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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Sandra Lee (Sandy) Hudnall

Campaign Position: Director, Correspondence Division

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 11, 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. Sandra Lee (Sandy) Hudnall 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 officially join the campaign?

Sandra Hudnall: I believe it was the first of May. Not counting about a week of volunteer work that I did in the very, very first days of the exploratory committee.

DB: What were you doing before you came to the campaign?

SH: I worked in the governor's office as quality control for correspondence.

DB: You came to the campaign to do what?

SH: To direct the correspondence division.

DB: What did that mean, to direct the correspondence division? How many employees, volunteers, volume of mail—that sort of thing?

SH: When I came to the campaign, we were receiving 1,500 pieces of mail a day. Between 1,000 and 2,000 approximately. I'm not sure how many paid staff we had then. Maybe seven or eight people with a crew of about twenty volunteers. After the convention we were receiving about what the White House receives daily, about 10,000 pieces of mail a day. My staff grew to twenty paid employees. At any given time we had about fifty volunteers. Right before the election we had eighty to one hundred people on the mezzanine, up here where our department was located.

DB: How much mail?

SH: It was pretty steady. About 10,000 a day from the convention up until the election. I guess the volume jumped for a few days before the election, and then a few days after the election it jumped to 30,000, at which point it became completely unmanageable.

DB: Did the nature of the incoming mail change over time? Did you have a sense of different reasons for people writing?

SH: Only after he won, it changed. I suppose my answer would be what the telephone operators would also say, that before he won everybody wanted to help Bill Clinton. The mail was enormously positive. After the election, they were wanting jobs. My staff and I felt that we always had our pulse on what was happening in the campaign. We never needed polls, we never needed experts to tell us that economy was the critical issue, that the draft issue really didn't matter. We saw comments on every issue, but the mail was enormously positive.

DB: Positive. Isn't that odd, because usually people write when they are angry.

SH: Well, we got that, too. That mainly came in the form of write-in campaigns. The draft issue generated a little negative mail, but just as much positive mail—or more.

DB: Somebody told me that in the aftermath of the Republican Convention we were flooded with phone calls from people who resented some of that. Did we get mail to that extent, too?

SH: Our mail did take a big surge after that convention. A lot of it was positive, and I think we got an unusually lot of mail from Republicans at that time. We knew, for example, the polls were close because we had so many letters saying, "I've never voted before but I'm going to vote for you." Or, "I haven't voted in twenty years." So we felt that those "likely voter" polls were maybe skewed.

DB: Did you get a lot of mail from children?

SH: I wish I could tell you what percentage. I wouldn't be surprised if a fourth to a third of our letters were from children. Would you like to hear a letter that Bill wrote to a

child? I try to keep a file of things he has written. This little girl—we just thought he would like to see her letter. Every so often we'd send children's letters to him. This was just a bright colored picture of balloons and it said, "Please write me." So Bill Clinton, in his own handwriting, wrote: "Dear Lauren, thank you for your beautiful letter wishing me well. I did win and I'll work hard for you. Happy Thanksgiving. Bill Clinton."

DB: How would you know which ones needed his personal attention?

SH: Well, of course, having worked in the governor's office, I recognized many of the names and had a sense of who he was close to. But we sent him a good sampling of letters that we thought were touching or critical or especially articulate. The staff would watch for good examples and bring them to me.

DB: He enjoyed that?

SH: He complains if he doesn't get the sense of what ordinary citizens are writing.

DB: How could you use volunteers to answer mail? How would they know what to do?

SH: That was a problem in the beginning until I convinced management that I had to have a core staff of trained people who knew how to reply, who were familiar with the form letters, and who could handle the more sensitive issues. Because only that kind of staff can write individual replies, and can do a really good job "coding." In the early stages of the campaign, we were very much hampered by constantly having to train people. Our volunteers did data processing, and the proofreading staff was volunteer. The "mail-out" section was entirely volunteer. I had a pretty good group of people who came and were able to code letters—meaning to determine which form letter to send, or whether it needed special handling.

- DB: Does it matter to Governor Clinton how carefully the mail was handled?
- SH: He would rather not think there is such a thing as a form letter. I'm told that Senator Bumpers is the same way. He'd walk by and pick up things and say, "Why is this getting a form letter?" Governor Clinton would prefer that every letter be answered directly and individually. Once I sent him a very articulate letter from a high school principal. It had useful information. It was a wonderful letter. I just thought that he'd like to see it. I attached the form letter we were using because I suspected Bill was going to put a postscript on it anyway. Well, he did put a hand written postscript on it and wrote *me* a note saying, "This is horrible. This is not the way to answer his letter. I guess it's okay with the PS, but be more careful." So I was careful about showing him any form letters after that. One thing I'm really proud of is we did write a large number of individual replies. A lot of those went to children. And many were on substantive issues. We made it all the way through the campaign without one single letter going through the department that caused him any embarrassment or political problems, to my knowledge. We trained our staff in how to acknowledge a letter personally without committing to anything. And there were only a few who wrote those, and who proofed them. For a long time, I insisted on seeing all of the individual written replies.
- DB: This is now being described as being the most effective presidential campaign organization in American history. From your perspective, what made this campaign so effective?
- SH: Bill Clinton himself was the key. He really is a brilliant politician. The next key, I think, was the involvement of people who understood him and knew him. He really

has always had a pretty effective political operation in Arkansas. I think people who joined the campaign from the rest of the country began to see that.

DB: They weren't going to come in and show us how to do politics?

SH: No, and they didn't. We showed them in a lot of ways. The national campaign was the same kind of operation he's always had, just bigger. The real key to our success was his own personality and his own clear understanding of how to reach out to the people and relate to them.

DB: That's what I want to talk about next. Specifically with respect to the campaign organization, would you describe it as centralized, decentralized, or what?

SH: You know, a lot of people have commented that our correspondence unit was the best run that they have ever seen in any campaign. I just laugh hysterically at that. We went through different phases. The most difficult thing was that every time we would begin to get a good sense of structure, we would enter a new phase of the campaign, and it would be chaotic all over again. Then we would have to adjust to that. My department was just a microcosm of that phenomenon. Every time the volume of mail jumped, I had to change procedures. It was that way on a large scale in the campaign, because we had several transition periods or stages. And transitions just bring total chaos.

DB: Was it clear to you that there was a clear chain of command?

SH: Well, I was so new to this kind of operation. There was a clear chain of command. Most of the time I guess there was. I understood the hierarchy as it related to me.

DB: You knew who you had to go to get something?

SH: Yes, usually, but a lot of my learning experience was just trying to find out whom to go to on different issues. As soon as I'd find out, that person would be assigned to something different. That doesn't mean the campaign was disorganized. That's just the nature of a campaign—any campaign. It's fluid.

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

SH: I don't think I ever really doubted it.

DB: I hear this again and again from Arkansans.

SH: I was still on the governor's staff and had not officially joined the campaign during the New Hampshire days, when a lot of folks deserted this ship, and people got demoralized at the headquarters. I was furious, and so were most of the governor's staff people. I remember at one time, someone at the campaign said, "Well, we don't know if we'll have a candidate next August." I sent a memo up to the chief of staff and said, "Those folks need to learn whom they're working for. This can only hurt him. Somebody needs to know this kind of thing is being said." I wrote that that person who made the comment had worked for Gary Hart, and I sent word that "Bill Clinton is not Gary Hart." We never doubted that he could deal with any issue that arose. I was *absolutely* confident after the New York convention. Once he wrapped up the nomination, I knew he would go all the way. And the convention was a real high point. Every time you'd get in an elevator or in a cab, New Yorkers were so positive. I thought, "Wow." I just didn't see how he could lose.

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

SH: There was just so much hard work. I was almost too tired to enjoy election day. I went home early. So, I think the high point for me was the night he went over the

top and got the nomination at the convention. I was on row five in the hall. I'll never forget when he and Hillary and Chelsea came in. I was right there to see it and it was just great.

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

SH: I don't know if I can answer that directly. I was often asked during the campaign why he should win or what kind of a man he was, could they believe in him? What I would tell people was, "He'll never do *all* that he wants to do, because he sets his goals so high. I know that he won't be able to get it *all* done. His heart is in the right place. He's going in the right direction. He's going to do the right things for the right reasons. He really does care about people." I think most important is that Bill Clinton really does love people and that his policies are made with average people in mind. I think that's what the voters saw in him. I know my department consisted of almost entirely Arkansans. I guess more than any other department, we were manned with Arkansans. The correspondence staff, being Arkansans, understood the special bond between Bill Clinton and "regular" folks. That's what people should understand about the campaign. There was nothing slick; there was nothing contrived. I think the campaign really somehow did convey what he was really like. That was our success. His personality and character drove the campaign. The screenwriter Carl Kurlander was here from Hollywood with some producers, to observe the whole campaign, and he said those people *running* the campaign would benefit from coming in here twenty minutes every day to just sit and read these letters. He wrote a letter to George Stephanopoulos that said, "This department has captured the heart of the campaign more than any other."

DB: Sandy, can you think of some other things that you think are critical to success?

SH: Yes. When I took this job one of the requirements was, “Could you pack up and move if we move our headquarters?” I said, “Yes I could.” But I was hoping so much that we wouldn’t, because I didn’t think Arkansas people would ever get over it if we did that. There were so many wanting to help him. I think one of the keys to the campaign was that the headquarters was located here in Arkansas. So many people who joined this campaign from across the country—some of them did come just to polish their resumes. Many others came believing in this guy that they really didn’t personally know anything about. They weren’t going to come into daily contact with him, and the closest thing to that experience was for them to come in daily contact with Arkansans and people who really loved him and had known him for a long time. It was important for them to get a sense of what it’s like to be in this part of the country. That Arkansas spirit, the spirit of the Arkansas Travelers and the local people here—I think we really did serve to inspire those who came from across the country. They learned about Bill Clinton by being with us.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]