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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Lottie Lee Shackleford

Campaign Position: Deputy Campaign Manager

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 2, 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. Lottie Lee Shackleford 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.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: When did you come to the campaign?

Lottie Shackelford: Officially I came to the campaign, I think, February or March. Prior to that I was just an ad hoc supporter, trying to work around the neutrality position that I held, vice chair of the Democratic National Committee.

DB: That was your full-time occupation before you came? I'm trying to get a pattern of what people were doing before they came to the campaign.

LS: Politically, vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee, as well as a local elected official here for the city of Little Rock—I was combining those two together. Then I was directing this minority business program, which I ended totally when I came full-time with the campaign.

DB: Could you give me an overview of your responsibilities as deputy campaign manager?

LS: I was responsible for working with state and local elected officials. That meant everything from nurturing to putting out brush fires, to also making certain those particular groups understood where we were trying to go with the campaign—understood the message and understood the campaign's need to involve people. I think one thing people tend to forget in something like this is our circle is really narrow, so we think that we know everybody that needs to be touched. It was a constant thing to make certain that a mayor understood—and that mayor was the key contact person—if he or she were a big city mayor, that or the mayor of a little town of two hundred people was equally as important to Bill Clinton and had

to be touched. I guess the exciting thing, for me, was to have these people understand that this was a true grassroots operation. And everybody was important, and getting them to understand that the more they truly worked the outreach effort, the more important they would become. So that was a real challenge and real interesting. Doing that with state legislators, county officials. Being an elected official, I think I understand the ego of elected officials. It was almost natural for me to understand how I needed to give the warm fuzzy in order for them to be able to.

DB: Wasn't there some tension about all the local officials wanting to be on the stage and in the picture, and the advance people wanting nobody but Bill or Bill and Hillary? How did you handle that?

LS: All of us, even as adults—if somebody else did it, it's okay. It sort of eases the tension. And this is the way I did it. I said, "Look, we're trying to have a somewhat uniform procedure throughout." In some local communities, you would have more local officials trying to be a part and some you wouldn't have as many. And just to say, in order to try and have some uniformity, we have a standard program—in the sense that X introduces Y and that person speaks first and then brings somebody else in, and then whoever would bring Bill in. You would say to them, even the person, be it the governor or the mayor when they bring Bill on, they go out. Part of dealing with elected officials is if everybody is being treated the same. That's the whole thing. Don't call one name and leave this one out. Don't let one be on. And when you started to share with them that this is what is happening across the board, they'll make accommodations. We got

into more trouble with some of our advance people not quite understanding how to deal with the politics of it. So the political division was constantly putting out fires because some advance person would say, "We don't want local elected officials in the picture." You never had to say that if you did a format. Those were the kinds of things we did.

DB: Did you have any particular responsibilities regarding women, regarding African Americans? Did you feel also an outreach obligation where those groups or individuals were concerned?

LS: Yes, I did a lot of that. I did lots of surrogate speaking as well. I started off on that early on, as early as mid-October, partly because of some of the contacts I had working with—national agencies, working with the Democratic National Committee. I had contacts nationwide. One of the things that was interesting, and I know you found it, too, post-November 3, 1992, the number of people whose memories are just so short. You would think that they were all with us October 3, 1991. To which I have reminded some of how many times I called and how many times I pleaded to just take a look at us. Shortly after the announcement, dealing with people in the respective states who were trying to organize, various folks would call me to come in and talk with black elected officials or female elected officials. All this ended up being an introductory for someone who knew him and knew these other people or at least these other people recognized my name. That was very helpful. Just like everything else in your own profession—I'm very certain that people would call you in that area and say, "Now just tell me who he really is." I did a lot of that post-February and

March. Going out and telling about the man I knew. What he had done for Arkansas. People asked very good questions. "Are you comfortable with him? To which I would say, "Being a vice chair of the DNC I was supposed to remain neutral until after the convention." I would then say, "I am supporting him because I believe in him. Because I know what he does. I could have just as easily stayed out of this fray. Easily stayed out of it. He wouldn't have been mad, because I have a responsibility to be neutral." I had a lot of them say that that meant a lot. For me to say, "I am here, not because I am an Arkansan, but because I know him, I believe in him. I know what he can do."

DB: Did you travel some with Hillary?

LS: I did. I traveled sporadically with her during the primary. In the last three weeks of the primary I traveled extensively with her.

DB: How did that come about?

LS: We had talked about it early on, about my traveling with her. As you know, there is something about when people just see a visual. Someone traveling with—they know her, they recognize her, that tends to help. It makes for an easier introductory kind of thing. It sort of validates, because Bill and Hillary were truly not widely known before. It was just a matter of doing to tie in. Hillary had asked me early on about doing that. I said, "Yes." I really wanted to do it, but then you just get carted off. I think all of us got carted. As I tell folks, this campaign, when you really look back, everything evolved. Yes, we had plans. We tried to strategize. But things just evolved.

DB: It was a fast-moving pace, when you think what has happened in one year's time.

LS: It is unreal.

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?

LS: Over and above any of the so-called strategic planning, because on the inside it's almost like helping to plan a wedding, it changes from day to day. Even when you sit there you're still thinking of all these things that are not going the way you wanted them to go and everybody says it's beautiful. That's the way I think about it. It worked. I think the real key though was the commitment and the dedication of the people, who then went beyond whatever thoughts they felt should happen. Most people just developed an attitude, "This is important and it needs to happen and I'm going to do what I can to make it happen." I think that was it. As with anything, there was a lot of frustration. There were a lot of people feeling that they were neglected in the process, but it didn't affect them when they put on the public persona. That's the part I think was the real key. You would have concerns. I remember one time I went to Bill when I felt overly burdened because of things that weren't happening. I'm not saying that they improved that much afterwards. But it was like, wait a minute, the important thing is for me to know that I've done everything I could do to help get him elected. I found out more and more everybody on the campaign felt public responsibility when they went out there. I think that was the key.

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

because it was so effective, are of this very taut, highly disciplined fighting machine.

LS: But when you were there I never saw that. I do think, and maybe that's where the whole organization and effectiveness comes in, the campaign was focused on a message. That was the glue—always. It was always that—always focused. Always on the message. They knew what his message was. I do think, and let me give credit to those working in those areas, George, James, and all those who kept the campaign focused. So maybe that gave this impression because we were not flopping across the board about what our message was. That's true. But when I hear about all this organization and stuff—where was it?

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

LS: I think the turning points for me were two. The Illinois primary, probably, and the New York primary. Those were the turning points for me. Then part of me said, "I always believed we could do it." I'll never forget when I was asked to be a part of the announcement program. On October 2, 1991, I called Ron Brown to say, "Ron, I've been asked to do this. I am going to do this. I wanted you to know before you started getting the comment about, "What is Lottie doing? It was because I thought, if Bill is really doing this, we can do it. It was that kind of feeling. How long we have thought that he would do this, and then to get this. I knew then he really was doing it, I just felt it. We could win. I remember having some conversations with other groups, and with him, and then we would get to the point of saying, "You've got to do it now. Otherwise you can never do it. Because if you wait until 1996, nobody will get on your team because they'll say,

This will be twice you prepped us up and pumped us up. And in 1996 you won't be able to get anybody to get on this bandwagon." Once that decision had been made, I always felt good. I shared it with folks then. I should have started taking bets that day. I wouldn't have to worry about paying for an apartment in Washington.

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

LS: I was afraid to truly allow myself to be a real optimist. People were saying, "You've got it." From basically after the Republican Convention, Meredith Kaplan kept saying, "Oh, Lottie, why are you so worried? I said, "You just don't know. Anything can happen, and we can't allow this." My thing was I was afraid to allow myself to believe. Maybe it was psychological; if I do, I won't do everything I need to do. The moment I was ready to say we have done this, was literally when I met that plane on election morning. I felt then nobody could do anything that would change anything. I was afraid to allow myself to feel comfortable with that until I met that plane that morning. At that point, that was the only day that I could feel if I didn't make a phone call it wasn't going to hurt.

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

LS: It was early January before the New Hampshire primary. I had been out of town on a campaign deal. I wasn't officially on the campaign staff. I walked back into headquarters that day in Wilhelm's office and George and all that early crew. Everybody was busy as bees in trying to respond and get messages and talk to people, but the rest of the staff was just walking around trying to look like they were busy. They had paper in their hands, but they were just—I could see in their

eyes, "Do I go and pack my bags? It was that kind of thing. I went in and asked David if they had talked with the staff. He said, "No." I said, "I think we should. We need to give them an upbeat kind of thing and let them know that we're in this. They don't have to worry about packing their bags." Within thirty minutes we did it. We did it at 4:00 p.m. David spoke over in the pressroom. I guess, to me, that was the low point because if we had had people start defecting at that point, to me, that would have been the signal that we weren't there. I always think about the full line, all the staff. I don't just think about the people here. It's always important that everybody be able to get this kind of support, see people who were working right in that little circle. They knew what was going on, yet somehow it escaped them that you have all these folk out here. So, that was the real low point for me. After that I really didn't—even when the shoes would fall on the desk and people asking about things, what I would say was that in my own mind I have always been comfortable. Bill and Hillary can't control what will be said about them, or anything like that, but they are prepared to take their message to the people.

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

LS: Election morning, seeing them get off that plane. I don't know. I got teary-eyed. I was able to bring my mother and have her there. Another high point this year was the convention. The convention this year was truly a high road. I was able to have my mother on the platform on both Monday night and Thursday night. So that was really high. To understand when they walked off that plane that morning, it truly was a new day. This was a new day. To me, the thing that this

whole election represents over and above the idea for change and all of this, is that the Clintons have broken the mold. I've said to folks, "When we say, 'Will a woman ever be president? Or an African American ever be president?' There had to be someone to break the mold." Bill Clinton had broken the mold. Now these other things can happen. I sort of look at things in a logical sequence that way. That, to me, sends flutters up because it then creates a lot of possibilities that were not there before. This is truly an American dream.

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

LS: Two things. I want it to reflect a turning point in the sense of how we as a people deal with public figures. I really want that. I think we made inroads there because the pendulum was swinging too far.

DB: Do you mean from the standpoint of permitting them some privacy and to concentrate on the real issues and not on rumors and tabloids?

LS: Yes. See, my sense is what was beginning to happen was truly eating away the core fabric of our whole political system. We were getting to the point where you had to be twelve years old to run. You heard about what was happening on the national level, but at this rate it can be the mayor of a town of five hundred or a CEO. This was beginning to creep on over to the private sector. People could just come out, say whatever they wanted to say, and destroy a life. To me, that is very important in the sense of protecting a system whereby people can participate. I think that is one important fact. The other one is—we talked about the ages of history, the industrial age of the country, and all this. To me, this has been a true new beginning. I have difficulty explaining it. It's like setting the tone now for

another hundred years in the sense of what democracy really is. What opportunity really is for all the people. This is what this was to me. As an African American woman, I feel much more positive about what my possibilities are now than I felt prior to this. That's just the kind of thing I see.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]