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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with David Wilhelm
Campaign Position: Campaign Manager
Little Rock, Arkansas
December 12, 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. David Wilhelm 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: Who reached out and brought you into the campaign?

David Wilhelm: The first time I met Bill Clinton, he came to Chicago in his role as the chairman of the DLC. The press secretary, Kiki Moore, set up a meeting. This was about July 1991. So that was the first time I ever met Bill Clinton. I went to his hotel room and we spent almost an hour talking, not so much about politics as policy. I'm a fallen policy analyst. At the time I was with my own consulting firm—public policy and political consulting firm. I have a degree from the Kennedy School and I used to do tax policy. That was very interesting. I liked him. I don't know if he remembered me particularly, maybe he did. But it was fun, liked him. I grew up in a part of the country which is not all that different from Arkansas, southeastern Ohio. So I maybe have a better sense than most of some of the challenges that a state like this faces. I really admire—and admired then—the fact that he was willing to make choices for the long term. It's easy to take a state like this and become a colony. He took a different approach. I met him then. He announced for president. It was all very interesting. I'm sitting there in Chicago, Mark Gearen and Eli Segal essentially called. There seemed to be two tracks of sorts conducting the search for a campaign manager. I talked to both Eli and Mark, set up meetings with Frank Greer and Stan Greenberg, I think that was basically the crew. I have no idea

how many people were talked to, if it was a real lengthy process. In any event, he had announced without having a campaign manager. At the conclusion of the week I was offered the job of campaign manager. I was offered it by him.

DB: Did you have to struggle with the decision?

DW: No. It took me about a nanosecond. I thought he was a strong candidate. I thought he had a message that had great appeal to the middle class, but beyond that had an ability to unify both middle- and lower-income folks. After a decade of working on tax policy issues, here we finally had a candidate who had something to say about economic growth as well. So, I thought he was a strong candidate. I didn't have any illusions. I didn't think we'd necessarily be sitting here today, but I thought it was possible. I didn't think it was impossible. I think by nature I'm optimistic.

DB: So you came to Little Rock. How much of a team did you bring with you?

DW: George was here already. David Watkins was here already. Bruce was obviously on the road. Craig Smith was here. That was about it. I think maybe the most important move I made in the entire campaign was to bring Rahm aboard. When I got here in mid- to late October, I looked at the schedule and we did not have a single fund-raiser scheduled for the month of November. Craig was the finance director, and that was not particularly his fault. He knew we needed fund-raisers, but for whatever reason they weren't being scheduled. It just wasn't happening. I'd worked with Rahm—this has been our fifth campaign together. There's no one better. There's no one better to kick a finance operation into a higher orbit. I prevailed upon him, with Stan's help, to get down here. One of the toughest things I

did in my first week on the job was to call Bob Farmer and let him know I wanted to bring him here, and to tell Craig Smith, who is a very descent guy, a very competent and effective person, certainly as the campaign has demonstrated, that I wanted him in a different job. He didn't like it, and he wasn't happy about it. But to his credit, he sucked it up and went into a job that was more compatible with his talents, and he performed extraordinarily well.

DB: By the time you came, did you have a strategy in mind? What was the best approach for the primaries?

DW: I guess my strategy—such that I had—consisted of let's raise money. Because if you don't have the money then you have to make choices that are untenable. We cleared the schedule. We did about twenty fund-raisers in the first sixteen days of December. We raised over two million dollars in December, which sounds like chicken feed today, but at the time was one of the key factors leading to our emergence. That was crucial. So, raise money, do it at the risk of not going into New Hampshire because New Hampshire, as important as it was, was not so important that we could not survive a second or third place finish if we had the money to do it. At least that was my view. I thought let's have the money, let's avoid the harsh trade-offs down the line that others are going to have to face. Let's establish ourselves. And this certainly predated me, but, let's establish ourselves through a series of speeches as the most serious-minded, visionary candidate in the field. Let's pay attention to the Florida straw poll, because a southern candidate that fails to do well in the Florida straw poll is just going to get hurt very badly. So we

paid a lot of attention to that. Invested real resources into that. Hopefully all those things would come together and we would win the pre-primary primaries.

DB: Those of us that have worked with Clinton for years know that he himself is a strategist and a poll analyzer. He could be a political consultant or campaign manager if he had not chosen to run himself. Does that make it harder or easier to be the campaign manager?

DW: I think it makes it a little easier. I've heard that said about him a lot. And he's certainly very much involved in the big things of the campaign. The TV ads, the message—things frankly I think he should be very, very much involved in. It's his campaign, it's his message. That's what's going to elect or not elect him. I think it's extraordinarily helpful to have a candidate who knows what he's about. Who knows what he cares about. Who knows what he wants to do as president. That is not something a campaign should come up with. That makes a candidate just a function of marketing. That's not what it should be. It should be an internal compass, and Bill Clinton has that. He kind of let us do the more tactical things. He was busy, he was on the road. He was not calling me all the time to say, "Why are you doing this?"

DB: Did you have a sense from the very beginning that he was in this to absolutely to win? Or was this at the outset more of a positioning race, considering how popular Bush seemed to be at the time?

DW: I always think that Bill Clinton was in this to win. I think he had, like all of us, a realistic assessment of his chances. That if he didn't win, it wouldn't be the end of the world and that he would have learned something from the process. I think he

always felt he could win, and, by God, he was going to fight to win. It wasn't a Pollyannish thing. It was, "We're in this thing to win. We fully intend to win. We're going to pull together a campaign that can win." I think he had a realistic assessment.

DB: I remember hearing you early on describing to the finance council how all we needed to do was stay in the mix in New Hampshire and I thought to myself, Bill Clinton has never been in a race where he was just going to "stay in the mix," he's going want to win that thing. To what extent did the primaries fall into place the way you originally envisioned them? Were there big surprises along the way?

DW: I'd have to say all of us were surprised by the emergence of Tsongas as a principal opponent. But I think they pretty much fell into place the way we thought. I think when I said that it was December and part of what I was doing was managing expectations about what we would do in New Hampshire. I agree with you. Bill Clinton fully intended to win New Hampshire. I think the most important thing to recall is how front-loaded the primary process was. By March 17, I think, twenty-seven primaries and caucuses were held. That's a lot. I think the thing that differentiated our campaign from the other campaigns was we had the resources—the candidate—who could do that. For all the focus on New Hampshire—and New Hampshire was certainly critical, because in New Hampshire, Harkin was out of gas and the winnowing process had begun. We immediately went into a March 3 primary. Before that you had Maine and South Dakota. I don't think they were all that important and never figured all that much in our own plans. But a March 3 primary, on which there were three major contests, Georgia, Colorado, Maryland—

that was supposed to be Paul Tsongas's big day—big day—but we had a political infrastructure in Georgia, the money to go in there and run an aggressive ad campaign, and we won by a large margin. We were also able to compete in Colorado. We had the money, a candidate with energy and ability to work himself to the bone. We were able to compete there and wound up in essentially a dead-heat with Jerry Brown. And then Maryland, where we thought that Tsongas might win by ten to twenty percentage points, again we had the resources to compete.

DB: Not as much as the Maryland people wanted us to.

DW: Right. But enough to stay in the mix, and we only lost by six. Then we could go to Super Tuesday and, again, we didn't have to make that choice between Texas and Florida. We went both places. And then on March 17 we didn't have to make the choice between Michigan and Illinois, we went both places. By March 17 any candidate who would have gotten into the race against us could have only been a spoiler—could not possibly have won himself.

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

DW: I was pretty much convinced after Illinois. I think the way the delegate selection process works with proportional representation—early on it keeps people in the race, because you don't have somebody who's going to sweep in with the first primaries and compile such a huge delegate lead that it's not worth it. But at another point the reverse starts to happen, which is no one is going to possibly come up with the number of delegates to actually win this thing. Being a spoiler is not a very compelling argument for election.

DB: None of us could have anticipated June, by which time he had the nomination, but we were running third.

DW: Right. Although even that, I always felt, and I think I was more optimistic than most—I thought we had done what we had to do. The public image, yes it was very poor at that time, but the gap between the public image and who he really was, was so great that ultimately people would see that—and the gap between public image and who he really was would narrow. It did narrow as a result of the appearances on shows like *Arsenio Hall*. We had that big, big week where Bush and Perot went at each other and we came out with our economic plan. In a year where people desperately wanted details, were tired of politics as usual. I actually think that week was the turning point.

DB: Before the Gore nomination?

DW: Before the Gore nomination, although the Gore nomination certainly had the effect of—for a lot of people—of educating people on who Bill Clinton was. And the convention. Those things were all crucial. But I really think it was that week, when Bush and Perot were slinging mud and Bill Clinton just kept his head down and came out with an economic program. We did all the television around it. That was a big week.

DB: And then followed by the triumphant bus trip. When did you first think about that?

DW: We thought about it about three or four weeks before the convention. Victory has a million parents and there are others who believe that they had the idea, too. I'm sure they did. I'm sure there were a number of people at that time.

DB: You saw that “geographic invitation” there.

DW: Right. There's no question about that. Here's my thinking about it. I thought, "You've got Perot in the studio. You've got Bush in the White House. Neither are really close to the people. Bill Clinton's great strength is his ability to communicate, draw energy, give energy back to average folks. Why not play to that strength?" We knew we were going to get attacked as liberals and tax-and-spend Democrats from Mars that don't share the values of average Americans. Why not play to that strength? Why not do something that totally belies that critique and go where the people are? Go to small towns. Go to where the Electoral College showdown states are in the country. I always thought the Mississippi River, Ohio River were kind of keys to our Electoral College strategy. So we mapped out a route from New York to St. Louis. We had a big debate about whether we should go through the industrial cities from New York to Chicago, rather than through the southern and central tiers of these states on the way to St. Louis. I was absolutely adamant about going through the southern and central parts of these states, because that just puts down the gauntlet. If you're going to win Ohio and Illinois and Pennsylvania, you have to be willing to compete with the Republican candidate in the southern and central and small town parts of these states, so I think it was absolutely the right thing to do.

DB: Could you have ever imagined it would be so spectacular a success as it was?

DW: No.

DB: What do you think happened out there? What made it so?

DW: Well, I remember talking to Gene Branstool, who is the only farmer that I know in Ohio who happens to be this big party chair. We went to his farm. Gene Branstool said, "Wouldn't it be nice to go down to the restaurant at the crossroads from my

farm so the local Democrats could come by and say hello?” I said, “Well, how many people do you think would come?” He said, “Maybe four or five hundred people.” I said, “That’s okay. We’ll stop the bus. We’ll say hi to the local Democrats.” This is a county that Bush carried two to one. We got there and there were 10,000 people at the crossroads. I don’t know. I think that it was the convention.

DB: The convention turned the Clintons and Gores into celebrities in some ways.

DW: Yes. Yes. I think generational change was so clear. That message was so clear from the convention. I think we went to parts of the country that were not jaded. I think, frankly, if we had gone maybe to the urban centers—they’ve seen presidential candidates, it’s no big deal. But you go to Utica, Ohio—the last time a presidential candidate came by was William Howard Taft. Here were these two young guys and their wives and this new sense of energy, change, excitement. It really caught people’s imagination. It’s hard to say everything that went into it.

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

DW: I think there was a strategic consensus about the message of the campaign. That started with Bill Clinton when he was thinking about this race. The campaign was about a big idea. I think it encapsulizes it when he is asked, “Why are you in government?” Bill Clinton says it when he’s asked, “Why do you do this?” And he says, “Because I want to do all I can to allow anybody to make the most of their God-given potential.” That is completely different from trickle-down economics. That is a fundamentally different economic approach. All the policy prescriptions in

the world flow from that simple but big idea. I think we all understood it. We got it. People out in the field got it. The whole country got it. Unlike 1988, when we woke up the day after the election and people said, “What was that all about?” I think this year when people woke up after election day, they knew what it was all about. I think as campaigns go, it was more substantive than most and fully about a pretty big idea. I think that allowed the Rapid Response Team operation to work, because people knew what the response was. What we were doing. What the key idea was. That was very important. Secondly, there was a strategic consensus about how we were going to allocate resources. Which states we were going to target. That is not hard to do. That is not easy to do in an organization of this size and complexity and difficulty. But we stuck to it. I give Bill Clinton a lot of credit because I’m not sure he always bought into it, but he let us move forward on it anyway.

DB: There was always a hungering after Texas and Florida.

DW: Right. There’s always a hungering after Texas and Florida, but we were pretty disciplined. We took a look at a number of factors. We looked at the southern cultural affinity. We quantified that, actually. We looked at economic performance because many econometric studies suggest that change in disposable income is the single-best-predictor variable in presidential outcomes. We looked at that. We looked at Democratic performance in past presidential races. We looked at Democratic performances in non-presidential statewide races. And we looked at polling. We jumbled that all up and out came a list of states that we then applied common sense and political instincts to. We divided states into our “Top End,” “Play Hard,” and “Big Challenge” or “No Way” states. We started with the

assumption that we did not need to win 500 Electoral College votes in order to win the presidency. We needed to win 270. How many Electoral College votes should we put into play? We felt 370 which are the states that were our best chances, and it worked. We won thirty-one of the thirty-two states that we put into play. We won only one of the states that we did not. Clearly in retrospect had we put any kind of effort into Florida or Texas or Arizona, we would have won all three of those states, but we would have lost other states on the other end. I think that, from a management point of view, that kind of thing is not as sexy as other parts of the campaign, it is very hard to accomplish that kind of strategic consensus. It's sometimes hard to tell states the truth about where they stand, "We're not coming in." Or "We're not coming in unless you can demonstrate that you deserve to be put into play." But I think we had that consensus. We did tell the truth. People in the long run appreciated it, and in the long run it was one of the success stories of the campaign. Clearly the rapid-response operation was extraordinarily critical. The big lesson is that if you're attacked and if you fail to respond immediately—the first day the story is attack, the second day is a repetition of the attack with your defense, and then the third day is analysis of the response, and so on. If you respond on the same day you're attacked, that's the story of the day. It truly was one of the breakthrough aspects of the campaign. It gave heart and confidence to people all across the country. I think that may have been as important as the specifics or the substantive of the campaign.

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

DW: Decentralized. I think we're lucky that we were never pushed. I don't think that this organizational structure, the tightness was ever tested the way it might have been. If we had ever dipped below, lost our lead, then we would have seen if this organizational structure was as tight as we've been given credit for. I think what we did have is four or five people who were very good, were not arrogant, were self-critical, who understood their jobs, the scope of their jobs, did it extremely well. I think we had that. Ninety-nine percent of all campaigns in the world don't have that. There was certainly a core group that did work well together. As in all campaigns, we did have our dysfunctions. A lot less than most.

DB: There were very few leaks to the press about turf battles, backstabbing, etc.

DW: I think for a campaign of this size and the intensity and scrutiny and this complexity of organization there were extraordinarily few leaks, there were extraordinarily few inside battles. There were a few.

DB: But it never became "the story."

DW: Yes. Again, we came out of the Democratic convention with a fifteen-point lead. And we were never behind. So that helps. Winning helps make a team more possible.

DB: So to some extent we were lucky that we could have such a decentralized operation.

DW: I think that is right.

DB: Do you think there were any strengths to it?

DW: Yes. There are very, very many strengths. I'd like to think that even if we were pushed we could have come together and made it work. I think there were an extraordinary number of strengths. There was more collegial decision making.

Things get vetted more extensively. There is no single person with all the power, so I think our campaign had its own internal system of checks and balances. Nothing crazy ever could emerge, because it would be stopped somewhere.

DB: There seemed to be an extraordinary sense of everybody feeling included and important and valued.

DW: I think so. I mean, we certainly tried hard to establish that. I like to make the corollary to football. There are two kinds of management styles. One is like Mike Ditka's. The other is Joe Gibbs's. Mike Ditka's style works sometimes. You have to rate your staff. There is a high level of paranoia. Kick them in the ass. The thing about Mike Ditka's football teams that has always struck me is they're great in September, and they stink in December. Joe Gibbs, on the other hand, treats his players with respect. Brings them into the process. Takes blame upon himself when they do poorly. Builds confidence. They are not so good in September, but they're really good in December. Joe Gibbs has won more Super Bowls than Mike Ditka ever will. I think we had decent people at the top of the campaign that cared about people, that encouraged people. There was not an arrogance about our campaign. We were self-critical, maybe overly so in some ways, but we were. I think we tried very, very hard to establish an atmosphere in the campaign where people could, yes, work very hard for Bill Clinton, but also achieve goals and aspirations that they had for themselves. I think that's good management. I think we were pretty well managed. I think Eli Segal deserves a lot credit for that. I think that he in many ways helped to set the tone for the campaign.

DB: Well, he thinks you did.

DW: I probably say both he and I had something to do with it, but others as well. I think that was the general atmosphere.

DB: When were you certain that he would win the presidency? When did you realize that you were going to have a guy in the White House?

DW: Probably for an absolute certainty that I thought we were going to win this thing was when my mother called me after George Bush made the “Bozo” comment. My mother, who is not particularly political, thought that was so unpresidential. I thought, “Bush is giving away his stature advantage.” I mean, no matter what, the president, the incumbent president enjoys the fact he’s the president. Kids look up to him. And for him to have kind of lost it out there, I thought, “This is over.” Clearly the Weinberger memo put the icing on the cake.

DB: This is so funny, David. Here you are the strategist, the econometrics guy, all of those tracking polls, Stan Greenberg’s analyses, and when you really knew was when your mother called you.

DW: That’s right. When my mother called and said, “This is bad. I can’t believe the president . . .” That’s it. Also when the economic data did not turn around in late September, I started to think, “Bush is through.”

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

DW: The absolute low point you can’t really use in your book, because . . . The low point was the combination of the draft story and Gennifer Flowers. The one-two hit. I worked on the Biden campaign, and we took a one-two-three hit and we were out. Those hits weren’t even close to the hits we took.

DB: So for you it was deja vu all over again. What was different this time, if these were much more serious?

DW: What was different were Bill and Hillary Clinton. Casting no aspersions on Joe Biden, he's great. But the people around him [and maybe he, himself] were ready to pack it in and retreat. You had the Bork hearings coming up and I think he made a judgment that was probably in the best interest of the country at that point. The people in Washington who were around him just kind of packed it in. In this case, you had Hillary Clinton get on a big conference call with everybody and say, "Let me tell you something. We are going to fight this thing, because this campaign is about something bigger than us. We're going fight to the end." There was never any question that we were going to fight. Bill Clinton said the same thing, and by every action along the trail showed that he had the guts and commitment to see this thing through. I thought that was the difference. And we weren't in Washington. I think the fact we weren't in Washington, listening to everybody say we were dead. We didn't know it here and we just kept working.

DB: Were you surprised at the outpouring from Arkansas of all the "Travelers" that came up to testify and witness?

DW: Oh Arkansans were great. Going back to the early money, the \$900,000 that Little Rock had December 16 may have been the difference between getting knocked out of the race or not after the New Hampshire primary. No other state had that kind of outpouring of support for their favorite son as did Arkansas. That always amazed me that we could raise that kind of money that early, here. The Arkansas Travelers were fantastic, the people willing to sign an ad up in New Hampshire, Senator Pryor

going up there—I think we all learned a lesson about commitment and dedication from people here in Arkansas.

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

DW: There have been a lot of high points. Winning is always a high point. One of the high points for me was an Ohio farm. It was the first time I had seen a bus trip, and it's the rolling hills of central Ohio. To see the nine buses coming over the rolling hills approaching the farm, that was pretty much a magical moment. There was something about going over the top—maybe for me personally at the convention, not so much the announcement speech, but when we got the delegates to go over the top and Bill Clinton came out to say thank you—that to me was a very, very big moment. But there have been so many. Hopefully the biggest moments are yet to come.

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

DW: I think that it was about a big idea. I think that's important because political scientists, like everybody else—it's easy to be cynical. Sometimes the closer you get to it, the easier it is to be cynical. I think ultimately this election was about an important big idea, and people voted against cynicism and voted for hope. I know that sounds hackneyed and maybe it is, but I do believe it. I think that's important and it's important that that be thought about—what that means for political campaigns moving forward. I think somebody has to think through the extraordinary willingness of the American people to—when it was so easy to think the worst of Bill Clinton they actually saw the best. Maybe this is not the kind of

thing you're looking for, but why was it that people were willing to look beyond? What was it about our campaign that allowed it to survive these extraordinary shots. Certainly this campaign will allow the baby-boomer generation to run and participate without fear. I think there are certainly some things tactically that we did very well. They'll be commented on. The rapid-response operation. Our stick-to-itiveness on our Electoral College strategy, I think, was very strong. Ultimately, what struck me I think was that the campaign always was about Bill Clinton, certainly during the primaries—who he was, what he stood for, and the American people responded. The rest is the history for you to write.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]