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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Maria Luisa M. Haley

Campaign Positions: Asian American Activities

Washington, D.C.

February 19, 1993

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. Maria M. Haley 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: When did you join the campaign and what was your position?

Maria Haley: I did not join the campaign officially until I took a leave of absence from the AIDC. My position with the AIDC was director of communications. As soon as he announced, I started volunteering in the political office and really helped start the office. I was in the office with Stephanie Solien, Nancy McFadden, and Pete Dagher. I was the volunteer who came in at 5:30 or 6:00 every night and did the political letters from Bill Clinton and drafted it for his signature. Sort of made sure the addresses were right, and such. He would write me notes on the plane. That's how I started, coming four or five times a week from AIDC to campaign headquarters and working until 9:00 or 10:00 in the evening and on weekends. I did this until about midway the campaign and then I got involved in activities with Asian Americans. I went to New York and Chicago. Eventually, during the convention, I took some time off from the AIDC and I worked the convention as a floater for Asian Americans. Didn't quite know what that meant, but after being briefed, I did that during the convention, which was extremely interesting, something I had never done before.

DB: Tracking the delegates?

MH: Yes. They told me to concentrate on California, New York. There were probably about ten Asian American delegates from California. There were several from

Alaska, Washington, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois. My task was to go to all of these different big delegations just to make sure that the Asian Americans had no problems or concerns, or that their concerns would be communicated.

DB: Did they have problems or concerns?

MH: Yes. The abortion issue, because especially with the Filipino Americans who are mostly Catholics, they had real problems with the pro-choice issue. Asian Americans tend to be a lot more conservative and therefore had a real problem with abortion. The Chinese, for example, had a real problem with what Mr. Clinton was saying about China—the human rights issue. That was a major deal with the Chinese Americans. During the campaign it came up all the time. I had pretty much joined the campaign and reminded them that a lot of them are here because they were running away from oppression, and so they should not forget the reasons for President Deng to open up China, reminded them that they were now comfortable in this country.

DB: Of course, these were Democrats. As you got to the general election, what would be the reasons for Asian Americans to support Bill Clinton rather than George Bush?

MH: It was very difficult. Asian Americans tend to be more Republican and conservative. A lot of them—especially the Vietnamese, Cambodians, the Chinese—came here from an oppressed society, so when they came here they are really, really anti-communists, extremely right wing, extremely conservative. So that was the major factor in this campaign, to try and get them to be more centrists, to look at Bill Clinton as a viable candidate, because of the things that

are important to him—education, the economy, and also the most important thing, the human rights issues. So I think that probably was the major factor. He did not have the majority of the Asian Americans like the Latinos and African Americans. I think probably more Asian Americans voted Democrat this particular time and that has never happened. It's hard to be able to get the figure, but what I hear in the community is that there were more and more Asian Americans who voted Democrat in this election.

DB: Did you work through these groups?

MH: Yes. A typical event or day would be—I would have breakfast with the Indian Americans, then meetings with Vietnamese Americans, Filipino Americans, then lunch with the Asian American Chamber of Commerce. They would be really tough. They would get into economic development. But I felt comfortable with that. I felt uncomfortable with issues such as education and crime, issues I was not as knowledgeable about because of my background. But economic development issues were very easy. I just went from one group to another. Then in the evenings everybody would get together from all the different communities and have an event. There would be speeches and questions and answers.

DB: You did this mostly in California?

MH: California, the Midwest, East Coast to West Coast, where there were large populations of Asian Americans. I think what was more interesting, really, to the people I met with in those Asian American groups was that there was an Asian American in his administration. That was something that they never thought was possible in Arkansas.

DB: Where the population is very small?

MH: Very small. And where we looked at the record in Arkansas where like 0.5 percent of the population was Asian Americans, and yet there was something like, I don't remember the figure, but it was a high percent of Asian Americans who worked in state government at higher salaries. So when I would mention that, there was total shock that here was an Asian American who actually knew and worked for Bill Clinton for twelve years and traveled with him and his wife and family. I feel that they really did not want so much to be told about policies and issues, they wanted to know the real Bill Clinton. Wanted to know Hillary and her whole role of wife and mother and friend and companion. Wanted to know him as a person. That really was mostly the message—the Bill Clinton who was not only a person who I worked for, but I felt like was my friend.

DB: This campaign is now being called the most effective presidential campaign in recent American history. From your perspective, and the work that you did, what do you think made the campaign so effective?

MH: Focus. The fact that we had one central message. Maybe not one central message, but several messages that were central in focus, and that we stayed on top of that message. We did not let other things get in between that message. It was always what he got them talking about all over the country all of the time. It was always emphasizing what was important.

DB: Clearly the message was very centralized. Specifically, with regard to the organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

MH: Centralized, but extremely flexible. Going all over the nation, but from a central

theme. Important points that were being sent every day all over the country. The message that was sent to me every day, faxed to me every day I was on the road.

DB: If you had a decision about a budget or scheduling or authority or legality of funds, would you always know who to go to?

MH: Oh yes. The structure was very clear.

DB: And you reported to?

MH: Stephanie [Solien]. But then I had support people who helped me through the process. Helped me through the scheduling. Helped me through all of the things that needed to get done. People to pick me up at the airport, people who had the schedules of the events. And the theme of “Haley’s Comet for Clinton/Gore” came about.

DB: Where did that name come from? Who first used that?

MH: It started in California. I had a van and Asian Americans would pick me up from the airport when I went on the road. They just started calling it “Haley’s Comet for Clinton/Gore.” They even had a little banner on the van. I traveled to all the different communities all over California. I would be sometimes talking to five people and sometimes there were three thousand people. It depended on the event.

DB: What in your life prepared you to do this?

MH: Gosh, I don’t know. I have wondered about that. I just sort of got into the middle of it without realizing it. I just felt like at that time there were terrible press releases that came out from the Bush Campaign about “Bill Clinton was not acceptable to Asian Americans,” and that “Asian Americans were treated very

badly in their education and salaries,” and so on. I just felt I needed to go on the road and talk to the Asian Americans. Of course, it was very interesting for me to do because I did not have the political contacts. I had to depend on Melinda Yee for political contacts. Since I was in many ways, really in Arkansas, isolated from that.

DB: Now Melinda’s background was with?

MH: The DNC.

DB: But then you could vouch for the man’s record in Arkansas.

MH: Yes. Basically saying, “There’s an Asian American who worked for him, and she is coming to California to speak about him and his Arkansas Record.” That would basically be my job—the Arkansas Record, and economic development, of course. But then get into education, health care, and things like that.

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

MH: Nashua, New Hampshire.

DB: Were you in New Hampshire?

MH: Yes.

DB: Why were you so certain?

MH: Because I was behind him as he was giving his speech, and there were thousands of people out there in the audience and I was looking at the expressions on their faces. I felt like this is it, if he is able to make these people listen, the way they were listening and I saw the expressions on their faces. I felt like he’s got it.

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

MH: Oh, gosh. I was nervous up to the last moment.

DB: You thought something would happen?

MH: Well, because I was in many ways isolated in California. I spent about a week and a half in California just before the election. Everybody had already gone from headquarters at that point. They were all over the country. So Vida, who was my main link, was in New Mexico. Melinda was somewhere else. At that point, I was by myself in California, and all I had was television. I stayed nervous all the time.

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

MH: The primaries in New York. I thought that was cruel—that was terrible—difficult. Yes, that was the most difficult time.

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

MH: The convention.

DB: Anything in particular?

MH: The entire convention. The feeling on the convention floor, the excitement—the anticipation. Just this sort of hope that everybody had during the convention. That was it—that was the high point. And, of course, election night.

DB: Did Perot have much support among the Asian community?

MH: Yes. Especially with the businessmen.

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

MH: That it was a good, cohesive, goal-oriented campaign. I think most of all we had a wonderful candidate. I have to tell you, I have this granddaughter who is seven years old. I remember I was in California on Halloween, and I had been spending

Halloween with her for the last so many years. I called all my grandchildren on Halloween to wish them “Happy Halloween. Sorry I couldn’t be with them but I was in California.” But this particular child, Ann Louise, she said, “Where are you?” I said, “I’m in San Francisco.” She said, “I guess you’re campaigning.” I said, “Yes, I’m campaigning.” She said, “Maria, are you a little bit worried?” I said, “About what?” She said, “Only 2 percent in the polls.” Now this is a seven-year-old kid. I said, “Anne Louise, it sort of worries me a little bit.” She said, “Tell me, are you worried about Ross Perot?” I said, “Yes, I am a little worried about him.” She said, “Give me a break, who would vote for him?” It was incredible. I couldn’t believe it. This little kid of seven years old was so turned in to this campaign that she said, “Give me a break, who would vote for him?”

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]