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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Caren A. Wilcox
Campaign Position: Deputy Director for Business Outreach
Little Rock, Arkansas
October 30, 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. Caren A. Wilcox 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: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

Caren Wilcox: I'm on leave of absence from Hershey Foods Corporation where I am the director of government relations.

DB: Did you volunteer yourself or did someone reach out and recruit you?

CW: I volunteered myself. I've been volunteering for Governor Clinton since February and had given a fundraiser with a friend for him in Harrisburg when there was no money in Pennsylvania. We raised money before the primary. And I just began to get a sense of what was happening in the business community and that we could make a difference and get a story out if we would just try. And because of my position I was getting all of the Bush propaganda in my office every day, and it became more and more annoying.

DB: In this capacity, explain what it is that you do.

CW: Okay. Well, Ellis Mottur is the director for business and high tech and he comes from Senator Kennedy's staff. So the two of us have been doing what I would say is sort of the marketing of the business policies that the governor has developed and working with the policy department on making those politically viable in the business community and in the high technology community. And we have been working with a group of volunteers across the country who have gathered up CEOs to endorse Governor Clinton and been having various events with them, including a major event in Chicago in September that he attended, which was a major endorsement meeting in which he met with CEOs from across

the country who were supporting him. The real focus of the whole effort has been to get the story out that Governor Clinton does understand business and understands that that's how the economy works and that he's a new kind of Democrat and that a lot of business people understand that and want him to be in the White House.

DB: So you would try to get business people to speak up in his behalf because that would be more persuasive to other business people?

CW: That's right. And they're expressing confidence in the campaign and in him as an individual and it enhances his credibility. And since the economy is the major issue for the campaign, it's very, very important that key business people be supportive.

DB: On a typical day, what would you do?

CW: Well, on a typical day I'd probably be talking to several states at this point. I mean, in the beginning what we were doing was simply organizing, because it's important to realize that we think that since 1964, there had been no business outreach in a Democratic presidential campaign of this nature. The last time that was done was under President Johnson. So we had a lot of catching up to do. I brought with me lists—the campaign had no lists of trade associations, no lists of business associations.

DB: And you came when?

CW: I think it was August 15. And when I got here we had little pieces of paper and the computer. We didn't have any lists. We didn't have any mailing lists. We didn't have any contact kind of things. I mean, Ellis knew some people in

Washington, obviously, having worked there many years, and I knew a lot of people, and we just started constructing our contact list. So we didn't start the way labor does in a Democratic campaign or even the way education does, or somebody else. We started with a completely nontraditional constituency. So the first thing we had to do was get all that refined. And I had to find a volunteer to help us because a lot of it was clerical. A lot of it just was data entry to get the lists so that we would be able to mail to people and communicate with people and fax to people, and so on.

DB: When did you get a feeling that maybe you were going to get a critical mass so that you could start to go public?

CW: By early September. We really did a quick start-up. And by early September we started planning the event for the twenty-first in Chicago and got it on the schedule pretty early. And you know, we really had a sense that we would do that. So we really worked in stages. We got the whole thing organized. We had the big event in September and since then we've been doing work on policy to get policy issued, because we've done that as it's gone along—high tech, manufacturing, and small business policy. Small business was the last policy we got issued. And we did events around each of those things, and then since then we've been rolling out what we call the national surrogates to go to states to get state surrogates in the business community. So I spend a lot of my time on the phone talking to various states, talking to people who are organizing field offices and so on, doing the nitty-gritty organizing of the events, going to a few of the events, although I haven't really traveled that much. And doing the briefing book

when there's going to be an event that Clinton or Gore have to go to. And really working with the volunteer Judy Goss who's been a godsend, to do all the clean-up. Because, you know, once you get 400 surrogates running around, you have to communicate back to them all thank you for doing this and do all the mailings and get them on the fax lists and be sure that they're in some kind of a loop. And then we've been working with some of them on things like op-ed pieces and those sorts of things. It's a lot for three people to try to pull it off.

DB: This campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign organization in recent American history. What, from your perspective, made it so effective?

CW: Well, I've never worked in another presidential campaign. I've done a lot of state and local campaigns. I think what has made it work is that we have a tremendous group of very smart but very practical political people. I think we're fortunate that we have some maturity on the staff, that there are people who have some very, very good judgment. And we have an incredible desire to win to change the country. And I think there's—obviously there are people here with political ambitions and the desire to be here because of that, but I think basically the motivation of almost everybody that I talk to is that we have to fix the country. And that's a motivating factor that's different. My mother says—she's seventy-five—she says she remembers no election like this since the time of Hoover-Roosevelt. That was kind of what motivated me. I couldn't stand it any longer. I come from a state where we have lost a million manufacturing jobs. I have watched that place and I have fought for seventeen years. We are now at a point

with Hershey Foods—you think of Pennsylvania, and yes, we're a great Pennsylvania company. We are now the third largest manufacturer in the state of Pennsylvania, after General Electric and Westinghouse. We now have more manufacturing jobs in Pennsylvania than Alcoa, USX, Bethlehem Steel. This is awful. And the economy, I mean, we can't survive as a people if we don't turn it around.

DB: And is that intensely felt throughout the business community, or just in some parts of it?

CW: Parts of it. It's been very difficult for some of the big company CEOs to come out for us. But we know we have a substantial number who have had the guts to do it, and frankly there has been retribution on them, on their companies. Their boards have threatened them. Because there's been pressure put on the boards to pressure them. So the ones that have stood up there have been incredibly brave and caring about the country. We know that for every one of them there are several others who privately—I heard about one the other day and I had heard that he was for us. He is not publicly for us. He's the CEO of a huge company. And they've become very, very concerned about education. The CEOs have been leading the way in the states about education. And what do they see? Bush doesn't do anything. Goes to photo ops. And they're very frustrated. They know that that's government. A lot of them have really faced up to the fact that all this talk about the service economy is—you know, we are not going to flip hamburgers for each other and take in each other's washing, and they haven't figured that out. A lot of small business people are for us—much more

substantial numbers than anyone expected. When we started doing small business outreach, we had people who said, “Don’t do it, it’s hopeless.” But it isn’t. There’s a survey just been done where about half of them are for us. That’s an incredible number.

DB: Let me ask another organizational question. I have been fascinated by the journalistic descriptions of this campaign as a highly-disciplined fighting machine. And you’re laughing. Because on the inside it feels a lot looser than that?

CW: Right. But it is lean and mean.

DB: How would you explain this?

CW: Well, I think we do have discipline. The undisciplined part is that we work from issue to issue and group to group. So you never are working with exactly the same group to accomplish a task. So that makes us feel a little less disciplined, but the fact of the matter is that we do organize around tasks and get them done. And we do have some very good co-chairs who have a real sense of how to get that organized. We work a lot with Eli because he’s very interested in business, but obviously George and James do other kinds of organizing of tasks. So my perception is it’s really sort of like a new modern organizational structure in a way—trying to do task team management rather than hierachal management. In business we strive to move toward that because that makes everybody feel included and when you do that, you get them motivated. So if you do that, you get a higher esprit de corps. From the outside, of course, all they know about is “War Room.” So they think that there are these marching orders in the morning,

and in fact there are. This morning there were three orders, and I'm sure by this hour they're done.

DB: What was your low point in this campaign?

CW: Well, I'm a person that does like to cooperate with people, and there have been really one or two people that I've had the misfortune to come up against who are exceptionally ambitious, and for that reason have been very noninclusive. And that's difficult. But I'm a big person.

DB: What's been your high point so far?

CW: Everyday is sort of a high point. I feel really good about having come. And we're going to do the right thing.

DB: When were you certain that Clinton was going to be the nominee?

CW: April 23. When he won Pennsylvania. If he could win Pennsylvania, there wasn't any question in my mind he would win. And I actually thought we could win Pennsylvania long before that. It was a very funny thing because when I told the people at Hershey that I was going to be working for Clinton's election, they thought I was out of my mind. And my secretary last week faxed me something I needed and she wrote on the front of the fax, "Are you practicing your last laugh?" In February when I said I was doing fund-raising for Bill Clinton—

DB: In February? That was a good time to start.

CW: Oh, yes. My boss thought I was just completely out of my mind. In my business I'm not prone to go out and do things for people that I don't believe can do the job. I wouldn't last where I am if I had done that very often.

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

CW: That we'd win? Well, obviously I hoped that that would be the night of the nomination. I'm emotional now about it. I was up in the balcony behind the Pennsylvania delegation and I'd been with some friends, and I was separated from them right then. And there was a guy about my age up there also—I didn't know him from Adam—and I turned around to him and I said, "We're back and we're going to win."

DB: What do you really want history to know about this campaign?

CW: That it was full of a lot of very smart, very well-intentioned, very determined people. Americans. Very determined Americans. I like it when Bill says, "Take the country back." One of the other high points in the campaign for me—and maybe it was the high point because I have read the acceptance speech. I thought the Notre Dame speech was for me probably the high point of the campaign. I just love David Kusnet, you know. I sit next to the speechwriters and they're back there, and we kid around an awful lot. We're closer in age than a lot of other people. I think that we are so gifted to have four people back there who can really help with that message, and that speech said everything I feel about how the country should be. And I have sent it to a lot of people. It was great.

DB: There was something extraordinary about that speech. I can remember turning on my TV and the first thing, which I'm going to get emotional about, is the ovation that was given to Hillary that came in waves and waves and waves, and after what she had been through, to appear in that setting and to get that kind of reception, to me was so powerful. And then the words that were spoken could not have been more eloquent. We kidded afterward about a Jewish man writing a speech for a

Baptist to be given at the Catholic school. I'm so glad you mentioned that because these are the things that need to be remembered.

CW: It was. That was probably the high point of the campaign for me.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]