

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 Michael Waldman

Campaign Position: Deputy Communications Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 27, 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. Michael Waldman 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 found at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/forms/>.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: Michael, what is your position?

Michael Waldman: My title is deputy communications director. Now there are several people with that title. In most instances it doesn't reflect what we do, but that was the title I was given when I came. When George Stephanopoulos asked me to come down, he said, "We don't have a title for you. Oh, call yourself deputy communications director. We can figure out another title later."

DB: What were you doing at the time George reached out and tapped you?

MW: I am on leave as the director of Public Citizen's Congress Watch, which is the biggest consumer-lobbying group in Washington. It's Ralph Nader's organization that he founded.

DB: Had you done campaigns before?

MW: Not that many. I was basically the communications director on the campaign of Mark Green, Democratic nominee for the U. S. Senate in 1986 against D'Amato. Green had been before that the director of Congress Watch. He comes out of the public interest groups. And I'd done congressional campaigns in New York. Never anything on a scale like this. But the statewide campaign in New York was pretty big. The staff was even younger there than it is here.

DB: Under this broad rubric of deputy communications director, what do you do?

MW: I work out of opposition research, but I'm not so much in the day-to-day flow of that—I do two sets of things. It's sort of shifted over time as the campaign has gone on, and some things have been less important and some have been more.

DB: You came on when?

MW: July 29, I believe, right after the convention. A week after the convention I got tapped and was down here by Wednesday, the week thereafter. One set of things I do is I am sort of the issues desk person for a few issues that are the issues that I know. Government reform, campaign finance reform, regulation broadly, legal reform, and to a certain degree, with Paul Weinstein, banking, and S&Ls. That's the stuff that I know from my previous life and have written books on a couple of those subjects. The more general assignment I've been given is—you've got Eric Berman and the other people in the opposition research shop doing the day-to-day "War Room," quick response—Bush said this, is it true, pull out the facts, and so on. What I was doing, and it proved to not be that essential in the end, was preparing attacks to use against Bush. Packaging not so much the original research on opposition research stuff, but packaging things for use as assaults against Bush by surrogates, which we did to some degree, and by Clinton and Gore. Now because we've been ahead since I got here in the polls, we haven't had to do that. If we were behind, we would be launching broadsides the way Bush is, and then that material would be more useful. So we've got all this material and it hasn't always been used, and I can't say that was the wrong decision. I brought some people down—people came down from Washington to help build the files basically on the Quayle council, on foreign lobbyists. Jody

Trapasso, who is someone who works with me—he's on leave I guess from Patton, Boggs, and Blow, a young associate there—and we're doing stuff that is not so much the day-to-day opposition research, but the longer term stuff. So, for example, when we do go on the assault on the AID issue, that was what Jody and I prepared.

DB: Did we know that story was coming on *60 Minutes*, or was it just a gift from the gods?

MW: Well, we didn't create the story. We knew it was coming before it came and we were ready for it. The genesis of that story is that a foundation—a coalition of labor unions called the National Labor Committee on Education and Human Rights in central Oregon had been doing this research for years. They had this study coming out, and they're mostly bankrolled by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and they let our labor people know—Chuck Richards, I think, and Rick Bloomingdale—that this was coming. And they passed the study in an advanced text along to Ricki and then Ricki passed it along to me and then I was in touch with people before the story came out and we were ready for it. When it came out on *60 Minutes*, we jumped on it the next day. The day after it was on *60 Minutes*, Gore spoke about it, and then Clinton talked about it, and then Tuesday and Wednesday night of that week, *Nightline* did it. We've been unbelievably fortunate in that Bush has been swarmed by these hornets of his own little scandals. We take the stories, but usually we're not generating the stories.

DB: Several people have commented to me that they're really surprised that S&Ls did not get played bigger. Is that because of all the Democrats in Congress?

MW: Well, we're not in Congress. You know, I would have liked to have seen it bigger. It was tentatively scheduled a couple of times and then pulled off. A lot of it is just—James and Stanley I think believe—I shouldn't speak for them because this is just conversations I've had and they may be commenting on it themselves—I think they think people don't understand it. I think it's easy. I've done so much public speaking and radio and TV on this, it's the easiest story in the world and people understand it, but they don't believe that. And I think there's the issue with Congress, though that doesn't affect us.

DB: Now, let's get back to your official role in the campaign.

MW: My official role. At one point we called it the bomb squad, although it was decided that that was too incendiary. It was decided in the War Room that that was too violent. So the AID issue we've put together. Fact sheets—we've done backup for the ads. Jody Trapasso really did a lot of that stuff. I briefed Clinton and Gore for their *Donahue* appearance. We've been talking to press and working very closely with the people who are the researchers both at the unions and on Capitol Hill to nail this down because it's factually very murky. It's very hard to prove that this job is taken from this factory in Ohio and to this farm in San Cristobal, but you can prove it—you can show it if you go deep enough into the corporate forms.

DB: And then you've also dealt with tort reform.

MW: Yes. It's something for them to talk about. I mean, that's why they did it. A year ago Bush started doing this because he needed something to talk about. He had nothing to talk about. It was Quayle at first, and then Bush took it up. And I got

roped in because of one point when Bush first attacked us in a frontal way, I think around Labor Day—you know, there were a few excessive claims about access by trial lawyers. I got pulled into it. I was never officially told to work on legal reform, but I noticed that this was happening and that we seemed to be running in circles. We made it an early decision not to engage them on the specifics of legal reform because we didn't want the issue to be, "Are you for the lawyers or are you against the lawyers?" We wanted the issue to be on our thematic grid. On our territory. And our territory here was, "Are you for the rich or are you for the average middle class?" The way the Bush Administration's proposals are written, they're completely toward the wealthy. So when they would come at us on it, we would hit them back on the competitiveness council, and secret access for lobbyists, and so on. So we did a couple of statements for George and I did *McNeil-Lehrer* and we pretty much didn't see the issue again. And I worked on those issues on debate prep. So you know, I think the reason I was brought in was because there's a whole set of issues that I just know really well just from working on it and it was a lot easier than having to call twenty experts to get the right answer, but then it turns into these attacks. Ironically, in the last week or two as these scandals have popped up, we have gone on the attack just as the race heats up. So just about every day I've been drafting a statement for George on Iran-Contra or Iraqgate or something like that. You know, the War Room produces four or five pieces of paper a day—press statements responding to something Bush said. A lot of what we do is just trying to focus the press on some things.

DB: Do we have anything really comparable to their daily fax attacks from Mary Matalin?

MW: No. Well, I mean, not a systematic, every day, 9:00 o'clock, here's an agenda. We have been putting out a fax attack most days in the last few weeks. Last week we put out maybe three or four on Iran-Contra and Iraqgate. Like when the *New Yorker* story came out, we put out a thing basically calling attention to the *New Yorker* story.

DB: Just explaining it, simplifying it?

MW: Yes. And buttressing the reporter's credibility with the other reporters.

DB: But we haven't done anything like that on Perot?

MW: No. We've not put a piece of paper out on Perot. It takes discipline.

DB: This campaign has been described as the most effective presidential campaign organization in history. What makes it so effective?

MW: I think, first of all, this campaign is run, albeit in a more chaotic fashion, like the best corporations are run—meaning all the top management theory now talks about the desirability of horizontal management structure rather than vertical management structure. Not being GM, not having fourteen layers of vice presidents between the CEO and the shop floor, and not having status differences and so on. From what I could tell, I wasn't there, I visited them once and saw this: the Dukakis presidential campaign was very much vertical. It literally was vertical. It was in a skinny building with seven floors and the pooh-bahs were on one floor, the research department was on another floor, the issues department was on another floor, the policy, communications department was on another

floor. And it was all very separate. Here the organizational chart is chaotic. Everybody knows this, you know.

DB: What organizational chart?

MW: What organizational chart? I mean, there's a campaign manager and a campaign chairman and a campaign director and a campaign chief of staff. So there's a campaign coordinator job that's open. And then there's a communications director whose function in most other campaigns would be regarded as being the campaign manager. The building really augments the horizontal nature of the structure. It's really, really important, and I'm sure it was just a fluke; but maybe it wasn't a fluke. You know, it was very lucky that there was a big, old newspaper building with huge, open as opposed to little, closed—offices. And it's just very important, the accessibility. I can walk into James or I can walk into Eli or anybody. There's nobody who I feel I can't walk into with an idea.

DB: When you say you can walk in, do you have a sense you can walk in and offer an idea, call their attention to a problem?

MW: Yes, I think it's very easy to call people's attention to problems, but it's very hard to get anything ever solved. In a sense, the other thing that's very important, I think that the centralization decision making, at the same time as it's being horizontal in nature in that there's not a lot of layers, it's also very centralized.

DB: What do you mean by that?

MW: Well, nobody has any doubt that, in terms of strategy, George, James, and Stanley, and Mandy call the shots. And whereas—from what I'm told, in the Bush campaign or in the Dukakis campaign, endless, endless sessions where five

million people sit in and nothing gets decided. And in models of leadership, it's more the charismatic model than the bureaucratic model. You've got this symbiotic relationship between James and George, who have the governor's confidence. They make a decision and it can stick. And it's run in that way a lot more like a good senate campaign than like a presidential campaign. Presidential campaigns are these big, flabby bureaucracies, whereas, here James and George can get on the phone and they talk with Clinton and the decision is made, at least in terms of short-term strategy stuff. Now in terms of other things, interaction among departments, Betsey's role, field, anything, all that other kind of stuff—I'm not as involved in that, but I get the sense that ultimately it's a mess.

DB: Is it possible that the presence of so many talented people permits this to work? You just sketch out a task and they'll go ahead and do it?

MW: Oh, sure. That's why I'm happy I'm here. In my previous life, I headed a twenty-person organization and I go on national TV a couple nights a week. If I felt a really strong sense of hierarchy and I were stuck in a bad part of that hierarchy, I'd be out of here. But I'm given tasks to do or I pick up tasks, and I don't feel any status deprivation.

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

MW: I really think after New Hampshire I thought Clinton would be the nominee.

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

MW: I think I felt that Bush was vulnerable from early on, after Pat Buchanan took Bush down in New Hampshire. The economy had been bad for two years and the political elites and the press just never focused on it. When you think about it, we

attacked Bush for not talking about the economy, but Congress didn't talk about the economy either. Neither did the press. The economy went sour in 1990, and you didn't hear about it all through the war. You didn't hear about it until 1991. It wasn't until Wofford won—between Wofford and Bush being sick in Japan, and the New Hampshire primary, suddenly—

DB: Everybody realized this is serious.

MW: Remember in 1990 everyone was talking about the anti-incumbent mood? Which was there and brought the margins for incumbents down a lot. And if they hadn't basically outspent the challengers four to one, a lot of the incumbents would have lost in 1990. Gee, I don't understand it. Why is it? Is it the pay raise? Really, there was a deep recession going on that nobody was noticing in Washington because Washington is a very cushioned place. So, I mean, there was an anti-incumbent move because people were losing their jobs and it wasn't really registering on the elites, but I think someone will go back and look at the press coverage and reaction of the elites in the country to the economy. It wasn't until white-collar layoffs really hit, it suddenly became a biggie. IBM—and when troubles in New York and Boston. So, I always thought that there was a real chance. I was concerned that Clinton was too damaged, but I think a lot of people thought that. I was wrong. I liked him from the first debate. Although I'm a liberal activist by trade, I very strongly believe that the approach that he has taken in this campaign is the right approach, which is the way the Democrats always win—on core economic issues, and not on social issues. And a lot the way Democrats play the social issues just has the effect of dividing the Democratic

base, working-class whites and blacks. And it drove me up the wall a year or two ago when Congress—after Wofford, what was Congress doing—the civil rights bill and they were getting all torn apart on whether it was quotas or not. Well, you know, national health care would do more for poor people and black people in this country than any civil rights bill. What I think Clinton has been really good about is—I mean he's a great candidate and he seems to understand the centrality. The campaign has been focused on it. I think that the strategic discipline—"The economy, stupid"—that's the way Democrats win. But they never had the intestinal fortitude to do it.

DB: What was your personal low point since you came on board here?

MW: I haven't had any.

DB: And your high?

MW: The high? I think the Richmond debate. It's been a series of bad things not happening.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]