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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Jeff L. Eller

Political Communications Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 3, 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. Jeff L. Eller 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: Jeff, your position with the campaign is?

Jeff Eller: Political communications director. That doesn't mean much.

DB: But this is not where you began with the campaign. You want to just quickly walk me through your positions with the campaign?

JE: I started the week after Thanksgiving, ran Florida, did the straw poll, was state director through Super Tuesday. Came to the headquarters. For a while was the headquarters press secretary. Utility infielder. Spent some time on the plane during the primary when we were stretched pretty thin. And then ended up overseeing state press operations, satellite feeds, radio feeds, town hall meetings, and the unknown of new technology with computer bulletin boards and stuff like that.

DB: The wonderful Florida straw poll was a terrific early boost. Could you say a few things about that first? Then I really want to get into some of the innovations of our communications.

JE: Well, the straw poll I still think was one of the early defining moments of the campaign because it gave us credibility—showed that he could win outside of, at that time, the perceived base. Florida being such a diverse state, it showed him as a more national candidate. And we won because we had a much better organization and worked it better than others did. Harkin came in as the perceived front-runner because of labor's dominance in the Democratic Party, but I think what they did is they assumed people would vote for them and they didn't count their votes very well. And we also had a lot of fun doing it. Hillary was

there. When the delegates checked into their room, their voice mail was blinking and it was a message from the governor. That was pretty cool. They also got—at the dinner on Saturday night before the vote on Sunday, we had fortune cookies made up on everybody's plate that said, "Bill Clinton is in your future." It was a lot of fun.

DB: As political communications director what do you do? And especially what do you do that is different from what presidential campaigns have done in the past?

JE: GOTV in this campaign meant "Get on television." We were committed from the top down to building a state structure whose goal was to get the message on TV in targeted markets where persuadable voters lived. We did that through a variety of means. We tried to hire press secretaries and state directors who weren't bound by tradition in how they thought. That they were willing to experiment with free media events. Not afraid to divert resources from the traditional phone banks and lit drops to building events that were designed to get on television and radio when the candidate was not in the state. And I remember the state directors training right after the convention, and you could see that it was a different group of people than what you might have seen in past presidential campaigns.

DB: Younger, or just not from the traditional political ranks?

JE: Not what I would call from the traditional political ranks. There were some real newcomers out there.

DB: Did a lot of them have communications backgrounds?

JE: Some did. It's people who understood that it was okay to go on the *Arsenio Hall Show*. And that it's okay to not go on the *Brinkley* show. They get that part of it.

There's a bit of a generational thing. And what I did was try to build a structure to accomplish this and then let that do its job. When I was state director in Florida, I was out there by myself. If I had not had my own computer and my own modem, I got nothing. So I vowed that state press secretaries and state directors would not be in a vacuum. So that's why I pushed for the wires and the computers that managed the wires. And with Bill Krause the e-mail system, so that every three or four hours they would get relevant wire stories and they could get speech transcription. They could get the Hot Line and they could get Green Wire. And the talking points. So if anything, we gave them too much. For the first time ever, they complained they were getting too much. But what Craig and I tried to do was give them a menu from which to pick. "Okay, here's what the candidate is going to do today. The candidate is going to go out and talk about health care. Now if you in your state are doing crime today, that's fine. Go do health care another day. If you can do health care today and it dovetails, great." We tried to give them a menu from which they could pick to always have something that they could light up a media market from. But we didn't force them to do the message of the day. It was just, "Do something. If it works with what the candidate's doing that day, fine." And the great part was they all got the message.

DB: Then did they gather ideas from each other so that if somebody in Ohio did something great, they'd share that?

JE: Yes. See, one of the benefits of having the press cluster system was when we went through every night before the War Room meeting, the hits—for example, I remember when the "Chicken" made its first appearance in Michigan. We all

thought that was a great idea. So at that meeting that night we started encouraging other states to do it. If it worked in one state, go try it in another. So I think the press cluster people were great, as evidenced by—I went away for almost ten days to go do debates, and it was great, really, really great.

DB: What about this constant use of surrogates on satellites? New or not?

JE: It's not that it's new. It's just that we, I think, did a better job of it and did more of it. We knew the markets that we wanted them to go into.

DB: So it all began with the targeting?

JE: Right. And what we called the satellite feeds was a tribute to Tully. Because it really was his numbers that drove where we did this. They did some of it in 1988, but I don't get the sense that they had the guidance. One of the first things I did when we had all the cluster people and the satellite people and the radio people on board was to put them in that back conference room with Paul Tully and have him explain it. They looked at those maps and they became converts. You go talk to the satellite people and they'll tell you, "No, we can't go to that market, it's not a persuadable market." So they really did pick it up. We just did more of it because it has become easier to do satellite feeds. It's become cheaper than it was four years ago. We didn't really do anything new with the technology, but what we did do was make sure that when we put somebody somewhere we had a purpose for doing it.

DB: I noticed once when I traveled with Hillary, every spare moment she'd be going into a studio somewhere, so that just became part of maximum use of a candidate's time?

JE: Yes. You can be in eight or ten other media markets in a day along with the one or two that you hit with your body. And what happened was the scheduling people for Gore and Tipper and Hillary would come to us and say, "We want to do a feed today." One thing we did do that I'm not sure was done in 1988 was we would take entire events and make those available on satellite—speeches and rallies.

DB: And who took them?

JE: That's a hard thing to quantify. We saw through our state reports comments about—local affiliates had pulled pieces off of our feed. But one thing we did learn was there is such a heavy emphasis now on affiliate news services—the NBC news channel, the ABC news one—they don't work under the same restrictions that the network itself does. So they don't feel compelled to not take a Clinton/Gore-sponsored feed. So what we would find was that within an hour of an event going up, the news channels would pull stuff and move it because they didn't have to wait to get it from the crew on the scene and have it fed from New York. So they would take stuff regardless, and we were almost assured that we would get a bite pulled out of that. So that really, really worked. And when we had the time, two or three days in advance, to let states know to do promotion and let television stations know, we were pretty sure that a lot of stations did pull stuff off.

DB: One of the things that I have heard from my interviews is how meaningful it was for people who never got out on the road to see these things on BCTV.

JE: That was a benefit that we had never planned for, but in hindsight—I remember in the primary there was a huge disconnect between here and the road. You had to wait for somebody to call and tell you how an event went. And a lot of times they didn't. And it didn't come back in the right kind of form. And I just think it was invaluable to be able to sit at your desk and watch an event or watch a speech in real time And since we were such a free-media-driven campaign even at the top, it allowed you to get on the phone and tell the wires and things like that how a speech went without having to be there and be able to speak accurately. So if someone called you and said, "Well, the governor said today . . . ," you didn't have to wait to hear from someone on the road how it went or what it looked like when he said it.

DB: Did you also have a hand in sweeping the skies until we found the opposition stuff coming out?

JE: Well, that's just the benefit of having a satellite dish. It's no different than having a satellite dish in your backyard. That's the same kind we got. Not anything super-duper or magic. But what we did become accustomed to was certain satellites are used by news organizations all the time. So through trial and error we would know where to start looking. And you also knew that if a speech was happening later in the day, the White House press corps would pool it, and we would look for the network pool. Because by pooling it, they could take the video down in New York and take the script from their reporter and just pull bites and stuff like that so they didn't have to feed. And that's how we found a lot of that stuff was off the White House pool.

DB: The other morning somebody announced at the War Room meeting that Perot was going to do this infomercial on "Deep Voodoo and Chicken Feathers," so I asked if there was any way we could get that before it runs Sunday night. Pretty soon, by late that afternoon, they had it, which gave us more than twenty-four hours—

JE: You know that's because Perot is stupid. Perot bought a block of time on the same satellite on the same transponder every day. And then he told everybody where it was. So we knew every day that the Perot feed was going to be at one o'clock, and we'd just go look for it. But that was just more stupidity on their part than it was anything else.

DB: But we were able to get some opposition ads in advance?

JE: Yeah. Because people use pretty much the same vendor to do that stuff. And a lot of times it was just talking with our vendors, or somebody in Greer's office would find out and call us and tell us where to look for it. The *Time* magazine ad, remember that? Well, now that's a real huge success story because what happened was our Michigan press secretary got a bootleg copy and we satellited on a half hour's notice out of Detroit—recorded it here, recorded it in Kansas City, and recorded it in Washington. Had we not had this structure in place, hadn't been using it, we would not have been able to make that happen. And that gave us forty-eight hours' notice.

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

JE: I worked for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

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?

JE: Well, that's 20-20 hindsight. Because four months ago there were a lot of people that said we didn't have the depth to run a presidential campaign. There's nothing like victory to make you look good.

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

JE: I mean victory makes everything look wonderful, but this is the first campaign I ever worked in that did not have a central command—did not have a single campaign manager—and I've never been particularly comfortable with that. Wasn't comfortable with it in this campaign. You had to go to too many places to talk to too many people to get one thing done and it wasted a lot of time. But with that comes some flexibility. I never had a problem doing any of the things that I wanted to do other than having to go to four or five people and make sure everybody knew what I was doing. But it also, you know, one person would say, "Yeah, let's do it," and it was looser in that sense. Sometimes you could move faster and get things done, but other times it really seemed to make the process really bog down. It's not how I would do it, but it worked here. And I think it worked here because the people that ran the campaign, I think, genuinely respected each other. I don't think they always liked each other, but I think they respected each other. Nobody was excluded. It was more collegial. People were really concerned about stepping on people's toes and being heavy-handed. It sometimes slowed down the process, but you never felt that you couldn't offer an idea and that you would be laughed at. And that happens in a lot of campaigns. I mean, people come in with an idea and they'd say, "Oh, you know, you're just

twenty-two, what do you know?" I don't think that happened here. That was one of our strengths. When you look at George and James and David and Eli, they're people who wanted to lead by consensus as opposed to lead by strength. And there are times when I wished we would have had more discipline at the top, but overall—again, victory hides a lot of faults. I probably wouldn't set it up that way.

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

JE: Jeff Watson and I shared an office in Tallahassee, and it was during the time period of Gennifer Flowers and the draft. And Watson and I weren't feeling very good and he looked over at me and he said, "What do you think?" And I said, "Well, I still think we're going to get the nomination." And all we have to do is not make too many mistakes between the convention and November, because the people of this country are going to vote George Bush out of office."

DB: So you saw it all pretty much at once, once he got the nomination.

JE: I figured if we got the nomination, that they're going to vote George Bush out of office.

DB: And when exactly did you think he was going to get the nomination?

JE: Coming out of New Hampshire. Because nobody had the organizational strength that we did. Nobody had the ability to capture money like we did. And had Tsongas been able to take advantage of New Hampshire—he lost a boatload of money by not being able to capture the match. And he got crippled. And he got money that came in, they didn't know how to spend it, they didn't know what to do with it, so they started throwing it places that didn't make any sense. And then

they ran out of money again. If Tsongas had had a little better organization and better planning, then he would have been a bigger threat.

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

JE: I think the hardest time for the campaign for me was in May. Because we had the nomination locked, but we kept just getting the shit beat out of us. We were running third, we were three million, four million dollars in debt, and we just couldn't get away from it. And it didn't make any sense.

DB: So what turned it around?

JE: What turned it around was the convention. Well, after California then people started realizing that it was inevitable. But there were still these stories that this guy couldn't win. We had to go look for somebody else. And then, all of a sudden, things started happening at the convention and leading up to the convention, and then starting in August, people couldn't get close enough to us. The velcroids really came out.

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

JE: That it was the no-name defense. That it was a group of people who nobody knew. The Dolphins or somebody had the no-name defense, the interior line that nobody ever knew about till they won. We were the no-name defense. Nobody knew us. We were not on the A-list of people you would go recruit to run and work in your campaign. Yet, when you look at people on an individual basis, you see there is tremendous strength in a variety of areas that when pulled together made a really, really strong campaign. I may never be involved in another

campaign where so many people with so much talent that nobody knew did such a great job. And it's a testament to keeping the campaign here as opposed to Washington. It's a testament to the governor in that he didn't feel bound to go to the people who had always done it. And it's a testament to the people who got here early on and were willing to take chances on people.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]