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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Celinda C. Lake

Campaign Position: Pollster; Consultant

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 4, 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. Celinda C. Lake 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: Celinda, what was your position with the campaign?

Celinda Lake: I worked with Stan Greenberg, who was the pollster for the campaign, and I'm a partner in his polling firm.

DB: When did you begin doing this work for Governor Clinton?

CL: Well, we had polled for Governor Clinton in his last gubernatorial race. And I had been involved a little in that from D.C., but nothing direct. And then the major involvement probably came around the time of New Hampshire, because we started to gear up doing focus groups and looking at testing in the media, how to get women voters and some of the things that were a little bit my expertise, so I got more actively involved, I'd say, around January.

DB: Did this then become your consuming occupation?

CL: Well, I still carried most of the clients for our firm—our other clients—so I would say I probably spent about half of my time, maybe two-thirds of my time, from June on, on it. Sometimes just an observer role, because I was just watching to learn. And then I would say most intensely over the summer with the media testing and the focus groups. And I think the thing that was nicest for me is basically from about May on, I got to hear the voters literally talk through this election, and it was a pretty amazing experience.

DB: You have been listening to the voice of the people. When you say you've been working with focus groups, was there anything different about this campaign's use of focus groups?

CL: A lot different. First of all I think the resources that we had in polling were so much more dramatic. Usually we'll do a couple of sets. We were doing it every week, every night. And the way we use them—you know, we had the resources to, as you know, work with you on all the back-and-forth on the Arkansas record. We really worked with the Perot phenomena, because Perot is very hard to poll on. People are much more willing to talk about it than to answer poll questions, so you couldn't really get at it. And I think the most important piece about Perot ultimately was not that his appeal was so great, because his appeal helped us in some ways by pulling off Bush voters, but that he provided the context in which voters understood us. So when he was in the race, it would change how they felt about us in terms of change or in terms of the economy or in terms of whether we were a candidate who wasn't going negative or who was going negative. And even when it wasn't true, it became very important conceptually, so that was a very important piece. This campaign has been pretty committed to women voters, and that's been something that Susan Thomases has pushed and Hillary has pushed really from the beginning, and that's a real expertise that I had long before I came to this campaign—so working with them. And then the other thing that I did was, as the polling expanded, I would take on special projects. So I took on a special project of women voters, took on a special project of a couple of the key targeted states—like Ohio was my state, for example.

DB: Because you are known as the godmother of understanding women's opinions in the political context in America, were there nuances to the women's vote this year

that you had not seen before, or did you understand it in ways that you hadn't seen before?

CL: That's something I actually want to figure out. One of the things that I regret, and I think both Stan and I regret it, is that we haven't had the opportunity to step back and really figure it out. We've been so immersed. I think that one of the most important things for me that I learned is the enormous difference between college and non-college-educated women in this country, and this campaign was a real microcosm for looking at that, because those two groups of voters, both of whom were in the end very supportive of Governor Clinton, moved in very different directions at very different times. And it was a major gap in terms of strategy for this campaign.

DB: Would you give one example of that? Of their moving in different directions?

CL: The way that the Republican "family values" message worked, for example, is a dramatic difference. College-educated women hated the message. In fact, it helped us gain record highs. In fact, we never touched those highs again, really.

DB: You mean like in the aftermath of the Republican Convention?

CL: Yes. Younger blue-collar women had a lot more ambivalence about it, felt more ambivalent about their own role. Even as they knew they were being critiqued, they were wondering if some of that critique wasn't true. And, of course, the whole First Lady role got in there, so that became a very important piece. I have not looked as thoroughly as I looked in this campaign at younger blue-collar women because they became a key target. And I think one of the things that was exciting for me is we were targeting older women for a long time and then we did

this special woman's project and realized at that point that our targeting had shifted and we should have been talking to younger blue-collar women and move the buys, etc. And that was a real turning point. It was really a gratifying point to know that you could have something that strategically responded to women without ghettoizing it.

DB: So you've got lots to think about even after this is over.

CL: Yes. And it was fun, because, I mean, we literally—and it's really a credit to Mandy and Frank that they would do this—we tested every spot. And they're very, very creative, but they also use research. They're not driven by it, but they use it, and so it was kind of exciting to test every spot we put up. It was a way to be involved in that, so it was pretty exciting.

DB: I had the feeling that they never hit us as hard as we had anticipated. We wrote more devastating assaults on ourself. Do you understand that?

CL: We tested more devastating spots. We made up our spots based on what you all produced, and they were more devastating. I think that it was strategically understanding that they were more blunt and more desperate. Even at the end, you know, that last ad, we tested a version of that which we made up that had real people in it. Real people was much more devastating than nuclear landscape. I don't know. I worked for Bob Teeter, which I guess people don't probably know. I did an internship with him a long time ago now, the Ford campaign. He's very research driven and it's very surprising that they could have put up some of the ads they put up because I can't believe you could test those ads and put them up.

DB: Did you find that there was resentment not only to the religious right family values theme at the Republican Convention, but specifically to the beating up on Hillary?

CL: For sure. In fact, it was the first time that there was kind of a groundswell, particularly among college-educated women, wanting her to hit back. I have a lot of admiration for Hillary because women are so conflicted about her role, and it's not about her, it's about them. It is the way they're expressing their own conflicts about their own roles and choices. And she's just been able to walk through that and present an image to people, I mean that is truly her, but to craft a comfort for people. It's really quite astounding.

DB: Let me ask you to step back from your own specific part of this. Now that it's all worked, from your perspective, what made it so successful?

CL: Discipline, for one thing. Discipline and focus. I worked in Mondale/Ferraro in a major role, and with Dukakis in a peripheral way. Presidential campaigns are terrible for their power struggles and all of that, and this one frankly was not the best defined in terms of roles. I have worked in ones that were better defined in roles. But people just gave that up. They put those struggles aside and that was unbelievable. A really smart political candidate—and team—I think Hillary and Bill are a team. But just focus, and being the right candidacy for the mood of the country. Really understanding what voters are feeling at this point in time.

DB: When you talk about discipline and focus, from your perspective, was it hierarchical, was it decentralized? How did all this work together? Where did the discipline come from?

CL: I don't know. I'm still not completely clear. Well, I think that James and Stan and Mandy and Frank and George and others are very disciplined on message and they really understand message. Even if it was diffuse in other ways, they kept that very disciplined. I think it's a team of really incredible instinct, just each of them in their own way. Their instincts are amazing. Obviously part of my bias is I just have so much respect for Stan and I think that Stan understood how to put a Democratic coalition together and understood the potential disintegration of the Republican coalition long before other people. We have treated it as this mass and he understood the softness underneath it that allowed it to be pulled apart. Other people understood that, too, but I just think Stan's a brilliant pollster, honestly. And I think he understood that and came in understanding that better than anybody else in the country.

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

CL: New Hampshire. Gennifer Flowers, New Hampshire and the draft. It was hard for me personally too, because I didn't know the governor as well as Stan did. So Stan felt very reassured on a personal level because he knew him. I did not know him. Two things that were very troubling to me—I come from Montana. Stan comes from the anti-war movement in the east coast. I come from rural Montana, and while I was not for the war at all, it's always been a very—it is not a period I want to deal with again. It is a very complicated period. I remember sitting in the kitchen watching my brother's lottery come up. We lived on the Canadian border. I didn't know anybody who walked across. You could walk across the

border. I didn't know. And half my high school class didn't go to college, so that meant a lot of my high school class went to Vietnam, and so it was very complicated. I think Governor Clinton did exactly the right thing and I respect it, but it brought up my own ambivalence. So it was a very tough period for me, on both of those levels, and not knowing him that well personally.

DB: Did the tabloid hits and the Gennifer Flowers—did that have particular impact with women?

CL: Yes. And there's still remnants of it. One of the things that helped a lot was the bio. Getting to know him personally helped voters a lot, particularly women voters. The other thing that helped a lot was voters make a distinction—and I think it's one of the fundamental faults of the Bush strategy—you make a distinction between personal trust and public trust. There are probably still some women voters who say to themselves, "If it's okay with Hillary, it's okay with me, but I wouldn't marry Bill Clinton." But they trust him publicly. They believe he's committed. They think he cares. They think he's in touch. And what he does personally or privately or however they rationalize it, it doesn't matter. But the family—their family was very important to that. Hillary and Chelsea were very important to women voters being able to put that behind them. Getting to know Bill Clinton on a personal level. Voters, women voters in particular, to whom education is very important, came away saying, "A guy with this background, he will die for education." And it's true. Look at his state. Look at where he came from. Look at how he made it. Look at his family. He will die

for education. And so that commitment which they believed wouldn't waver gave them public trust of him even when all the personal stuff was hitting.

DB: Was the choice issue as big a factor as had originally been anticipated?

CL: No. The *Casey* decision was a major hole in that strategy for one thing. Because *Webster* really mobilized women voters. And voters thought that *Casey* was a compromise, and they thought it because both the right-to-lifers and the pro-choicers were unhappy with it. So they figured, okay, it must be a compromise. The one thing that motivated some college-educated women, and we used it at the end, was this one Supreme Court justice away. Because *Casey* also taught them that. But it's a level of information. Younger pro-choice non-college-educated women, for example, don't know what you mean when you say that because they don't know it was a five-four vote. They don't even know how many votes are on the Supreme Court.

DB: Did you have any supremely gratifying moment in the campaign?

CL: There were a bunch of high points. One high point for me is I think Bill Clinton is one of the least sexist people I have ever met in my life, and I don't ever feel he's dealing with me for affirmative action. He doesn't say, "Hey, okay, I'll do this for affirmative action." It's just a personal, fundamental way. The other thing is, at a time when there was some disagreement about targeting, and not in terms of the importance of white men, but in addition the importance of white women. And there was a sense in some parts of the campaign that they were mutually exclusive, and it got really embroiled in politics and it was just a mess. He and Hillary really cut through that. They said, "Listen, it's not mutually

exclusive. We got to get more women. I want to get more women voters. My levels of men are great, but it doesn't preclude me getting women. I want to get my women out." And it was just nice, that clarity. So on a personal level, his clarity about women was really terrific to me.

DB: The attacks on the Arkansas Record, did that play any differently in different parts of the country?

CL: Massively different. First of all, in the south, people took it as an attack on the south. Also, the regional responses mattered. When you said, "Top of the region," in Georgia, that mattered. When you said, "Top of the region" to Ohio, they said, "So what?" Also it was hard to make the record count to the big industrial states. And then we began to see in Michigan and Ohio the low ratings were an issue. In fact, Perot really could have been much more devastating had he started out early. One thing that was really key and that you guys ought to feel really gratified about—inoculation clearly worked. It mattered a lot. And that wouldn't have been possible without all that work you guys did early on. And really, it made Arkansas' record probably the biggest plus, because once people went from personal trust to public trust, and, "I'm going to look at the changes the guy brings," then his record is the only place you can get any validation of that. Because they don't know him. And it was just critical that we inoculated early. It was a critical, critical job.

DB: Well, I'm glad to know we helped. When did it become clear to you that he was going to be the nominee?

CL: New York. When he survived that.

DB: And when did it become equally clear that he was going to be president?

CL: Post–Labor Day. I think post–Labor Day. And one of the things for me is I've been more optimistic for a while, and I'm usually the pessimist because I have a little bit more distance. The one thing that was rattling was the surge of Perot after the debates. We actually picked it up in the focus groups first, and it was really interesting because people were pretty euphoric, you know. We won these debates, no problem. We did the first focus groups afterwards and, holy heck, we got major problems here. And so being on top of that dynamic was really important. And that was a little rattling. But other than that, I think since Labor Day really, and you could just tell. To me, hearing voters talk about it and then seeing the polling data that matched it—voters gave up on George Bush post–Labor Day, they really did. They weren't going to vote for him. It wasn't going to be about him unless Clinton was completely destroyed.

DB: Does it surprise you that Perot ended up with as high a vote as he did?

CL: No, because one of the things I've been warning about for a while is, as Perot sinks, a closet-Perot vote emerges. We've seen it repeatedly in the focus groups. That's where we first identified it. We would screen these Perot voters out, and all of a sudden these Perot voters would pop up in there. These were people who had screened undecided, and they clearly weren't. They were Perot supporters, and there are only a couple of periods where Perot supporters have been very selfconfident about their vote. And that was in his initial run, and then right after the debates. But in all the other periods it's been a significant, a couple percent, or a percent or two points of closet vote that you could just feel when you were

doing the qualitative side. And we developed some ways to try to get at better on the quantitative side based on that experience. So, no, it didn't. Also, I guess because I'm a westerner, you can understand the appeal of Perot and you can feel it. In Montana you could feel it.

DB: What is it that you would really like for history to know about this campaign?

CL: That's funny. I never think of campaigns as a historical experience. I guess the thing I would like for history to know is how really, really smart Hillary is. That's the part I would like to note, because that's the part I'm not sure gets through.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]