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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Nancy E. McFadden

Campaign Positions: Deputy Political Director;
Director, Surrogates Program

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 21, 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. Nancy E. McFadden 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: What were you doing right before you joined the campaign?

Nancy McFadden: Practicing law in Washington, D.C.

DB: Any particular kind of law?

NM: I do a lot of appellate litigation. It's constitutional law, just some typical commercial litigation, but generally big clients. Some airlines' litigation and regulation, and then a lot of sort of *pro bono* public service kinds of things. I spent six months investigating the United States Naval Academy's treatment of women.

DB: If you would, walk me through a day, first as deputy political director. What were your responsibilities? Then I'll ask you the same with the surrogate program.

NM: During the primaries, Stephanie Solien and I were pretty much the political department for a long time.

DB: Many might think the whole campaign is political, so what specifically does that mean?

NM: We dealt with a lot of the elected officials. We pretty much—even though we had one person up in Washington trying to set up a Washington and congressional relations office—we spent a lot of our time dealing with members of Congress. With governors. With mayors. And we also spent a lot of time trying to work with the national constituencies. Labor groups. Women's groups. Environmental groups. That kind of thing. So a typical day would be spent from morning until night on the telephone, basically.

DB: Trying to get endorsements?

NM: Working on endorsements. Working on feeding information to the states so that as each primary came upon us, we had some starting point for people organizing the states. We would put them in touch with the teachers and with the local women activists and the elected officials that we'd been able to get to endorse us and join the Clinton team—a lot of working to pull people into this campaign, the fruits of which we see now with the tons of dollars that are coming in.

DB: Clarify something for me. One of the things that conventional wisdom seemed to feel was that Mondale, for example, became so pegged as the candidate of the organized interests, that that dragged him down ultimately. And this campaign has been different. I mean, we've had that support, but we have not been seen as the tool of organized interests. How did we do it?

NM: Well, I think that it starts with the candidate. And this candidate was not willing to say things solely to get support, so it made the political job a lot tougher. A lot of the labor support that we have wasn't easy to get. And I think the way that eventually we were able to garner so much support is that we were able to talk about a broader vision and, as Bill Clinton says a lot, this is bigger than Bill Clinton. I think that one of the things that we were able to convince a lot of the traditional Democratic constituencies is that this election is bigger than them. It is bigger than a labor union. It is bigger than the Sierra Club. It is bigger than the Gray Panthers. It is bigger than the choice issue alone. And I think that that is largely what we've been successful at doing, and that is why you see this incredible coalition.

DB: But there must have been scary moments in the primary when they would be pounding on you, saying, "You sign off on this or we absolutely have to go give our support elsewhere." But somehow Clinton came through without signing off on the traditional litmus test.

NM: I think that's right. And I think—I mean one of the most difficult things about working with these various groups and working with elected officials is that everybody—especially with somebody like Bill Clinton who not everyone had been thoroughly exposed to—everybody wanted to see him. The demand upon him to go to conferences and to meet with leadership and all was enormously high, and we were trying not to schedule a lot of the traditional kinds of appearances, so that was tough.

DB: And would there not also have been suspicion because he was from Arkansas and because, looking at this state where women have not been that active and labor has not been that active, that there would be kind of a natural suspicion about how good he is?

NM: Yes. Suspicion or just ignorance. And not a lot to reassure people, although we made use of during the primaries, and continue to make use of up until today, people who are Arkansas labor representatives, Arkansas environmentalists, Arkansas women activists, Arkansas teachers. Sid Johnson has been a marvelous surrogate and worked very, very hard during the primaries and continues to work hard. The personal testimonials from people from those groups in Arkansas definitely helped.

DB: Now you're doing surrogates—has your title changed, or have just your responsibilities changed?

NM: I suppose I've never been much into titles. I think my title has changed. I am now the director of the surrogate program. I now am in charge of a department in the campaign. So I guess, theoretically, I've been bumped upstairs.

DB: And what do you do now?

NM: What I do is basically run the operation that sends our national surrogates into our targeted states—primarily a free-media strategy, but also a political and mobilization kind of strategy. We make use of a lot of elected officials. Members of Congress. But we've also tried to reach out and use people that know Bill and Hillary Clinton personally. People that are issue-specific surrogates, like a Leland Swenson, who's the president of the Farmer's Union, who endorsed the Clinton/Gore ticket and has been to probably ten states for us as a surrogate. Mayors. Authors. Celebrities. Familiar political names, like James Roosevelt and Bobby Kennedy, Jr.

DB: Again, you've obviously been given a very people-sensitive assignment, because you take these people who are prominent, prestigious in their own right, and perhaps something of a prima donna—can you call people like this at the last minute and say we need you here and you are going to say this, do not get off message? How do you handle that?

NM: Well, you learn who you can call and who you can't. I've learned that the surrogate operation is one of the most thankless jobs in the campaign because you can never make anyone totally happy. The states always want more surrogates, or a different

surrogate than you're sending them. And the surrogates always want to be utilized to the highest level. Many of them don't have a realistic view of their potential to attract. But I will say that we, unlike four years ago, we have been just very, very fortunate. We have a wealth of people who want to speak for the campaign.

DB: And what's made the difference?

NM: Well, I think looking like we're heading to victory has certainly made the difference. I think that people are comfortable in delivering the Clinton message. I think that we've worked harder at putting together a surrogate program that focuses on free media and have been very clear from the beginning on what we want to do with our surrogate program. And I think we've done successful trips. Once you get someone to do a trip and it's successful and they're treated well in the states and they get press and they get a sense of excitement, they want to become more and more involved in the campaign. And we found that once we're able to send somebody out on a trip, they become repeat surrogates. And we've had really little problem with prima donnas. We really have had just an outpouring of support and people willing to jump on planes at the last minute. We called Zell Miller to go to Florida to speak to the National Association of Police Organizations for their endorsement session. It was the day before, and he went down and we ended up getting that endorsement. And I think it's clearly, directly attributable to Bill Clinton, but I think in part attributable to the fact that Zell Miller went there and gave one hell of a speech on Bill Clinton's behalf. So we've had people that have been willing to shake up their schedules.

DB: Then don't you also use them extensively for satellite?

NM: The campaign has done an absolute incredible job of making use of every medium and every media technology that exists. We can't get Mario Cuomo to go on the road that much. But Mario Cuomo has sat in a chair for at least an hour a week for us, doing satellite into targeted media markets, local television stations, and it's been fabulous. A large part of what I do is use surrogates to respond to George Bush or Dan Quayle when they're in states, or when they are attacking us. And again, we've had incredible reaction and response by our surrogates in doing that. We've been able to send members of Congress into states the day after George Bush has been in the state, or sometimes the same day, and we've had enormous success in crowding the George Bush or Dan Quayle story in many media markets. The surrogate operation probably was at its zenith during the presidential debates. That really showed how all elements of the campaign could work together. We had a group of about twenty surrogates at each debate.

DB: Selected by your department primarily?

NM: Yes. People who we knew the press on site—the national press—would want to talk to and get reaction from. And also people who could do satellite television and radio from the debate site into local markets. So we always had a geographic diversity in our team of surrogates at each debate site, and it was fabulous. Every single surrogate that came to the debates would do a mixture of talking to the press and giving interviews in the press center, in the media center, being scheduled for satellite television interviews—many of them live interviews—into targeted media markets throughout the country. And radio interviews. And many of our surrogates for the early debates, the ones that started at 7:00, would finish at 8:30.

We would be in the press center ten minutes before the debate ended. We always outhustled the Republicans. Our surrogates would be talking to reporters. We would usually have somebody seated in chairs doing satellite interviews at 8:30 at the close of the debate. Have people on network news shows, wrap-up shows, on radio. Some of our surrogates literally were doing press for up to three hours after the debate.

DB: Now, in addition to just selecting, scheduling, targeting, these people must require some kind of briefing to make sure that they have the message. How much of that also do you do?

NM: Well, my department is really very dependent upon every other department in the campaign. But we have people—I have people on my staff—

DB: What do you do?

NM: Well, we split—it started off as about a ten-person staff. In order to maximize the amount of money that we could spend on surrogates, we split the operation and we now work in tandem with a parallel staff. Actually I sent some of my staff to the DNC. And we now have some staff people working who are DNC employees and then some who have remained Clinton/Gore employees. We work together, although there are separate DNC surrogate activities. But we have two people on staff who do briefings, and every single one of our surrogates, when they go into a state, has a full briefing. At times, we provide a whole surrogate packet. We have a surrogate stump speech and talking points and message of the day, and all that.

DB: Well, my sense is that it is an operation that has absolutely overwhelmed the Republican organization this year. You hear the same people over and over again

speaking for the Republicans and at least it seems to me we're getting a much bigger variety of people involved in this.

NM: Well, it's tougher for the Democrats because we don't have a ready-made pool of surrogates, as the White House does. The White House has its cabinet, and that's who their surrogates are.

DB: Do you think people are sophisticated enough to understand that's what these people have to do—that it's their job?

NM: I'm not sure about that because I think in some ways, with a lot of the messages that the Republican surrogates have been delivering this time around, the messenger hasn't mattered at all. It's been the message. And their whole strategy, I think, in terms of using surrogates is just repetition. If they have enough people say in enough places say, "He's a failed governor of a small state and you can't trust him"—they were hoping it would stick. I mean, clearly all of our surrogates talk about the economy, and many of them can talk about the economy in a very personal sense and can talk to why Bill Clinton's plan for turning the economy around is clearly the answer that we're looking for. That, by the way, brings up another category of surrogates that we've made good use of, and that is our economic experts, the CEOs that have endorsed Clinton. At every debate, John White, Ross Perot's former senior economic advisor, attended and was a key surrogate. Some of the Republican CEOs that endorsed the governor were at the debates and have done innumerable radio and television interviews for us and have spoken to groups. The array of people that we have been able to call upon to speak

on behalf of this campaign has been just magnificent, and really representative of what the campaign's all about.

DB: Do you also get people to write, or is that another section?

NM: We try to, and a lot of people in the campaign tried to do that, from the different policy people to the political staff that are working with specific constituencies to us. And we've sent out advisories to some of our issue-specific surrogates. We have a whole database that we've established so we can pull up our health care surrogates or our veteran surrogates or our economy surrogates. And at times, we send out special talking points with a plea to do an op-ed piece—a letter to the editor, call a radio talk show, that kind of thing.

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?

NM: Well, I think it's our candidate. A friend of mine always uses sports analogies, and says when you are playing tennis, you always want to play tennis with somebody better than you because that's how you improve your game. And I think Bill Clinton has made all of us improve our games, and the fact that he would always be able to pull it off, whatever it was. Whether it was an important and serious policy speech that he was delivering whether it was dealing with some of the low times that we saw in January and February and March. Whether it was rallying huge crowds of people. Whether it was giving the speech of a lifetime at the convention. He always pulls it off, and I think in some ways that could make us lazy, because we knew we could always depend on him. And instead, for some reason—and I think it's probably the caliber of the people and his expectations of us—but instead

of getting lazy and knowing that he could pull it off, we've just improved our games so we can look a little harder. We can do more. And I really think that that's set the tone. I think also the people in this campaign—each and every one of them has been able to contribute in his or her own way. And people were ready to make this a success.

DB: You have been in previous presidential campaigns?

NM: I've done a lot of statewide politics and a lot of local politics, but I've never worked in a presidential campaign, which is, I think, another unique thing about this campaign. You clearly have a lot of people who have been around for a long time and who have done a number of presidential campaigns, but you also have people who, like myself and others, have never really done a presidential campaign but came down here when there were twenty of us and stuck with it and found it in their blood.

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

NM: I think it's very decentralized. And I think for a while it seemed like that was a negative and that was going to hurt this campaign. No one really knew who was calling the shots and who was in charge. As time has gone on and as we have filled holes so that people are responsible for specific areas, I think that the general election campaign structure, though decentralized, insures that everything is accounted for. Somebody is responsible somehow for everything, but I think it is at times very unclear who is really the ultimate decision maker.

DB: Is that frustrating at times?

NM: Well, I think it has been frustrating at times, but I think many people just realized that that's the way this campaign works. And it does work, so you stop beating your head against the wall when something's working.

DB: I find it mysterious at times. There is this great, great centralization of message, but the component parts all seem to make their contribution in their own way.

NM: Right. I think that's exactly right. And I think part of it is as well, that there are clearly some very strong figures in this campaign that have gotten, and certainly deserve, much of the attention and credit. I think this campaign is also made up of a lot of unsung heroes that have not been featured in the "Style" section of *The Washington Post*, but, nonetheless, really make this place work. And I think that is probably another secret of the success of this campaign. From top to bottom, if you want to look at it in a hierarchal way, everybody is working for the same goal. And, really, we've had magnificent people at every level in this campaign. I think some of the unsung heroes are really the ones that some day somebody, I hope, will acknowledge, and I hope that they at least know it themselves.

DB: Are you sometimes just amazed that it works at all?

NM: Yes. But it definitely has worked. I think it hampered us at times in the primaries because it wasn't clear, but I think in the general election we have really pulled it off together. And at key moments, every element of this campaign has worked in sync in an absolutely phenomenal way. The convention—the convention is clearly the premiere. The Republican convention and how we worked as a campaign around that. And the debates. And everybody has played a role, from people out in the field doing response to the debates, to the surrogate operation at the debates and

out in the states, to the rapid-response and the research people, to the debate prep team. Every element worked. And everybody again was just working in sync. At critical times the campaign has really done it, and that's what's made the difference.

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

NM: I guess right before the New York primary.

DB: Before the New York primary?

NM: Yes. I thought we were going to win the New York primary and that that would do it for us and that he would be the nominee.

DB: When were you certain that he would be president?

NM: When I signed on to the campaign.

DB: But when did the dream start to become reality?

NM: I think at the convention.

DB: What was your personal low point?

NM: When I first joined the campaign, in addition to working as a deputy political director, I spent a great deal of time working on response to the Gennifer Flowers allegations, and then was involved in the first round of draft stories. I guess my personal low point was the Gennifer Flowers press conference.

DB: And your personal high point?

NM: Well, probably a couple. I was one of the first people to read Bill Clinton's letter to Colonel Holmes. I remember reading that letter and thinking, "This man is really for real." He wrote this in 1969, and it moved me. And I knew that it would cause problems because of the way that the letter would be presented, and how the Republicans would twist words and sentences in the letter, and all of that. But to

me, the letter was a beautifully written, heartfelt expression of somebody who cares passionately about people and about principle. So that was one high point. And I guess another high point was the convention. It really was. It was just a fabulous experience. And being someone who is not on the road, but works in the headquarters—in some ways it's too bad, because I don't think that we have the high points that many other people have. We just don't see it, except on television, so the convention was sort of my being on the road.

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

NM: That this campaign brought together a lot of people who believed in Bill Clinton and who were not just hungry for a Democratic victory. I think that the people that I've had the good fortune to get to know and to work with these eleven months really are committed to him, and believe in his leadership ability and his intelligence and his vision. And in that we did it, we did it right. And that even though when we win this campaign, it will probably be in large part to the fact that the economy—which we saw as the major issue in this campaign—clearly is the major issue and will be the determining factor, that Democrats could have lost this election. When we win, it will be because it worked. And again, because it came from the top.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]