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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with James Carville

Campaign Position: Senior Strategist

Washington, D.C.

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. James Carville 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.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: When did you officially join the Clinton campaign and what originally were your responsibilities?

James Carville: I officially joined the campaign on December 1, 1991. Like most people, when I first joined my responsibilities were probably unclear, but we were going to be consultants or advisers to the campaign and the candidate.

DB: And over time your responsibilities changed?

JC: Exactly. It took until the Christmas holidays just to sort of get the lay of the land and who everybody was, and get up to speed on what everybody was talking about, what the race was about. After January 1, we got more and more engaged.

DB: What were your duties and responsibilities?

JC: I think it was pretty ill-defined. It got so when the Gennifer Flowers thing kicked in, it basically became more news management than anything, I guess. Working out of New Hampshire, it evolved into the role of the strategist for the New Hampshire primary. After New Hampshire, my role changed somewhat. I left for Georgia about four o'clock in the afternoon of the New Hampshire primary, when the exit polls showed we were running second and we were going to be around for another day. Went down to Georgia and took sole focus for that because we felt strategically we couldn't win the race with a loss of the Georgia primary. Substantially, it would have cost us any chance to win. After the Georgia primary, my role shifted a little bit. I stayed pretty involved through Super Tuesday. Super Tuesday, Georgia—with South Carolina being on a Saturday. I

traveled a good bit with the governor that week in the South. We had some debates, one in Dallas. Then went down to Florida and did some work there. Then we went up to Illinois and Michigan. By that time, David was sort of ensconced there. Then we had the debate in Chicago. Worked a lot on the schedule and some of the events there. Then we went to Connecticut and the strategy became that we were going to concentrate on New York and not Connecticut. And then we got beat in Connecticut, so we really had to concentrate on New York. I moved to New York, maybe two or three weeks before the New York primary. Then we were back in sort of a New Hampshire motif in New York. If I remember correctly, we had to deal with a variety of things up there. Right after the New York primary, the day of the New York primary, I think it was, I went in to see Mickey Kantor and said we need to start this Manhattan Project, where we thought after the win in New York we were going to win and it was foolish for the strategic people to be involved in the ongoing process thing. The ongoing primary thing. Because we felt like we had real serious election problems and we hadn't figured out what they were and how we were going to address things like that."

DB: What was his response?

JC: It was very positive. He said fine. It was myself, Stan Greenberg, and Mandy basically formed the core of what we called the Manhattan Project—where we got money and started doing focus groups and research, and things like that. We just felt we were unfocused and we had rise in negatives and decline in positives. The feeling from the party was they were going to be stuck with Governor Clinton as

the nominee. We learned a lot from that process. After the California primary, there was a general feeling of real urgency there, but I think by that time we had a lot more figured out. We knew a lot more what our problems were. I think we were a little closer to the answer. In June, it was sort of a "stand up to" month in the campaign, where we were going to do some kinds of counterscheduling. The most famous was the Sister Souljah event, which sort of evolved. And he started doing the *Arsenio Hall* stuff. I think by and large June was a pretty good month for the campaign, but we still sort of lacked a strategic center. It was still sort of floundering, but George had taken over as kind of communications director. But there still wasn't a strategic center, a nerve center, if you will. I was spending most of my time in Washington, and I had made some trips down to Little Rock. And I think every time I came, I'd just get more of a sense that I knew what was coming in the general election, and I knew we were going to get hit from all sides. I thought we were very unprepared for general election warfare, but I did think we did have an idea of how to do it. We had a sort of a plan that was in place that we had as a result of this Manhattan Project, at least the outlines of it. That's when I went to Mrs. Clinton with this sort of concept of the "War Room." I talked to them in the mansion, at the iron table back there. She said fine. She said that she had talked to the governor that night and to go by and see him in the morning. I went by to see him and he said fine. It was one of those things that he said to go do, and she said to go do, but I think there was some internal resistance—lack of enthusiasm for setting it up. This was like two weeks before the convention—just couldn't seem to get it just right in place. We had the Gore thing going on,

getting ready for the convention. So we went to the convention and Perot dropped out, and things were pretty successful. Still, no one felt we could sort of sustain it, and we went back to Mrs. Clinton and said, "Look, we've got to have some enthusiasm here." So we had a meeting with the then-governor and said, "We've got to put this thing in place and boom, boom, boom." That was the last bastion of resistance.

DB: How did you envision the central purpose of the War Room? Did it change over time?

JC: It changed a little bit from its original form. It became more inclusive. It became bigger. In its original form, there would be a representative from everywhere. But one representative. I think that it became sort of infectious that everybody sort of wanted to do it, and we just came up with this thing, that we would just start revealing more and more. Until such time that there were leaks, that we would become more inclusive. It became a thing that everybody wanted to be a part of. We thought, "Why not, if that's what works." If you were in the Arkansas Record thing, you just didn't want to hear from Roger, you wanted to go to the meeting yourself. The same thing throughout. It was always intended to be inclusive, that everybody would know what was going on in the campaign. I think it became even more so than probably I originally envisioned. But outside of that, I think it held pretty true to what it was in its original concept.

DB: It was both the psychological boost of the day—the pep rally—but it was also a strategic operating center.

JC: Yes. It wasn't a pep rally. The decisions of the campaign got made. You could see in the morning what we wanted on the news. And you could watch the news that night and there it was. In retrospect, we had so much to do in a short period of time. Remember, after the convention we were just really starting up a lot of the opposition research. We were just starting up our theme. We were just starting stuff up. A lot had to get done in a very, very short period of time. Looking at it in retrospect, it's pretty clear we would have never been able to get it all done had we not had this sort of inclusive, infectious sort of enthusiasm. Where people were willing to have the extra bounce, run the extra mile, stay the extra hour, or whatever it was. It worked. It's one of the few things in life that actually worked better in practice than it did on paper. Usually, things work good on paper and when you put them into practice, they don't work as well.

DB: Let me ask you about something on paper. Did you ever see an organization chart of the campaign?

JC: No. If I'd seen one, I wouldn't have paid any attention to it. But if you talk to people who've been in other campaigns, they will all tell you that this campaign had a more streamlined, efficient, and quick decision-making process than either the Dukakis or Mondale campaigns.

DB: Which did have structured organizations.

JC: Exactly. I think because we started kind of diffuse and I think the governor had so many friends and people.

DB: Were you there when they had the fifty-person conference calls?

JC: Right. Oh yes. I think because of that if somebody would have put out a chart there was no way to get everybody on there. And if somebody would have seen their name somewhere, it would cause a major eruption. I think the real secret was, was not to have one. And to have this sort of amalgamation. But the War Room became the strategic center because that was just where people went. It just became acknowledged that it wouldn't work without this, and this is a better system than we had before. It worked because people wanted it to work. Why did they want it to work? Well, there are probably a lot of reasons. You know, necessity is the mother of invention. The campaign had to have that. It was the only way for it to go. It was necessary to have a center. People wanted it. They wanted one place to go. They wanted one place to get something done. Long before then, people were quite comfortable that they could get a hearing and that if something else came up and replaced it, it would just go back to the hierarchical, vertical kind of—who was the second floor, third floor type of thing that generally breeds a lot of resentment or confusion or inaction in a political campaign. Because a campaign is of a short duration, I think it's sort of less given to that type of thing. I think it is really sort of a function of Bill and Hillary Clinton because they had so many friends and there were so many different people out there that wanted to be heard from, that they wanted to hear from, that they wanted to help out. In a sense, the best thing to do was to open the floodgates and let everybody in. I also think having us in Little Rock was a big help.

DB: Were you part of that decision?

JC: No, I wasn't. To the extent that I had anything to do with it, I thought we'd be better off in Atlanta or Chicago because the air service is better. But, in retrospect, I don't think there were but two people involved in that decision. That was a decision that the Governor and Mrs. Clinton made. I think one of the smartest things I did is just never offered an opinion. Just took the position that it really wasn't any of my business, but if anybody asked, I'd say, "Why don't we do it in Atlanta?" But that would have been a mistake, too.

DB: Somebody I talked to described you as the psychological center of the campaign. Were you expected to be or was there a vacuum there that you just kind of filled?

JC: Remember there are very, very few people that ever come in contact in the country with the campaign headquarters, but yet it sets the tone for a campaign. A campaign has a culture just like anything else. A company has a culture. A university has a culture. A family has a culture. There's a way that your family does things. There's a time that you ate dinner. You dress a certain way on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Certain things you emphasize, not emphasize. Certain things that you felt you ought to do. A campaign sets a sort of culture. I think, in honesty, that I probably helped set the culture of the campaign. What was important, what was not important. The way that we did things. What were the things that we sort of stressed. And part of the culture had to obviously reflect what the candidate was, it had to be complementary to what the campaign was about. To a large extent, this campaign was about the action and change, difference and inclusion.

DB: Working hard?

JC: Working hard. And a lot of those things were part of the culture that was sort of embodied in the War Room. It was certainly less about your status, or the way that you looked, or the way you dressed, or where you were on the chart, or what corner your office was in. I didn't take an office. I think to a large extent one of the reasons that it succeeded is people like Mandy, Stan, and other people intentionally put their offices in there too, so people could see them. It was a very intentional thing so people would say, "This is open. This is where the people who make the decisions work. And you're part of this. This is what counts." We left the polls lying around. We didn't try to hide things. We didn't lock anything up. I think the real test of everything was we were a campaign that was almost leak free.

DB: Do you think that could have happened if we'd been in Washington?

JC: No, I don't. Never would have happened. So much of the culture that we were would not. And another thing, it was a little like kind of a boot camp. There were no distractions. You were down there to do a job. Schedules didn't vary. There was no distraction. You could, within five or ten minutes, predict where people were on the campaign. It was like people went down there with a job to do and they really didn't want to do anything else. I never heard anybody after the convention complain that gee, I wish we were back in New York. I can't go to a play. I think it worked because people wanted it to work. I wish I could say it worked because of the genius of me. Or it worked because of the genius of a certain group of people. I think in the end people went down there with a purpose and they saw this as the vehicle to get it done.

DB: When you say they went down there with a purpose, to what extent was it hunger and to what extent was it idealism? Did you ever wonder what all those people were doing there?

JC: Any party that's been out of power for twelve years it's certainly got something to do with hunger. I think the party was hungry. I think the people in it were hungry. I think there was a lot of idealism there. There was a lot of that sense of something different. One of my favorite stories is that one of Father Damian. He was a priest in the Philippines, dealing with the lepers. The reporters were covering him one day and he was washing those sores. The guy said, "I wouldn't do this for a million dollars." And the priest said, "Neither would I." I think it was more than just getting power for the sake of power. I think people felt there was something they wanted to do with the power they got.

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

JC: I think the California primary. We were not scheduled very well, we didn't have the larger sense of what we were about. We didn't know what to do. We didn't know how to talk about the economy. We were sort of intimidated by the riots. We just didn't seem to have very much to us in that period of time. And actually that whole period of time from New York to California.

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

JC: Forget election night, because that's not fair. Up to the first debate, I didn't like being away. The debate prep that week was really upsetting because you didn't have the sort of normal thing you had. I think when we came back, it was kind of sprint to an end. The election was pretty much set by then. We came back with

maybe a seven-point lead, and the race ended up five and a half points. I think everybody kind of knew what was going to happen.

DB: Did you have a favorite event or memory?

JC: The Richmond debate was one of my favorites. Any time that he was with people, that you saw him on TV—I like to think the *Larry King* thing we did off the bus tour—any of the sort of wholesale events. I guess one of my favorite times was when he knew the price of a dozen eggs. And blue jeans. I guess it was the *CBS Morning News*, one of the morning shows—I forget, exactly, which one.

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

JC: The New York primary.

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

JC: The Sunday before. I wanted to hear the first exit poll and everything. But, in all candor, we thought we were going to win Monday night.

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

JC: I just hope the culture that permeated the campaign goes into the government. I think if we ran a good campaign and don't do some of the things we set out to do, then it would have been for naught. I hope, in terms of being a political professional, that's what I do. I think we had a pretty open campaign in the sense of what it was about—what we were. Maybe that will make future campaigns more open. But we were about enthusiasm and change and inclusion. Everybody sort of working together. If the same people go into government and fight over parking places and office spaces, titles, and things like that, then it would have all

been for naught. It would have been one grand summer camp that we all went to. If the spirit of it and the culture of it brings about change, then it would have been worth something. I'm optimistic, but it remains to be seen if people carry through with it. It's like anything else, no person is going to make this work. The people in the government and administration are going to have to want it to work. The War Room didn't work because of me, it worked because people wanted it to work. They believed in what they were doing. They believed in the system. They believed in Bill Clinton. And they believed in each other.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]