michael Dukakis lost Ohio, Howard Metzenbaum won big. The voter that we were after is the Metzenbaum/Dukakis voter. It's hard to think of that voter in liberal/conservative terms—that's somebody who wants certain things out of leaders, certain things out of government. When you look at it ideologically in content terms, that gives you one window into it. So that's out of the exit polls, 1984 to 1988 and also up and down the ballot. But it also gives you, when you study it demographically and geographically a very clear sort of view.

- DB: Give me a typical week then. What happens with all of this information?
- MS: Well, in a typical week, once the campaign was really chugging at the end, it's sort of, "Get out of the way and let it happen." That Susan would see what the targeting was suggesting. She would ignore some of it and use others of it. The people who were buying the media would see this stuff. Media buying, by and large, went on a slightly different track, through the states meetings and Stanley's work, but the satellite people would use this, the free media people would use this, radio, Richard Strauss and the radio. And the DNC radio operation would use it. And so once things really got cruising, as the state polls come in every week there would be a reevaluation of the states into which strategic category they fell. And then you'd rerun the computers and the persuasion value—week five would become targeting value week four. And that moved.
- DB: And you're telling me that for once we were far ahead of the Republicans from a technological, strategic—
- MS: Who knows whether we were far ahead? But we were certainly not far behind. I mean, they seem to have run a very stupid campaign from the outside, but you never know. One of the things that amazes me more and more in the campaign is you don't know how much, you just never know. I mean, the real heroes of this campaign are people who are not—who we'll never see. Every place you turn, there's somebody who's doing amazing work on another amazing part. And that's just one of the nice things.
- 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?

MS: Well, first of all, a commitment to professionalism. If you read all the management textbooks, they'll tell you that organizations set goals. Sometimes clearly. Sometimes not clearly. But they end up setting goals and following through with them. A primary goal in this organization was to be an effective, professional campaign. That's what the rapid-response was about. That's the affect of targeting. But insofar as this ends up all in play, I think the Eli Segal connection cannot be underestimated, and his friendship with Paul and his ability to make that happen. But more broadly, why is this the most effective campaign? Because people were intent on taking campaigning seriously. Lots of Democrats in the past always had this idea that a campaign was sort of a dirty, you know, unpleasant side business. Which I think actually started to afflict the Bush campaign. Campaigning isn't the most pleasant activity in the world. This is something that nearly every one wants to be over so badly you can taste it. Right now it's, "Could we just have this over? I want to sleep in my own house. I want to say hello to friends. I want to live a life." But after 1988 there were so many of us who got so upset about how incompetent, that we'll sacrifice time, but also sacrifice a lot of individual goals and a lot of concerns just to have it run right. There's been this ethic a couple of times where there's been an organizational problem of too many people deferring. But on the other hand, there've been a lot of times where people have said, "Just give me a decision. I don't care. I'll do it, just find out how." This I saw a lot of at the convention, which was an intense experience all its own. The first time we started seeing it was about a year and a half ago at DNC meetings, where there was some resolution where there was

going to be a fight. Somebody cared deeply about the issue and was about to have just a normal Democratic blood bath. And I walked up and I said, “Look, if you want to be all over the television and the newspaper losing and making your point and reducing your chances of winning the White House, that’s your right, I cannot tell you not to do it. But all you’re going to do is get bad press for yourself and lower our chances of winning in 1992.” The person sat down. That type of ethic in the party and then in the campaign has helped immensely.

DB: Did some of the friction come from folding the party into the campaign? That’s what I remember feeling in my shop.

MS: Yes, and a large part of that had to do with having the campaign in Little Rock. One cost of having the campaign in Little Rock was it made the transition from the DNC to the Clinton/Gore campaign harder on people—harder to sort of do more of a set of organizational separateness, rather than a sense of full ownership.

DB: Do you think that on balance it was a wise or a foolish decision?

MS: I don’t know. There are obvious advantages to having it here. There are obvious disadvantages. I have no clear opinion.

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

MS: I’d describe it—and again I’m being completely frank, these are things I’d never say to a journalist—but what I’d describe it as is a campaign that is, the phrase “brutal meritocracy” comes to mind. That organizationally it could be a lot less brutal if people paid a lot more attention to structure, to the importance of having a management structure and a management team and a consistent management

ethic. This is, again, where it would become clear to anybody who talks to me for any period of time that I think Eli Segal walks on water because he is a manager as well as a brilliant political strategist. A lot of the other people who by implication you know I'm talking about, are by their own admission and by others' admission not brilliant managers and they have frequently not, as much as I would have wished, pulled management teams beneath them. And if a victory occurs, that's going to be one of the primary challenges for this team in governing the nation is how to take management seriously. So there's been a brutality of dogfighting, of infighting, of argument and turf that has been regularly dispiriting and counterproductive and energy draining—not dispiriting, energy draining. But it's not been completely dispiriting or resulting in ineffectiveness and there is a meritocracy nonetheless behind it. When I look at even people at the top who I don't like, at least they're smart. At least they're good. And the frustration of a junior officer in any war is not the brilliant, decisive, unpleasant general—that's annoyance. The problem—I'd much rather have that than the nice, incompetent McClellan. I mean, give me Grant, and I'll handle that better.

DB: But there have been very few stories out there about infighting, turf battles.

MS: That's right. And that's because this is the most media savvy—it's the professionalism and also the media savviness of everybody down to the interns, who know never tell the press the whole story.

DB: Well, we don't tell the press anything except the message.

MS: Right. "Never tell the press the whole story" is probably a little cynical even for me, but it's, "Stick to message." And infighting is never message. And again,

everybody wants to win. I mean, “hungry” is certainly a description. And then the other thing is—I don’t think for a variety of reasons and I impute this virtuously to Bill Clinton as I impute other things to him—but virtuously I impute to his credit that people probably have never been able to successfully prosecute internal politics externally. Now that’s going to be a lot harder in the government.

DB: Do you think that the organization we had would have held together if times had gotten really tough? I’ve wondered whether to any extent we just got lucky.

MS: Oh, you’re asking a theological question. I believe that this campaign has been phenomenally lucky. Certainly the campaign did function under adversity numerous, numerous times. And indeed, the problem is that the lessons of childhood are played out in adulthood, but some of things that were necessary to survive early adversity in this campaign created problems that would have been much harder to deal with later had a different sort of adversity come up. In other words, to be more concrete about it, the wild travails of New Hampshire and some of the sense of us against themness led to a very tough orientation towards the world. It could have backfired as the campaign expanded had the campaign been subject to different types of pressures. I mean, again and again there’s the delight of what a stupid campaign the Republicans have run. Snarfing all credit I can, and giving all credit I can as well to everybody on this campaign, so much of the credit goes to the Republicans and goes to them in strategy terms. I would have worried a great deal had this race narrowed to one or two points in the first couple of weeks after Labor Day. That again goes very straightforwardly to the management style of Bill Clinton and the management style of the people who are

right near the top. At one point when the DNC was first starting to integrate, I tried to do an organization chart of the Clinton campaign to understand. And I came up with fourteen people who reported to Governor Clinton. And showed that to each of the fourteen people, and they all agreed that was the structure. And I kept using the argument that, “Look, I want to be a second-tier employee, but you’ve got to have a first tier that’s thick enough to have second tiers.”

DB: Would you say in this last month you’re still talking about fourteen?

MS: No. The last month has tightened it dramatically.

DB: To about how many would you say?

MS: Probably only four or five, which is probably about right.

DB: How did this come about?

MS: Necessity is the mother of invention. First of all, people give up. There comes a certain point where the common good is more important than the individual good—and I count myself among the true self-aggrandizers, but even when doing that, there comes a point where you back off and say, “Look, we have to have one.” And so you saw peace being made between people for the common good. You saw people saying, “Okay.” You saw a lot of people, for instance, with James, saying, “Okay, let’s make James our leader.” It sort of started with the George’s move off the plane into communications director. It was a process that began with that, and then moved through James and moved through Eli, solidifying his leadership role, which had not really been that threatened but it’s becoming articulated and clear to numerous people, and so that helped. But again, insofar as this is diagnostic rather than historic, I cannot urge people—I

cannot find—I'm too tired at the end of the day and at the end of the campaign to come up with words clear or strong enough to make my case to convey the conviction with which I say management—process and management are the name of the game in terms of leading this country, in terms of making that transition. That sounds geek, nerd. Maybe the way into it is by saying, “Look at what David Osborne—look at what the management reform people say. Big-scale management reform is different than small-scale management reform. Look at how GM, how IBM, how larger organizations change each other.” It is a management and leadership challenge. And it is a matter of delegating. And it is a matter of standing behind people when they've made a wrong decision. And it is a matter of finding people and saying, “Here is a clearly defined role. Stick to it so you have great leeway and latitude.”

DB: Isn't one of the biggest concepts in managerial literature that people throughout the structure must have a sense of power and feel like their work will be rewarded?

MS: Teamwork is certainly critical. And I would not want Prussian Army hierarchy as the model, but on the other hand relatively clear organizational lines of responsibility, matching responsibility and authority. I mean, if there's a pop-watch word, it's decentralized authority but centralized accountability that tells people, “Go off and do this, get this done. You have the means at your disposal. But come back to us and we're going to say, ‘Here's what we told you to do, how did it get done?’” Teamwork is a good thing. Consulting many people is a good thing. All right. But putting people in situations where they are pitted

against each other is not a good thing. Now this was Roosevelt's management style and I believe that things have gotten larger and more complex since Roosevelt's time. And that it is more important to, particularly at the upper levels, to find ways of focusing and expanding the managerial underpinnings. Delegation is going to be such a premium.

DB: What would you really like for history to know about this campaign?

MS: That it won.

DB: That's your—

MS: Yes. And it seems to me that, that gets it in a lot of different ways. That comment stands.

DB: But if that's enough, and then the pundits and the historians and the analysts all write and say, "Yes, but it was the economy and the Republicans ran a bum campaign and there was this anti-incumbent mood," then does that not take away your sense of achievement?

MS: Well, the moral challenges of the successful campaign haven't started.

DB: What do you mean by that?

MS: The challenge of are we serious about changing our country? Are we serious about thinking hard and working hard and getting it done? That hasn't begun. All of us have put everything aside to say, "There's no way we can learn anything more about our country until we are in charge of it. There is no way we can think without thinking with our hands." The bankruptcy of liberalism, the bankruptcy of progressivism, the bankruptcy of moderatism has all been transparent in the sense that until you have the opportunity to try things, you can't figure out

whether they make any sense. The types of moral things that get each of us involved in politics when it's not just a climb to the top of a greasy pole—a contest, the spirit of battle, bloodlust and all that. The types of stuff that make this bigger than ourselves: the questions of can children be given a better life; can time be made more available to strapped parents; can a sense of optimism be imbued in our country once again; can we deal with the environment. I mean, all these questions, all these things that pull you into politics—they're next. When I say, "What do I want this campaign to be remembered for, we won? Right?" There are very strong disagreements in this campaign, in this party, about what comes next. I'm not going to argue, I have not argued a single thing except in good humor, because all of us say, "First you've got to win." That as a moral standard is a purely instrumental standard. The judgment of the campaign first will be did it do that for which it was intended, which was to win. But then at the moment it wins, it becomes not a campaign about, "Should it win?" But a campaign about, "Okay, now what have we won and do we have the moral fiber, do we have the spiritedness, the energy, the ability, the direction, the commitment to make it work?" That's the better way of looking at it. The appropriately smarmy way of saying it is that what I want this campaign to be remembered for historically is it won and gave Bill Clinton the chance to run the presidency that he won. I mean, Jimmy Carter's campaign won. The failure was not in the campaign, the failure was in the governance. Actually as I speak I rethink because I hope that many of the ethics in the campaign about communicating with people continue into government.

DB: You don't think that was just a gimmick?

MS: No. Because I believe that polling married with policy is in fact a pattern for leadership. Not a vicious political denigration. A lot of policy people—and I've worked with the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office for eight years—would say, "Oh, get your dirty hands off me about political people coming in." Watching good policy ideas not get used for eight years made me all of a sudden realize, "Hold on. Come over, walk this side of the street for awhile." The point is that policy gets informed by the testing of it politically. Again, if the commitment is maintained. I mean, at this point the soul of the leadership becomes very, very important. All of us have small cynical sides, all of us have big expansive sides, and the notion of growth and heading towards the large and expansive rather than the small and brittle is in simple terms the challenge between having a presidency that was worth it and having a presidency that was another historical disappointment, as were the presidencies throughout my lifetime. And the way not to disappoint is to be big. This is the Carl Wagner speaking, but Carl, when he gets on this track, is exactly right.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]