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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with William (Bill) Burton

Campaign Position: Advisor; Energy Policy Coordinator

Little Rock, Arkansas

February 4, 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. William D. Burton 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 Blair Papers and prepared for publication by the editorial staff of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: Bill, begin with how you began your association with the Clinton campaign? I know you go way back with them.

Bill Burton: A few weeks before Bill announced, he was in Austin at a DLC event and also had a fund-raiser there that night and I went. I mentioned then to him that I suspected that he was going to run and if that was the case to please let me know. I was anxious to do it. When they announced that day, I wrote a long letter to Hillary, because I knew that would be the route to go. I basically offered to do anything, from legal to press. I got two calls fairly soon thereafter. One that week from Garry Mauro, the Texas Land Commissioner who I'd met at Bill's fund-raiser, but he didn't remember me. He called me and asked me to come over to his office. I had been in Austin less than two years at that point. I went over to his office and he says, "What do you want to do in this campaign?" I said, "Well anything." He said, "I think I'm going to run Clinton's campaign here and I got a call from Hillary today saying that you were down here and until they figure out what they are going to do with you in the national campaign, we need to let you do any and every thing you want to do because you're one of the smartest people she and Bill knows." I said, "Well, I don't really have a political background at all. I'm interested in politics and I've covered it, but I've never been in a

campaign." He said, "So you don't want to be state director?" It was real interesting because clearly what she had said—indicated that whatever I wanted and she meant that. So I got involved that way and then it was really doing state campaign stuff until they hired Wilhelm and Stephanopoulos. And again, within a day of hiring them it seemed like I got a call from George Stephanopoulos, introducing himself to me and finding out what, if anything, I wanted to do in the national campaign. I said, "Anything I could do, provided I stay based in Austin." I didn't want to join the national campaign full-time.

DB: So what did you end up doing for the campaign?

BB: I had several roles—I guess basing what I spent the most time on, what I wound up being was energy policy coordinator for the national campaign, which involved a lot. It involved putting together the energy policy group of advisors. It involved working on drafting an energy policy, including preparing Bill Clinton's debate preparation materials on energy and environmental issues. It involved answering questionnaires. Working with staff members on crises that arose, which occasionally happened. The ethanol crisis, gas taxes, import fees, offshore drilling, Yucca Mountain. But I mean, genuinely, that was just one of my many roles during the campaign. I worked with you and Betsey at some length on doing defense work, so to speak. I was state counsel for the Texas campaign. That happened real early on. In January or February, I got a call from the national council and Bruce Lindsey had given my name as a lawyer they knew

in Texas who would do that. That involved putting together a network of lawyers, both for the primary and general election. Ready to respond to specific things. Basically kind of playing "gofer" of the national council on making sure the filings were done properly, making sure we had our national electors in place.

DB: You were trying to practice law while you were doing all this?

BB: Well, that's right. I continued to maintain my practice. My billable hours suffered tremendously as a result. I didn't go off the chart. I was involved quite a bit in fund-raising, which a lot of people don't know. I helped organize an energy and environment fund-raiser in Washington and raised about $100,000. I worked with DNC finance out of Washington a lot, in working on organizing fund-raisers, raising money. Participated in several seminars in policy meetings, where we discussed that. Raised, gosh, well over a million dollars, all told.

DB: Was it tough for you to know that Texas was not going to be seriously in play?

BB: It's kind of funny. During the campaign, I felt much more like an Arkansan than a Texan most of the time. Except when I dealt with people from Little Rock, I felt like a Texan. In Texas I was viewed as an Arkansan. So most of the time I felt like an Arkansan, and I think that had something to do with it. But I perfectly understood why Texas wasn't being targeted. Finally, the Texas group came around and accepted the Alamo team thought. Which is, there's a few of us, but we will draw off a lot of Republican dollars by what we're doing. And we did that. We did a little pinpoint stuff. We did the bus tour through Texas, which I thought was a terrific thing on the heels of the Republican convention . It was kind of an "in your face" tour, I thought. By doing spot dollars here and there,

just a tiny little bit, I think we wound up getting $50,000 from the Clinton campaign. A little more from the DNC.

DB: That was just a drop in the bucket.

BB: It was just a drop in the bucket. We drew off literally millions of dollars. I don't know what the final count was—I heard, $2.5 million, I heard $4 million at different times—of the Republican's money in Texas as a result. I felt we were very much a part of the national victory, and I understood the strategy perfectly.

DB: Where there some Texans that never did?

BB: Yes. At the request of the Texans, I went to bat for them every time. You remember when Beatty and I came down and visited with Wilhelm and worked with him. But I would always call. I mean, I never took it personally when they opted to go somewhere else and Texas never became a target state. I understood the strategy perfectly. It was a good strategy. A lot of Texans, real interestingly, thought it was Begala and Carville, who actually had a pretty good Texas background, but who didn't want to play Texas because they had been, quite frankly—and I think Paul and James would admit this—they'd been beaten in Texas, time and time again. Their success was outside Texas, so there was some thought that Carville, particularly—and Paul was a UT law graduate, so he loved to get to Austin—they thought Carville just didn't want to play Texas because he hadn't had luck there in the past.

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

BB: That's really hard to say. I think it comes down to the individuals involved. It was much more a personality, individual-driven effort than it was—there was some magic to the organization, 'cause it didn't have an organization structure. I remember real early going to Little Rock at Craig Smith's invitation to get an idea of how the campaign was structured. One of the things I'd hoped to do while in Little Rock was get an organizational chart. Or at least kind of sketch one out in my mind. By the end of the campaign, I made this comment, "You really have to do it on a computer screen so it would be moving. It reminded me of a cell. Like you watch a picture of a cell with it crawling around and different parts of it are in ascendancy or descendancy all the time." That's really what it seemed to me. By the end of the campaign it was such a smooth operation. It was almost like a living organism. People knew when they needed to duck and other people knew when they needed to take the lead role in things. But that was it. It was personality. I think it was a combination of Bill and Hillary's personalities and abilities, James Carville and Stephanopoulos. Everybody kind of knew what needed to be done. That's what it seemed like, to me.

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

BB: Yes. If you tried to impose that kind of organizational structure, which was almost none when you came right down to it, you never knew who to appeal a decision to, for example. If you really wanted to get something done. I mean if you just absolutely had to get dollars into some TV market to counter an offensive, or you just absolutely had to get the campaign to take a position on this

widget issue, you never said, "Okay, absolutely this is one that Stephanopoulos has to handle." You just didn't know. So you would make calls and you would go through the Bruce Lindsey route and the George Stephanopoulos route and the Hillary Clinton route, maybe, or the Diane Blair route. You would go through all the different channels. But without the particular different mix of personalities, I'm not sure it would have happened. You hate to say that when you're trying to analyze it afterwards. I read, I can't think of their names, the two political science professors who write a book on presidential elections every four years. I was thinking how they are going to put this one in the formula and you really aren't going to be able to. I think that happens more times than one would think in political science. But this one, absolutely, I don't think you're going to be able to pigeonhole in any formula. What do you do? You tell people to hire an eclectic mix of talent. And a lot of it is—well, it is youth driven. It was all these young people. But you know, Eli Segal had a whole lot to do with that victory. Mickey Kantor had a whole lot to do with the victory. Harold Ickes. I don't know that you can say that, when you look at the state organizations.

DB: So there was no organizational formula?

BB: No, it absolutely was not. It was the right mix of people. Who, I suppose, were working with the right motivations.

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

BB: I think I was convinced after Illinois. But surely I knew before then. Surely I had at least an inkling before then. I do specifically recall Illinois.

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

BB: Coming out of the Republican convention, believe it or not. I felt like we had done it. I felt like the difference, it clearly showed that the Bush organization wasn't the old GOP organization. I think it was Bush's failings that convinced me. I thought because of the way the Clinton organization was put together, I wasn't sure that against a tremendously strong other organization, that it could have been pulled off. I saw how disorganized Bush was. I thought at that point it was too late for Baker to make a difference. If Bush could convinced his old buddy to sign on early, maybe they could have. But after that Republican convention, I knew.

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

BB: New Hampshire. I think a lot of people hit the same place. I was working away and had been going for three or four months come February 1992. And then the stuff started hitting. The new stories started hitting. The thing that most concerned me was when I looked on the TV and I saw Bill Clinton and he was puffing and he had gained some weight. He just wasn't the Bill Clinton that I was used to. But then something happened. That's when I said, "I've just got to get involved." So I called someone you named, Jennifer Smith, who was working in New Hampshire. We talked about Yucca Mountain earlier on. I called Jennifer about ten days before the primary, and I said, "I don't know what's going on up there, but I understand some folks from Arkansas are coming up—do you think it would be silly if I came up?" She said, "No, come on up." I was really glad. She said, "Absolutely you need to come up. He needs people like you up here." So I went and bought a last minute ticket, which really broke the bank personally and

put Melissa and I behind the rest of the year. But I got to New Hampshire about the time David Leopolous, another old friend of Clinton who had driven up. He had already been up there once before. We hit the campaign headquarters almost within thirty minutes of each other. They had a young staff member who drove us out to the mall where Clinton was. We shared a hotel room in Merrimack.

DB: Did Clinton see you right away?

BB: It was a little bit before we saw him. We missed him at the mall, but we saw him at a rally that night in Nashua or some place like that. It was worth the trip. Every time I gave out a button or bumper sticker, which I know in the long run didn't make any difference I don't think, but in my heart it made all the difference in the world. Being up there late at night, sharing a hotel room, which is something that a lot of folks at our age don't do. But David and I were having these discussions about our old friend and pal. How he was going to come out of this. I think we were both trying to pump each other up. It was a low point, but emotionally it became the high point. There wasn't anything else that reached that kind of thing. And I was a delegate.

DB: Were you there election night in New Hampshire?

BB: Yes, I was there. I stayed the whole time and flew out the next morning. I was there at a lot of the other key points in the deal, including the Democratic convention. I was a delegate from Texas and I went to Little Rock for election night. But nothing gave me the kind of boost that watching Bill Clinton on the day before the New Hampshire primary. That was the high point. I knew he was coming back. I knew he would be fine coming out of New Hampshire. He had

gone to the people. We had kind of built it up with the rally. Then we had that tour around the state. I was a driver basically for the four of us in our group. Leopolous, Carolyn Staley—and just seeing those dear old friends of Clinton's. It was a real, real treat. I'm very glad to have had at least one point in the campaign where I got to do that.

DB: Are there any things looking back that you wished had been done differently?

BB: Oh gosh, right now, I wish we had been a little more careful about what we said about the economy and the numbers. That's hard to say. No huge things. Obviously, if we could get Hillary to retract the "tea and cookies" statement. A few months ago I would have said if we could get Bill to retract the "I didn't inhale" comment. On the whole, I don't know if that was a negative. I think it showed he was human. I think to me anyway, it was real evidence that the guy hadn't been programmed and it convinced a lot of people that he wasn't. Overall, I think the campaign did what needed to be done. I would not have played Texas in the long run.

DB: What is it that you want the future to understand about this campaign?

BB: The idea of change versus more of the same was my favorite slogan of the campaign, my favorite sign in the "War Room." You had people who were really locked into that idea. They did believe that. They believed in hope. They were an optimistic group. They were not doing it from a personal power perspective. I think evidence of that is, quite frankly, how lousy the transition went. I think it showed the clear difference between the Clinton election and the Reagan election. I think there were some similarities but I think the biggest difference was the

Clinton people were truly optimistic about the future, were truly "Can't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" the Fleetwood Mac song. They were truly so intent on this person bringing about this movement, bringing about change, making America a better place for everybody, that we couldn't waste an ounce of effort in getting the person elected to do that. If we got him elected it would happen. I guess I'm a little nervous about saying that because a lot of time the kind of people that attract that kind of following are people you would not necessarily want for president. What was good about this one was the people that had just met Bill Clinton, like Stephanopoulos, had pretty close to the same feelings to those of us who had known him for years and those people who had known him since childhood. So that, I think, was a good sign. Somebody I read somewhere, said, "Bill Clinton has the first friend he ever met and the guy he met fifteen minutes ago, he counts both as dear friends." I think that's true. The problem there, again, we are back to—it's a personality-driven thing. I guess my message is, when you see another Bill Clinton out there, the same thing will happen. This same destiny that brought us behind him.

DB: Is there anything that you think is being described that you're afraid that history will not get right?

BB: I'm a little concerned and I think it's hard for me to know whether history is going to recount the inside stories like you saw in the news magazines the week after the election or the stories the average American knows from the campaign. I hope the story is the one the average American knows because I think that's the real story of the campaign. In other words, they could have done all the

manipulating they wanted to, and I don't know to what extent the new magazines got it right on how basically they decided to go in and reshape Hillary Clinton. What Hillary did thereafter followed some formula. If that was going on, it wasn't obvious to me. I felt pretty much like an insider. What I hope is that the story gets told is that story going on out in the states. Like in Texas, where you have folks like Garry Mauro, Roy Spence, Judy Trabulsi, Nancy Williams. People who had known Clinton for twenty years, since they met him in the McGovern campaign, out there working harder for him than they would for anybody else they'd ever met. I mean, if one of them ran, it would be that kind of thing. And that's what made the difference in this case. Along with the people that met Clinton one-on-one. I really do think that made huge difference. It wasn't so much this orchestrated image maker. I think that was nice, I think it was very important to the success. What Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth Thomason did. What Carville did. What Mandy Grunwald and Frank Greer did. I think that was important to the mix, but I do think you can over estimate it. Now, I realize that other people would tell a different story, but that is mine.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]