Special Collections
University of Arkansas Libraries
365 N. McIlroy Avenue
Fayetteville, AR 72701-4002
(479) 575-8444

# Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

## 1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with George Robert Stephanopoulos

Campaign Position: Communications Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 11, 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. George Robert Stephanopoulos 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.

The Diane D. Blair Papers are housed in Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. Permission to republish or quote from this interview must be obtained before publication. Please contact Special Collections at (479) 575-8444 or specoll@uark.edu for assistance. A "Permission to Publish Request Form" may found at http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/forms/.

[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: This campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign in American history?

George Stephanopoulos: Because we won.

DB: But what made it so effective? What were the key components of success?

GS: Breaking down the walls between departments. I was with the Dukakis campaign. Press office was on the second floor, communications was on the third, issues was on the eighth, political was on the fifth, management was stuck somewhere in between. Nobody talked to each other. We forced conversation and cooperation through a structure. I think that was reflective of the kinds of things that Bill and Hillary Clinton learned, both in their public life in Arkansas, but really through a lot of management lessons that they learned from Arkansas corporations. We kept hearing about Wal-Mart.

DB: You're talking about flattening out the organization? Empowering people at lower levels?

GS: Flattening out; yes.

DB: So this was by design?

GS: Absolutely. Of course, it's not perfectly replicable. A campaign is not a corporation designed to make a profit over a long term. It's a very short-term thing. But the equivalent is, in the campaign, information is power. So even though there wasn't perfect sharing of information, again we structurally forced the sharing of information. James had this big saying, "How are we going to communicate our strategy to the country, if we can't tell each other?" And that's

what the whole idea of the "War Room" was. Everybody—whether it's in Little Rock, Washington, or the field offices, or all the precincts—was saying the same thing.

DB: If I express astonishment that that was by design, it's because it never looked planned. There was a way in which it just seemed like, "Well we had this big building and people didn't have individual offices, so there was no privacy and there was no leader, so it had to be a team."

GS: I think it was inspired a lot with help from Hillary. A lot of us thought we had a pretty bad spring, we thought—a spring without a leader, without a definite campaign structure. The stupid conference calls, which were the most frustrating thing in the world. I even came down a month before James did, and it was very hard from my perspective because you had all these people in different places. Nobody committed to working full time. They were all getting in these conference calls to tell you what to do, and they had no sense of what they were even asking you to do. It took having James come down here, essentially, to be the psychological center, and giving him the authority to get stuff done. Nobody is ever going to say that James Carville is a great organizational manager, but he is able to at least create that kind of climate. And you don't want to go too far and give him too much credit for it, either. But he was a center in the sense that he did make that room happen. That room was his idea.

DB: If he was the psychological center, what were you?

GS: I was his interpreter, I think—an interpreter. I would interpret the Governor to him and him back to everybody else. I tried to make sure that what he wanted to

get done, got done and just tried to the extent I could, at a different level, to keep everybody talking. There were times when James couldn't talk to Susan, and Susan couldn't talk to Eli. And I could pretty much, with some notable exceptions, talk to everybody, and tried at that level everybody was communicating and try to give a sense of building to the governor. Because I had been traveling with him so long, trying to give it back.

DB: One of the things that prompted me to start thinking about this, was that the press kept describing this as a taut, tightly-disciplined fighting machine, and, yet, inside there seemed to be tremendous play in the joints. So in trying to arrive at the organizational truth of this campaign, what was the real design here?

GS: They're both true. They're both right. Essentially, a lot of the departments were autonomous, but they were organized around a single mission, generally. The field was set up to deliver the message "Get on TV," not, "Get out the vote." The way that it was taut was that once a decision was made, we were able to move quickly. That was because we had autonomy. James and I didn't really care too much about the money, so we let that go—except to the extent where you'd have major media decisions. For the rest of it—fine, let it go as long as we had what we needed. Don't worry about it. Let it be completely separated. We didn't particularly care—well, not that we didn't care, but it wasn't our responsibility about the local politicians. Let it go. Because of my past jobs, I had initially a little bit more to do with Congress than I would have. You let people go out and do it as long as they understand what is going on. We would pick our battles, too, like on the schedule—if there was this big thing about should he go to meet one of

the organizations, or not. As if they really want it as long as it's after the news cycle and as long as you got the event you really want, let it go. Try not to fight over it. And that wouldn't happen if you had an overly hierarchical structure where the premium was on getting control of everything. I mean, one boss who signed off on everything.

DB: At the JFK conference, Mary Matalin was talking about changes that had to be made by the time of the convention and, as she said, "It was like trying to turn a battleship around," I thought how much more flexible we were.

GS: That was also because of Clinton. Because he's so flexible. Clinton is so smart. If we changed direction, he could handle that. You know, you can't reprogram a sixty-eight-year-old man who's not as smart as Clinton and who's done it before. James said that a zillion times during the campaign. It often happened. We would call him up at 7:30 in the morning, and we had seen something, and we could get him to do something different right away.

DB: I talked to Stanley about doing polls for someone who really understands polls and can interpret and analyze. Were there ever times when you, as a manager, almost wished that you had a more manageable candidate?

GS: Of course. I mean, it's a mixed blessing. There are some times when you just think you're right and just wish that he would go out and do what we say, but he was right more often than we were. So it works out in the end. And I think that's a natural thing that develops between a candidate and staff. I was lucky. Again, I saw both sides between the headquarters and the plane. Headquarters always thinks it's right and the plane always thinks they're right. You say, "Oh that can't

be right. Why didn't he just do this?" So you wish he would just go out and follow your lead.

DB: And yet, given that tension, there was remarkably little public discussion of internal tensions, turf battles, infighting. Do you just think that was luck, or was there something more to it?

GS: Well, we were always ahead. I'd like to think that it would have stayed that way had things got really, really tough. But you never know.

DB: People that I've interviewed have said the flexible nature of the organization might have not worked so well if we had really gotten tested.

GS: I think we got tested. I don't think it's fair to say that we weren't tested. We were tested every day. And we passed a lot of those tests, which is why we didn't fall behind. There were any one of a zillion times between the conventions and after where, had we not made the right decision, we would have been in trouble. We made the right decision on media. We made the right decisions on response. We targeted beautifully. The governor turned things around on Bush on taxes by his pure fighting on it. We were tested constantly.

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

GS: There were several. The worst was an odd one. But it really was. The morning of Junior Tuesday, which was the morning of Georgia, Maryland, Colorado, we hadn't polled for seven days, so we really didn't know how we were in any of these states. It looked, from the public polls, that if Tsongas was able to win Colorado, Maryland, Washington—pick up one of the other states, maybe Minnesota, and we didn't have a resounding win in Georgia, that could be it. That

was pretty bad. The Sunday before New York, when the second draft letter came out was real bad. The other odd one was the day of the California primary. We had been working, working, and working and we won the primaries—it was like a loss. Those three.

DB: That whole month of June?

GS: It wasn't depressing to me. For me, it was a new time. It was when I came back. It was the hardest month of the campaign for me. At least in my department, I was essentially alone. It was all that work. It was before Susan came down, so I had to do all the scheduling. I was in that little room. I was there as long as I had ever been, eighteen hours a day, twenty hours a day, and he was in a foul mood. He was yelling all the time. Everybody else was yelling all the time. Nobody was coming down and working.

DB: That's when he had the nomination, but it didn't look like it was worth anything.

GS: Yes. And the thing was, we were doing things that made sense. We put the schedule in place for all the free-media stuff. It was when he was starting to make his decision about Gore, when we were putting together the economic plan and all that sort of thing. So things were starting to come together.

DB: It was like being becalmed, though.

GS: Nothing you could do would help. You know, there was also that period in April or May when we won the primary in Illinois, but it got played as a loss because of the exit polls, which is just insane.

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

GS: Early on, for a very personal one, was when I first saw him on the first trip I went on to New Hampshire in October. It was great—all these people going to these houses and really listening. We knew that something was happening. The second debate. The night of the Cuomo speech when he came on the floor. Obviously, New Hampshire—the comeback. Illinois, but it turned out to be false. A little thing like when Wilder dropped out. You could see that really meant we had a good chance on Super Tuesday. Another false one was when Tsongas dropped out. Turned out to be a real dagger because Tsongas dropping out made us the incumbent, which is why we lost Connecticut.

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

GS: I was certain the night of Illinois, but then I was wrong. I thought that was it. We had always planned on it. We worked back from Illinois. Despite all of the heartache in between—it was strange, but the early primaries actually went exactly according to plan. If you looked just at the numbers and the result, and took away all the news stories, like in New Hampshire, it was like boom, boom, boom. There were so many false starts. You sort of start back in December once he had done in Chicago the state chairs. Once he had done the Florida straw poll, once Rahm raised all that money—what did it look like? It looked good.

DB: *Time* magazine decided he was the one.

GS: Which always turned out to be a problem—whenever you go too far.

DB: You started to answer my last question. When you were absolutely certain he was going to win the presidency?

GS: I'm the wrong person to ask about absolutely certain. My heart and my head were always opposites. In my head, I remember I had a great little thing with him. When we were in Washington, the night of the Italian dinner in September when we had debate prep and did the commercial—whenever that Saturday was because he was giving his NAFTA speech the next day. That Sunday morning, he was going through his obligatory ritual, which got to be a habit—we laughed about it—any morning of a speech he would get mad for mad's sake. That was his way of dealing with it. So I would go in for my meeting, and he was yelling, but his heart wasn't really in it, so he's started yelling about it, but he really couldn't sustain it. So he calmed down. That was the first time 'cause I hadn't really thought of it. We had gotten a late poll and I said, "I don't think we're going to lose. We're going to win." It was the first time I had heard him admit it. Then the debates were such a wild card and Perot was such a wild card that you had to be thinking. I thought after the second debate "No way could it be taken from us."

DB: Other people, obviously, are going to be studying this campaign, trying to replicate it . . .

GS: Good.

DB: But can it be replicated?

GS: No, because he can't be. The thing that really won it for him was his toughness. I mean, that's what people saw and took away—"If he can fight for himself like that, he can fight for anything." Nobody had ever taken what he took.

DB: Did you have any idea how much toughness was going to be required when you signed on? Or let me ask a first question. When you signed on, did you think that this was for real, or was it more a positioning race?

GS: I thought this was for practice. For me, personally? I thought he was the most interesting candidate, the nicest guy I had met—smart, and you knew that no matter what happened he was going to run a good campaign, focus on the right issues, and at least make the public think about him. I said, "I'll go the effort for six months and then—I had already worked in the House too long anyway—time for me to do something different." I really, really deeply believed that.

DB: I've never seen Clinton in a race that he didn't expect to win, though.

GS: Yes, he's different. That's why he wins. Maybe he's different from Hillary. I don't think Hillary came into this thinking they were going to win.

DB: How could you possibly have, looking at the odds when he got in?

GS: Impossible, but I've got a certain sense theory that it's only when you're not worried about failure that you can be a little bit more loose. I think a lot of us were like that. I mean, the worst, dark part of the campaign—again, maybe, emotionally, not the worst, but the most tense—was in the last three weeks. When, if we lost, it was definitely our fault. That was very hard for him to take. The last week was very difficult because you knew if you lost, there is nobody to blame. That you had done something wrong. And, especially when that was overlaid with—you know, that this campaign was so watched and people were so hungry that we really felt, on top of whatever personal disappointment, the sense of letting people down. That was very real.

DB: Is not that a terrifying responsibility now? All the hopes and expectations?

GS: It hasn't been internalized yet. Sure, but we have a lot more time.

DB: What were the obvious differences between this campaign and the Dukakis campaign?

GS: Maybe the organization. The openness to broader thinking. The differences between running it against an incumbent with a record. Objective conditions of the economy. Changes in the Democratic Party, a lot of which were precipitated by Clinton and the way he dealt with things.

DB: Were there differences between the kinds of people who were attracted to this campaign?

GS: I think, at the kids' level, it's all the same.

DB: Idealism, excitement.

GS: Although you remember, back in the spring, none of the kids liked him. They liked Tsongas, Brown, or nobody. I think, on our level, it's just a different generation of people. It wasn't strategic thinkers. It wasn't parochial at all. A more political candidate, that makes a big difference.

DB: With a political spouse, as well?

GS: Exactly. No question.

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

GS: That it was more disciplined than we looked. That's really it. That we created a strategy and stuck to it.

DB: But you also said that you had to be flexible?

GS: Flexible tactically. But there were different phases. In the spring, the strategy was to make sure that people knew who they were. In the summer, it was to establish that they were in touch, and to make sure that nobody else defined who they were. In the fall, it was to make sure that people understood how the people got where they were, and whose fault it was. It is very simple.

DB: Was there a step in there where you got off a plane or looked at a television shot and felt just kind of overwhelmed?

GS: The first time it happened was as he was waiting to come out and give his speech at the convention. I walked out from behind the stage and went to the right side of the podium. I was standing alone and I looked out to this sea. I was there back when it was a paint store and it was like running for the city council, basically. I was saying, "Oh, my goodness, this is it."

DB: I was with the little gang down at Macy's, and when I got my hug I whispered something to him. He started crying. What I said was, "Do you know where we were twenty years ago?" Exactly twenty years previously, he and I had been down on the floor fighting the McGovern battle. Exactly twenty years later, there it all was for him.

GS: That was a great moment. The second time for me was different. It wasn't related to him. It was the night before the election in the War Room. Because most of those people were kids. I mean, just to take fifty kids and make them into a little machine, that just felt good.

DB: They would have walked through fire.

GS: They would have. That was more personal. You've worked with them everyday. You knew you could call any one of their names and they knew when you called what you were asking them to do. They could do it.

DB: When you think about this, is there anything you would have done differently?

GS: Yes. I don't know how I would have done it, but, had I known a little bit more and understood him a little bit better and had a deeper relationship with him from the start, I would have forced him to say everything he knew about the draft.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]