

Special Collections
University of Arkansas Libraries
365 N. McIlroy Avenue
Fayetteville, AR 72701-4002
(479) 575-8444

Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with James L. (Skip) Rutherford

Campaign Position: Assistant to the Campaign Manager

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 3, 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. James L. (Skip) Rutherford 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.

The Diane D. Blair Papers are housed in Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. Permission to republish or quote from this interview must be obtained before publication. Please contact Special Collections at (479) 575-8444 or specoll@uark.edu for assistance. A "Permission to Publish Request Form" may found at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/forms/>.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: Skip, what is your position with the campaign?

Skip Rutherford: I'm an assistant to David Wilhelm, the Campaign Manager. I officially joined the campaign in September.

DB: But you've held many unofficial portfolios.

SR: I was there before day one. In fact, the early days were the summers of 1990 and 1991 at the Hillcrest Softball League where, sitting in the bleachers, we would discuss presidential politics with Bill and Hillary—sometimes together, sometimes individually—because our daughters were playing softball. It's amazing what kind of discussion can take place at a baseball game on a splintery bleacher. But I got the sense in early spring of 1991, at least from Hillary, that this was worth considering and giving very serious thought to. I don't remember the exact date, but it was one morning I was out jogging and Craig Smith drove by and said, "I've been driving all over the neighborhood looking for you." And I said, "Well, what do you want, I'm jogging." He said, "The governor wants to see us." And I said, "For what?" "He just wants to talk." I said, "Craig, I got up, I haven't shaved, haven't cleaned up. What are we going to do?" He said, "I don't know, but get in, he's only got an hour and a half." Went to the mansion and it was there with Craig, Bruce Lindsey, Bill, Hillary, and myself where the topic of running for president in 1992 was seriously discussed, at least in my presence. A lot of dialogue, a lot of debate—but the great quote of that thing was we talked about, "Well, if you don't win you could do it in 1996, set the stage," and finally after about two cups of coffee, Bruce looked over and said, "But

Governor, what if we win?" I knew right then by the way he responded and the way Hillary responded, "Well we just serve. We do the job. We lead." I knew then, I came home and told Billie, I said, "Get ready." She said, "Oh, I don't think so." "Get ready. He's going to run for president of the United States."

Several other informal meetings took place, as the exploratory committee was set up. And then the headquarters opened in the old paint store on Seventh Street the night before the announcement. Some great stories. First of all, they named me assistant secretary of the campaign. I didn't know what it was. They said, "We need you to come over here and sign these documents." And I said, "Well, what am I signing?" "It's some papers for the exploratory committee." So throughout this campaign, I really have had an official role, and quite truthfully sort of forgot it. I've been assistant secretary of the Clinton Presidential Campaign. I've signed other stuff now. I signed something the other day. I think I was told that I was notarizing something or signing something verifying that I knew it was true. And I said, "Oh, my goodness." But the night before the campaign, we were sitting around. Thank goodness Bev Lindsey had done this before and knew what to do about orchestrating the stage and all that stuff. Bev told us we needed some music. And about six o'clock that night Bruce said, "You know, the governor told me one time he liked this song by Fleetwood Mac called 'Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow'." And I said, "Yeah I know that song, does anybody have the tape?" We said no. So Bruce got in his car the night before the announcement speech, drove all over Little Rock, found the tape. I think he found a CD of it. Couldn't find a tape. We piled into David Watkins's car

because there wasn't a player at the headquarters and heard "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow" by Fleetwood Mac. Last night when I heard that song, that story came right back.

DB: Well, we got threatened over using it.

SR: Oh, yeah, and John Brummett said that he didn't like the song. He even acknowledged that on the show last night—that even he was wrong about the song. But we played it again last night. So I became involved in the campaign as a full-fledged volunteer coming over every night after work and on weekends. My first role was to chair a December fundraiser called the Winner Wonderland. It was at a time when the numbers were not great in the polls. It was a time when a lot of people thought that the governor of a small state, particularly a rural state, couldn't raise money. The most money ever raised at a single fund-raising political event in Arkansas was \$600,000 at that time, and that was for David Pryor and Dale Bumpers, and they took PAC money. But still, that was significant. Previously, the total had been about \$300,000. I privately thought if we could get to \$750,000, it would just be a huge hit. We didn't take PAC money. So it made it very, very difficult asking people individually. You know, set up a great network, organizational network. Rahm Emanuel came in and taught us all a new lesson about fund-raising. By the way, I told a reporter yesterday that the South hadn't seen anything like Rahm Emanuel since General Sherman marched on Atlanta. We raised \$906,000. It got a lot of play across the country. Other presidential candidates could not raise that money from their home state. And I

think it really gave a confidence level. It also encouraged donors from around the country.

DB: I have heard it described as the first primary.

SR: It was important. And we were real pleased with that. Then I started working on other basically special projects. Two or three things that come to mind is that one day I remember getting a call from David Wilhelm, who said, "Do you know Gennifer Flowers?" I said, "David, I've never heard of her." And he said, "Well, you're probably the only person in Arkansas who hasn't." And he said, "Well, she sings at local bars and I don't go to local bars." I said, "I've got three kids. I go home at night. I don't do that scene. Don't criticize those who do, it's just not my scene." And he said, "Well, please get over here, we need some help."

Obviously, the Gennifer Flowers thing was unfolding.

DB: Unfolding. Is that a pun?

SR: Yeah. Literally. And that issue—we did work hard on that issue, and I helped and obviously you did, too, and others putting contacts together and finding people and tracing down all sorts of rumors as you know. Lots of calls from David Wilhelm that I want to talk about because I think he's done a masterful job. But he said, "Do you know anything about a letter that Bill Clinton wrote when he was in Oxford?" And I said, "No, I do not know anything about a letter." He said, "Do you know what Clinton did during Vietnam?" And I said, "No, but I will tell you he didn't sit in a tree in Fayetteville. I can affirm that."

DB: The one thing that the Arkansas crowd knew was that he had not sat in a tree, and we were ready to prove that.

SR: But we didn't know about the letter. So that issue developed.

DB: Did you ever get a sense during that time that the non-Arkansas people were looking at us and thinking, "Why did you hide all this stuff from us?"

SR: I never got a sense of that. I got a lot of sense that a lot of people at that point in the game thought this was Joe Biden all over again. That sort of thing. The night that the letter was read on *Nightline* that afternoon I went over there and morale was low and I could sense it. And people were worried and scared and they didn't know. I talked to David Pryor about 8:30. He was at his apartment here. We were talking and he said, "Let's go down there." I said, "Go where?" He said, "Let's go to the campaign. Pick me up." So I picked him up and we came to the campaign headquarters and he walked through—

DB: And lifted our spirits.

SR: And talked to everybody. Not just the senior staff, but every person. Sat down and asked them where they were from. And each time he did it, he said—and Rodney Slater took him around, I remember that—"You know, I know him, trust him, just don't worry, just hang in there, you're working for a great guy." And it was a very special touch. He spoke to the staff that night, and then left. Then we went to the Faded Rose to have dinner and watched it. And I'll never forget this. After we got through we sat quietly and watched it. Ted Koppel, Bill Clinton, the whole bit. And everybody kind of looked at him because they were waiting for his reaction after the speech. The first thing he did was give the thumbs up sign after the show. Then we walked out, and he walked out the door and he looked back and he said, "He's the next president of the United States." I thought about

that last night. Particularly when I heard that voice introducing him to the crowd, that familiar voice that we all knew. When he said, “The next president of the United States,” I said, “He said that before.” And it was the night of *Nightline*. Nobody else heard it but me, but two or three other people—the waitresses in the restaurant heard it. But I think that was a critical juncture in the campaign, and I think that once people saw—Arkansas people rallied at that point. We rallied so much for Clinton, and I think that out-of-state people saw the Arkansas people rallying—that they didn't want to, have time, or even think of pointing fingers of blame. I think they basically said, “These people believe so much in this guy, heck, let's join the circle.”

DB: And they know him best.

SR: Give credit to David Wilhelm there. Because at that particular point in the campaign it could have been us versus them. But he put a team together and never made it one area or one region or one state over the other. It was all one team. And his door was open and I think people really appreciated that. It was very important throughout the campaign, but particularly at that time. I was also doing hundreds of press interviews within this time. On the credibility, trust, and the Arkansas issues. Personal sides of Bill and Hillary. About why politics was so personal in Arkansas. About why people call people by their first names.

DB: Of course, by that time, Hillary had become controversial.

SR: Hillary had become an issue, and because Hillary and I had worked on public education issues together, and because we served on the Children's Hospital board, and because of the conversation at the ballpark, and basically because we

just like each other, I spent a lot of time with reporters. In fact, virtually for a month or six weeks, every free moment during particularly crisis times. And there were three kinds of reporters at that point. There were ones who were coming in legitimately doing this “who are Bill and Hillary Clinton and who is the governor of Arkansas” these sorts of general biography story. Just my piece and how it relates to Los Angeles or New York or whatever, the local angle. The second element you had was those who were following up a previous story that somebody had done trying to get more, you know. And then you had that third group that was looking for the big one. And you could quickly tell which category this respective reporter was in. General, specific questions, big one. And you learned right off the bat. So I did a whole bunch of that. And people in the campaign were referring reporters to me. Other reporters were referring reporters to me. And people in Washington were referring them, so I did a lot of that.

DB: At some point you just flat came over to the campaign.

SR: I came over to the campaign. I'd been considering it for some time. David Wilhelm and I had been talking about it. Hillary and I had been talking about it. Within the campaign structure, as things were moving, Hillary wanted to make sure that the Arkansas Traveler program got the priority it deserved because it had worked so well in New Hampshire, and she saw it. And then we were being inundated—she was, Bill was, you were, all of us were—by Arkansans who wanted to do something. And more than just come down to headquarters and answer phones. They wanted to be traveling. We had to put a program together,

and Hillary felt that it needed an advocate on the staff. So I came over to put that program together for the final stretch run. I'd been doing it a little bit.

DB: That was for people going on trips, the “Ask Me About My Governor” program?

SR: “Ask me about my governor.” Setting up programs, materials, organizing trips. And over the last six to eight weeks of the campaign, we sent people to probably twenty states in an organized fashion. That doesn't count the ones who called and said, “I'm going to Minneapolis, what do I do?” We had countless numbers of those. And then there were ones that never called us that just went. We tried to encourage that. We tried to say, “Okay, if you're going to Minneapolis to a health care meeting, call us. If you're going to St. Louis on vacation, let us know.”

DB: I heard that Hillary got quite disturbed in New Hampshire when the Arkansas people arrived and the professional campaign people were trying to tell them how to behave. She just said, “Look guys, you all know how to campaign. Go out and do what you've always done at home and we'll be in great shape.”

SR: Well, character and trust became such big issues that when you had high school classmates and people in the same carpool with a daughter and teachers and your long-time friends and neighbors—people like that were big press hits, particularly in rural America. And so the Travelers went basically to areas where Bill and Hillary and Al and Tipper didn't go. And covered a lot of small and weekly newspapers, radio stations, and showed up at rallies a lot of times. We attempted to try not only for the Travelers' sake, but also for the candidate's sake to have some familiar faces in the crowds on occasion that helped. That was really the strategic value of the Fayetteville trip.

DB: And then you took on some other responsibilities.

SR: Once we institutionalized the Traveler program, got it working, Sheila Bronfman was a big help. And she was the outside coordinator and did a terrific job. And then you should talk to her, too, because she actually was the operational person. I basically made it work within the campaign structure, but she was the operational organizer—set up the travel, all that stuff. Worked on the schedule. She made it happen.

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

SR: I think there were probably several reasons. Number one was the focus and the ability of Bill and Hillary. I think that had an enormous impact on the effectiveness of the campaign because I think that they both have wonderful talent and such good focus. And they didn't ask people to do anything they weren't willing to do themselves. They put the time, the attention, the thought into this. Bill Clinton had studied this. He had studied it. This was not a fluke, haphazard decision. It was a well-thought-out study. So he came in very grounded with a strong foundation. I think that had a lot to do with it. Number two, I think the campaign never took itself too seriously. I think that all along decisions like remaining in Little Rock, the inclusiveness of the people, the involvement of hometown, all of that which was—people say, “Well, you should be in Washington. You shouldn't have a bunch of these people who wander around here in blue jeans and wear gloves and have silly habits and are superstitious, and a bunch of these Arkansans who've never been involved in a presidential campaign before.” And I think that basically, again, because politics are so

personal in Arkansas, that the Clintons—and soon the staff—both Arkansans and out-of-staters—realized that the personal side of politics could be transmitted to the national level. And I think it was a campaign that didn't take itself too seriously. That always thought that there was another hill to climb and that we weren't king or queen on the mountain. That we were, as Dizzy Dean would say, "just proud to be amongst them." And I think that was very important. The third thing is that David Wilhelm crafted the team approach. Of all the campaigns that I've seen, including local campaigns, there was as great a spirit of camaraderie here as I've ever seen in any campaign. And while the candidate and the spouse can set that to a certain degree, while they're on the road they are not involved in day-to-day. And I think David Wilhelm did that. It was a very inclusive campaign and very important to the success of this is that people felt a part of it. People were invited into big spots like the "War Room" and lots of people traveled with the candidates—went on bus trips. Lots of opportunities were afforded to people other than just senior staff, and that was very important

DB: I think you've hit on something critical because while the journalistic accounts have focused on this as kind of this lean, mean, fighting machine, it's been a very open campaign structure.

SR: Sure. Well I think as we saw in this staff briefing, certainly the degree of professionalism was there. I was impressed listening to them by the way the campaign was run. But within that scope of professionalism was a family. Was a sense of belonging. Was a sense of community. Was a sense that everybody was on board. And I said that I think that's going to be transmitted. David Pryor told

a great story. Maybe you've heard this story. One of the reporters called him and said, "Okay, what would be the first thing you would advise Bill Clinton to do as president?" And David Pryor said, "I would take a crane and I would lift that building and I would take it to Washington. And I would keep those 369 people together because they were a family. And I think that's important in running this government." So I think that was the real key. I think the fourth thing was that people were utilized to the best of their ability. People were not just thrown into roles because of who they were or who they knew. People were really utilized to their abilities, and everything was important. What you are doing, while it may be a specialized targeted area, it was still viewed as very important and very critical. So people could perform within their own areas and in their own expertise and feel very comfortable and accomplished about it. A lot of job satisfaction. Hard work. A lot of pressure. Long hours. Tough days. But a lot of satisfaction that you were helping create a product, and at the end of the day you felt a sense of accomplishment, even as tired and weary as we all were. The fifth thing is that I really truly believe that one of the things that the campaign did right was that it never let George Bush score points. We never were behind. I mean, we may have been behind in the polls, but we weren't behind in the campaign. There never was a lapse or a lack of focus. Maybe four or five days near the end there was a little cockiness about we're going to win, but once you saw that developing, you quickly pinched yourself and said, "No, wait a minute, let's don't think about that. Let's get back on focus." But the campaign never let George Bush and the Bush campaign take the offense as in football. Always the

ready response. SWAT teams. Whatever it took on every issue. Money. And that's the sixth thing. Is that, again, when the book is written on this, I don't care what anybody says, Rahm Emanuel will have to go down as a superstar, because when the going got tough, the money kept coming. And there was money and access to money during the very, very dismal days. Fund-raising never ceased, and even though there was—folks were saying, “I'm tired of fund-raising, I don't want to do this,” It was always he pressed that agenda, put it at the top. Money becomes so important in a presidential campaign, and this one was critical. I mean, it was absolutely critical.

DB: And we raised how much in Arkansas?

SR: Total directly to the candidate and the DNC, there were estimates of close to \$4 million, which is almost a dollar and a half a person. But still again, we didn't have the natural base. We didn't have the big base of a California or a New York or a Texas. I mean, you had two people running from Arkansas and Tennessee. They were not your big financial money market states. So give Rahm Emanuel a lot of credit, because it was there and that was an area that a lot of people in the campaign never focused on, never saw it. Never related to it. Never understood about how it worked. And it was a brilliant operation. Absolutely brilliant.

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

SR: The night of the Colorado primary. I looked at it, looked at the states left with the field and thought it was ours. Because Kerrey was gone.

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

SR: That's an unfair question because I have polling data every day, and the numbers look so doggone good that—

DB: Well, they didn't always.

SR: Well, I guess when I realized he was going to be president of the U.S. is when he made that walk at Madison Square Garden. That's when I—I was in the garden and I saw the walk and I saw the video camera and I thought to myself, "Here comes the next president of the U.S." That's when I really thought he would win.

DB: What, for you, was the lowest moment in all of this?

SR: Probably should say all the crises, but those weren't my lowest moment because my adrenalin got going and I felt that wasn't a time for me to be low. I think my lowest moment was about three days before the New Hampshire primary.

DB: Were you up there then?

SR: No, I was here. The poll numbers indicated that we were running fourth. And indicated that we were going to do poorly there. And had we done poorly there, it probably would have been over. I guess that was my lowest moment, because I looked at those numbers and I thought to myself, "We can't stop this slide."

DB: What has been your highest point so far?

SR: Oh, I think there've been several. I think announcement day was special to me because it was just a time when a lot of folks across the country weren't focused on it, and it was sort of an Arkansas historical event. But I guess the highest moment—I think the thing that I'll remember most in this campaign—it was something that I worked for. Lobbied for was about ten days out, when we took on all the operatives and schedulers, and I thought it was important that he go

home to his political roots. I thought watching him on television it seemed that he needed an adrenalin boost. That the attacks were so fierce. And I thought the state needed him, too. And it was sort of a mutual coming together, that everyone needed one another. And I really thought that that should take place in Fayetteville, because while there had been a lot of attention placed in Little Rock, Hot Springs, and Hope—and rightfully so, no disrespect—the political roots were in Fayetteville. And that’s where their first house was, the home in Fayetteville. That’s where the first campaign was. That’s where long walks on the campus took place and lots of the great discussions. The wedding and all that. But I thought it was important. And when I got in the van and drove from the Fayetteville airport to the campus and saw the people standing on the side of the road long before we got there. I mean, a long way from the campus, holding signs that said, “Welcome home, thank you for coming.” That was about as high as I got in this campaign. I almost reached it last night, but I still think—and then we walked out the front door of Old Main and you heard the U of A band playing and you saw Clinton visibly get emotional—I was about as high as I could get because I wanted that trip to happen, and I wanted it to be good. And I knew it was. I knew when we got there it was. I sensed it. I knew when we got there and I saw the people—when he saw the people—so I was really proud of that. That was my high.

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

SR: That this was a family of well-intentioned people. From all walks of life. All parts of the country. Who came together because they thought that America could be better. It was the least-selfish group of people that I have ever seen, who really came because they believed and because they rallied behind the person who represented the future, a new generation. And lifting people up. And I think that I was riding on a bus through Maine in the middle of the night on one of the Democratic Party's in-state bus trips. The governor wasn't there, but the Maine representatives and senators and everybody were there. A delegation. Some members. And about fifteen law students from Harvard had taken off the week to ride the bus. And I went through the bus at one o'clock in the morning, and when they started talking about Bill Clinton and about the future and what they wanted for the world, it reminded me of being a kid in 1960 and feeling the same way about JFK and about seeing that kind of spirit—I wasn't in college then, but I saw college kids doing what these kids were doing. And I thought to myself, "That's what I want history to remember, that this campaign is about hope."

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]