

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 Richard L. Strauss
Campaign Position: National Radio Director
Little Rock, Arkansas
December 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. Richard L. Strauss 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 be found at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/forms/>.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: What was your position with the campaign?

Richard Strauss: I originally started out as a volunteer, but I finished up as the Clinton/Gore national radio director.

DB: How did you go from being a volunteer to being national radio director? When did you begin?

RS: I began January 20, in New Hampshire.

DB: What were you doing before then?

RS: I was in school. I was at UCLA. I originally got interested in Clinton upon hearing about his record as governor in Arkansas and hearing about the straw poll in Florida. Knowing that he gave the speech at the convention—the long one.

DB: So you didn't have Arkansas ties? You didn't know people who were talking about Clinton all the time?

RS: No. I honestly didn't know a lot about him other than those couple of things. I was interested in working for him. I have always been interested in presidential elections and politics and media. I worked as a reporter at my high school newspaper and my school radio station. I had worked at a couple of radio stations as a news reporter. I started my own radio company in Los Angeles. I had done a lot of media things and combined with politics. I just called up information in Little Rock and asked for the Clinton for President Campaign. I was interested in Clinton's relationship with the Jewish Community and satisfied my questions by checking with someone that I knew in the Los Angeles AIPAC office. Then, I was interested in Clinton's stand with the NAACP because of my

interest in the African American community. Both checked out very well and that piqued my interest in a great way.

DB: So you came in as a volunteer.

RS: I went to New Hampshire. I sent all my materials, letters of recommendation, résumé, and cover letter. They got it here and I called and asked for the press secretary. Steve Cohen picked up the phone and played along as if he was the press secretary. I didn't know anything about Dee Dee Myers. So the materials got here and then I kept bugging them. Finally, they faxed everything to New Hampshire. Jess Sarmiento got ahold of the papers and she gave them to Jeff Forbes, and I think Jeff gave them to Mary Ellen Glynn, who was the press secretary there. So Mary Ellen called me and I decided back and forth whether I was going to go. Then I said, "I'm going to go for it." I withdrew from school. I drove up to Northern California, got on a plane that night to Boston and took a bus to Manchester. I was there January 20.

DB: Have you been home since?

RS: I have twice. I went home during the Jewish holiday of Passover and then also to pick up my car during the summer.

DB: Feeling increasingly smug because everybody thought you were crazy when you did this?

RS: Yes. My mom was like, "You don't know anybody. You don't know what you're going to be doing. You don't know anything about this." But my dad was like, "Go for it." So I decided to go for it.

DB: When you started in New Hampshire, did you begin immediately doing radio?

RS: I think I started doing newspaper clips. I worked in the press office in New Hampshire and did newspaper clips. Slowly did radio, then kind of evolved into my just doing radio. I got to follow Governor Clinton around in New Hampshire at the various sites and record the speeches that he made. Taking the tape back and editing it and sending it out to all the radio stations in New Hampshire—we did this twice a day. I did a lot of interviewing.

DB: Did you just send it to the radio stations, or did you hustle it?

RS: I hustled it. I forced it down their throats, in fact.

DB: With what degree of success?

RS: Great success. Probably hit about forty radio stations each day in the morning and then twenty at night, because less stations have news in the afternoons. It was great. While they were wanting to talk about stupid stuff like Flowers and draft issues, I was pumping out message and the economy and jobs and they were taking and playing it, too.

DB: So this seemed to be a fairly successful operation. Was it at that point that they started using you more exclusively for radio?

RS: Right. I think there were some people that really caught on. Michael Whouley and Mitchell Schwartz. Simon Rosenberg and Mary Ellen, too, they all caught on that this was a good thing. So they pushed it. I pushed, too. I sort of handled it and I carried it out.

DB: Did you, from that point on, work at headquarters, or did you go out to other primary states?

RS: I went from New Hampshire to South Dakota. It was really exciting, too. We had a lot of fun there. I went with Mary Ellen, Tim Connolly. Then went to Colorado with them. Jim Lyons was out there. Then went to Michigan. I came to Little Rock for about a week. Not much was really was going on in terms of getting a radio operation set up, so I got sent back out to New York for that primary. That was exciting.

DB: How do you do radio in New York?

RS: It's tough. You can't really do New York City radio because there are a lot more big stations and they don't want to take these feeds. The other problem is there are so many radio stations there. I got some help from some students at Columbia University radio department. They helped me do some feeds. I did have some help. I solicited their help, and they were great. After New York, I came back to Little Rock for about ten days. Again, it was pretty quiet here. I wrote a detailed memo about an 800 number actuality line. It didn't get going. I got sent back out to Pennsylvania and was there for that primary. After that I went to D.C. for the primary there, fully expecting to go to California. I didn't go to California because Jeff Eller asked me to Little Rock and I've been here since. So I've been in Little Rock since right after the D.C. primary.

DB: Working the radio?

RS: Yes.

DB: Which really was a major component of the campaign.

RS: We did a lot of radio.

DB: As best you can tell, is this an unprecedented reliance on radio for a presidential campaign?

RS: That's what I've been told. People who have been doing this certainly a lot longer than I have, have said that this is the most radio that's ever been done in any campaign in history. So that's very exciting to have been able to direct that and to be a part of that.

DB: For the record, what is it that makes radio so strategically valuable?

RS: It's quick and it's easy to do. And it's cheap to do. We had definite targeted states. Michigan, Ohio, New Jersey. From anywhere in the country we could have people call in to radio stations. We could establish a feed network of feeding to the radio stations. I think it was a commitment from the campaign to use radio and to provide resources for it. And someone to carry it out. We did a lot of interviews. We did a lot of radio spin. I went to all four debates, and after each debate we had sixty one-on-one interviews with radio stations saying that Governor Clinton had won, and how great he looked.

DB: Did you line up the surrogate speakers to do the spin or how did you work that?

RS: Mostly that was coordinated by Laura Quinn and Jeff Eller helped line up staff to come and do the interviews. I scheduled them on the stations. We booked them all on the radio stations. We hooked up a studio at the debates for them to come in and do the radio interviews. So I didn't actually get people there myself, but once they were there I took care of them. During the campaign and during the general election I solicited people like Senator Wirth, Senator Biden, or Bradley.

Called their offices and got them to go on radio. Cuomo. We did a lot of radio interviews throughout, with people saying what a great guy he is.

DB: How much of the Clinton campaign radio presence was purchased ads and how much was free?

RS: I certainly did the free side. Greer's team did the paid. They did some paid radio, but I don't think there was as much as has been done in other campaigns. I'm not sure, but that is the sense I get. I'm sure in dollar figures we did more free than paid. We were on every station, every targeted state, and every day.

DB: Was a lot of this coming from the state press offices? Or was it pretty much coming out of the national?

RS: We set up a network. I ordered all this radio equipment that got sent out and then we had forty-five states running their own smaller radio operations, in consultation and really direction from me in Little Rock.

DB: Was there a morning conference call, or did you e-mail them, or how did you reach them?

RS: We did some e-mail through the state e-mail distribution system. They also sent daily reports back to me so that I could see what stations got sent what feeds and how many they did. I would talk to them all—individual calls mostly. A lot of them were up and running on their own and we did some of the general e-mail messages.

DB: If you were a working woman in a small town in Ohio, what would have been the chances that you would have heard some Clinton stuff that you would have hustled out there on the radio?

RS: I think it would have been great. In addition to this proactive system, we had the 800 number that got about 500 calls a day. All these stations around the country—especially the small stations that don't have access to NBC radio network or CBS radio network—they could call the 800 number and get these sound bites. Then the radio stations would play them.

DB: What would be a typical sound bite?

RS: It got somewhat mundane day after day. A typical sound bite would be the Clinton pledge that everyone should be able to afford to go to college—talk about paying it back.

DB: And whose voice would be saying this?

RS: Clinton.

DB: So they were actually getting the candidate's voice?

RS: Yes. The economy, jobs, health care—those were the themes. Jobs, unemployment, the economy, health care, and education. We kept hitting them day after day. It was all positive stuff, all about him. We also got personal stuff from friends. On our line we had on there Clinton, Gore, others including Hillary. We had African American leaders. We had a young college line where celebrities call up and . . .

DB: Like who?

RS: My mind went blank. John Cusack, Bette Midler, Richard Dreyfuss.

DB: Aside from your very wonderful special operation, this campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign in recent American history. What, from your perspective, made it so effective?

RS: First of all, I completely agree with what you said and what others are saying. I think certainly Governor Clinton deserves to have won this. But I think we had the best act that's ever been put together. What made it go? One, I think, is the openness. The "War Room" meetings open to everybody—not an exclusive, elitist campaign. You could walk into Eli Segal's office or George's office and say hi. Clinton would come through the office occasionally when he had time. I think the openness and camaraderie. And that the people were hungry. We haven't won in so long. People were so dedicated. I worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, for ten months. I think that people were dedicated, hungry—we had openness. We had young people, especially—that was very good. I think that summarizes it.

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

RS: One thing that kind of tips me off on is it wasn't extremely uptight. People didn't wear suits every day. They weren't all choked up. We'd throw the football around in the press office. We'd watch once in a while a football game on TV. I think it was a lot more loose. As far as the organization, the one thing I can comment on is I like the way everyone was connected and everyone's field related. I don't know if there was a department in the office that didn't use radio in some way or another. You had Saul Benjamin, who did education, have leaders come and want to put some education people on radio, which we did. We had, of course, a communications side, with Jeff Eller and George Stephanopoulos willing to do stuff. Political. Every department wanted to use

the radio in one way or another. It wasn't just with radio. It seemed like everyone was interconnected. That's why the War Room meetings were so important. Everyone got to see what everyone was doing and have reports. I thought the organization was very good the way things were put together.

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

RS: I think because I didn't completely know the delegate counts and the way the system entirely worked, I wasn't sure that he had wrapped it up until it almost happened. It's not because I didn't think that he would win, but I wasn't sure in my mind when he would get the nomination.

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

RS: One of the things that he did that kind of tipped me off was remembering, when in '88, Bush had these pictures on TV of him with Reagan meeting Gorbachev and kind of that international leadership. I talked to Bruce Lindsey a little bit before it happened, the Clinton meeting with Yeltsin and then Shamir of Israel, then he started meeting with all these world leaders. It was at that point that I said, "I think he's going to do it." I think that once he started meeting with world leaders, it gave him a lot of credibility and respect. I'll tell you, at one point I was pretty scared when the polls started dropping toward the end when Perot started coming back. My personal thought, when the Iran-Contra thing came out—the last four or five days with Bush—it was at that point I got so fired up, I knew he had it. I didn't relax. Actually, I don't know if I've yet relaxed. But I got really fired up. I was sort of down at that point. Scared. I really thought that he could pull it off after that.

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

RS: One of the low points was a rally in Westchester County, New York. Clinton was giving a speech there at a high school and was just heckled to death.

DB: By whom?

RS: By high school students mostly. Young people—wouldn't let up, wouldn't let up on anything. He could not talk. He told people to shut up. There was, like, a fight in the audience. I was sitting in the back, almost crying. I couldn't watch it. It was awful. But to my amazement, he made it through the rally. I don't know how. I would have walked off and gone home. He made it through and was a real trouper. Something else. I don't know if I'm sort of a jinx or not. Three highlights. One, it was my third or fourth day after getting to New Hampshire. I got assigned to drive a pool van for the press to Claremont. I was with Mark Halperin of ABC and Nancy Cooper of *Newsweek*, and Bob Shogan from the *Los Angeles Times*. Mark Halpern came up with this fax and it was an advance copy of the Flowers article. I'm thinking to myself, "You know, here I am. I could drive off the road right now and save the campaign." At that time he thought he had the only copy. He was driving to the event where Clinton was giving a speech. I'm trying to talk him out of it. We got to the event and this was an amazing thing. Clinton was swarmed by the press. "Why this?" "Why this?" "Why this?" Then five minutes later he delivered a beautiful speech to this brush company in Claremont as if he had been unscathed. I was super impressed that he was able to do that after being asked all these questions about his personal life. The second thing was, I was at the airport hanger in Manchester when he made

that draft press conference. I asked Mitchell Schwartz, the state director, “The press is talking about some letter and I really don’t know anything about it, but it sounds pretty serious.” He’s like, “I know. Don’t worry about it.” Then Clinton gave his speech and I raced back to the office because we had to transcribe it and send it back to Little Rock. That was sort of a low point. The third thing was when I was in New York when he was on this interview when the “I didn’t inhale” line came out.

DB: You were there for all of the great moments.

RS: I was there for all three of those things.

DB: Amazing. Well, let’s switch for a moment. What, from your perspective, was the high point of the campaign?

RS: Can I list a number? Or do you just want one?

DB: You can list a number. You’re entitled to since you were there for all the bummers.

RS: I’d say one of the best moments I had was at the convention; standing on the floor of the convention—not when he gave his speech, but the night before when he made the walk in through Macy’s and came across the floor. I was crying. Seriously, there were tears pouring out of my eyes. All this had built up. Every day all these people were saying great things about him and talking about his career. You’re used to going to awards ceremonies where people are being honored and people come up and make speeches about them and then they are there to accept the award. For three nights Clinton hadn’t been there to accept the award, the nomination. Then when he came in and didn’t say but five or six

words, just, “Thank you.” It was just incredible. That was really amazing. It was like people head to toe, all crammed in like sardines. I thought it was just awesome. One of the other high points was my first night with the campaign. I was in Manchester, New Hampshire and I hadn’t met Clinton before. It was the night of a debate with all the Democratic candidates. I got there, and after the debate there was a party for Clinton supporters. He came in and went through the receiving line. I said, “Hi, Governor. I’m Richard Strauss and I just came in from Los Angeles to work for you.” He looked at me right in the eyes, and I remember this so clearly, he said, “Tell me you’re name again?” I said, “Richard Strauss.” He said, “Richard, thank you very much for being here.” I loved it. It was awesome. So thank you for that, Mr. Clinton.

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

RS: I think maybe one thing was our response, perhaps. On a technical and inside level, our response to attacks from the opposition and our rapid-response. We did a great job in responding to allegations. But on a more personal, sentimental, and global scale, I think just the camaraderie and hunger for winning. Also, Clinton’s personality. The campaign was driven by Clinton and his camaraderie with his campaign. Everyone seemed to be close. Everyone, coming from all parts of the country, having all different interests, was able to rally behind for one goal. You might say that for every campaign that exists, but I think this was special. I think there was a special cohesiveness among everyone, thanks to Clinton. Here’s another memory for me. I thought in New Hampshire we did an awesome job and

I think a lot of credit goes to Mitchell Schwartz who kept everyone together during the bad times. Not having had much experience in political campaigns before I left to join, my parents had warned me about politics and the stereotype of the backstabbing and how evil politics is. When I got there I told Mitchell Schwartz about that. I said, “My parents kind of warned me about politics. My mom had just seen *JFK*.” But with Mitchell’s leadership, he got us through in good shape.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]