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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with James L. "Skip" Rutherford

Addendum - SWAT Teams

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. 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.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: [Interviewer's note: Explanation of Addendum - On November 1, 1992, I asked Skip to explain how the SWAT teams worked.]

This is an excerpt from Skip Rutherford, who wandered into our office, and who I managed to get to talk to us for a while about SWAT teams.

Skip Rutherford: Several weeks ago David Wilhelm called a group of us in and said, "Okay, we're going to form a SWAT team. We're going to take the battleground states, and we're going to assign them to individuals, and you are going to look at this state like you are a campaign manager in a governor or a senate race, where all you think of is this state. We want to develop state-specific issues, both offensively and defensively. We want to look at all the state's specific trends—break it down by media markets. We want a fine-tuned plan for these states." So we divided up the states. And we have been working with various departments in the building and the media team on specific issues.

DB: Which states?

SR: Oh, well, let's see. I don't know if I can name them off the top of my head, but I'll tell you mine. Kentucky.

DB: Okay.

SR: Georgia, Louisiana, New Mexico, Colorado, and Louisiana. And I have Arkansas. But I had Arkansas because Arkansas needed someone to make sure

that the radio advertising was out, that the local stuff was taken care of. Different people have different states. Rahm Emanuel, for example, had Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Oregon. Richard Mintz had some. Page in the “War Room” had some. Paul Tobak, who came down from Chicago, had some. So we developed state-specific media strategies. In Georgia, for example, we have localized radio up. Every time George Bush said something about “Bill Clinton's going to close Fort Benning,” we had a spot up with Sam Nunn saying, “That's a bunch of bull.” We have Sam Nunn on television above our normal TV buy. The same in all these states. We have radio spots, for example, that are bombarding western Kentucky with Al Gore. They're just saying, “Here's what Clinton and Gore are going to do for western Kentucky.” It was the state-specific group that developed the TV ad “Decaturville” that we ultimately used all across the state—about plant closings. An agricultural commissioner up in North Carolina doing local radio spots. We have, I believe, the governor of Montana doing local radio spots. Specialized TV in Ohio and Michigan, which we had in Tennessee and Georgia with the “Decaturville” thing. And I know we've run specialized TV in at least four states. So what we've been able to do is that in the past the Republican campaigns have done a better job of developing wedge issues at the state level. Wilhelm said, “They're not going to beat us this time. We're going to have these SWAT teams pull out this thing and we're going to develop wedge issues at the state level. And take them on.” So on these states that everybody viewed as battlegrounds, there are Clinton/Gore SWAT teams.

DB: Why was that done here instead of by the state directors? Because we had the

resources here?

SR: The resources were here. The political people to fact check were here. Contact with the media people was here. You could turn and get a spot produced in hours here—budgetary considerations to deal with. Plus, you were able to fit it into the overall whole strategic thing. For example, early in part of this effort, particularly during the recent Perot surge, states in the west were really pushing hard for us to engage Perot and wage anti-Perot local radio spots. We resisted that. Not because the states wanted us to, but from an overall campaign strategy. Had you left it entirely up to the states, you might have had fifty different strategies going out there and could have had some national impact and it could have been bad. So we didn't get everything we wanted from the states, nor did the states get everything they wanted from us. But much more got accomplished, and we were able to really personalize the presidential race at the state level. We'll see when those battleground states come in, but we've taken about twenty. And if a state, for example, moved into play, a SWAT team was assigned. If it moved out of play, the SWAT team disbanded. It was only states in play. In other words, you weren't focusing on all fifty states. If your state moved up to the level where you weren't really needed, fine. Then you just left it alone. But if the state moved into—Louisiana, for example—a lot of people thought we were going to lose it. All of a sudden it moved into play, we developed a SWAT team and we were ready. We had John Breaux up on radio talking about how you could trust Bill Clinton, how Arkansas and Louisiana are neighbors. How he's one of us. And it makes a big difference when you're able to do that.

DB: Was the SWAT team also dealing with all those negative radio ads?

SR: Yes. We were dealing from both offensively and defensively. We were putting up ads of our own, as in football, offense, trying to score. But at the same point when the other side was putting up the horrible ads, we were trying to defend. In some cases we responded personally, in terms of just a direct “That's not true.” In some cases we responded generically by saying, “Well, you've heard about George Bush. He's distorting Bill Clinton's record.” So it depended upon the degree of the spot, the intensity of the buy, the location, the state, the numbers. All the factors went into play. Fascinating process. Wilhelm deserves a lot of credit. He put it together. And he said he'd just seen the Republicans beat us time and time again at that game. You know, election day will prove whether we won or lost, but we held our own. I mean, they didn't beat us. They clearly were never able to get a wedge issue up against us. In fact, in Tennessee and Georgia with Decaturville, and in Michigan and Ohio, we had great local TV spots that those four states made a difference. So all that is happening within the framework of the campaign, so—and you had a media consultant assigned to your team, a state director assigned to your team, someone from issues was assigned to your team, and you had a whole team that thought about and devised a plan for Colorado. Which by the way is one of my states. So you looked at Colorado. And every day you'd talk to the folks in Colorado. “Well, we think you ought to do this, we think you ought to attack Perot.” “We can't attack Perot, so now what do you want to do?” “Well, we need a hard-hitting ad about this.”

DB: Let me ask something else about that, because I guess if I have had any anxieties,

I look at the polls and then go, "Fine," but I have never seen anything yet that has been absolutely persuasive to me about what happens to the Perot vote. I mean, it's very clear to me that not that many people are going to end up voting for Perot. They're not going to waste it. Where is the vote going to go? We must be damn well convinced that if we lay off Perot, most of that vote is going to come to us.

SR: In our polling information, they always run a two-track poll. They always run a three-person and a two-person race. So if, for example, in the poll—and you need to talk to Stan about this—but my understanding that if there's a major discrepancy between the numbers with three in the race and with two in the race, then obviously additional attention is given. So far the Perot fall-off vote, those who are not going to—

DB: Strengthens us.

SR: —strengthens us. In general. It may hurt us. But what you have is the theory of our leads in the big states where Perot is having a factor are so substantial over George Bush that it's negligible fall-off. Bush's leads are not that big on us in the states where Perot hurts him and he throws his state—some of them—into play, i.e., Texas. I think Bush is going to carry Texas, but I think Perot has thrown it into play. He did not throw California into play. But he threw Texas. He forced Bush to defend Texas.

DB: In Colorado?

SR: Colorado, he was a factor against us. I mean, he was a big factor there for a while in Colorado. His numbers are now dropping in Colorado. He has peaked. As he

drops in Colorado, our lead's gone back up. So we have a ten- to eleven-point lead in Colorado two days out. So Carville today predicted that we would carry three or four mountain states. He considers Montana, I think, Colorado, New Mexico, and I think that's what he's basically considering. I think Montana and Colorado are good to very good. I think New Mexico is fair to good.

DB: John Yates—

SR: Oh, it'd be great for John Yates.

DB: Surely we don't have a chance in Idaho.

SR: No. But wouldn't it be great for Jon Foster? Wouldn't you love to win that one for him? But I agree with you. I think the Perot thing is beginning to fade and probably fade rapidly.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]