



Presidential Oral History Program

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William J. Clinton

Presidential History Project

BRIEFING MATERIALS

David Wilhelm

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MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR CIRCULATED

David Wilhelm Timeline

Prepared by Kelly Erickson

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia 05/20/2004

- 1976** Wilhelm works on the Carter presidential campaign as a delegate recruiter in Ohio. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1978** After graduating *magna cum laude* from Ohio University. Wilhelm attends the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where he earns a master's degree in public policy. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1979** Wilhelm interns for Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH) in Washington, D.C. He later takes a job as a researcher at Citizens for Tax Justice, an AFL-CIO-backed think tank. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1984** Wilhelm joins Paul Simon's (D-IL) Senate campaign as Field Director. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1985** Following Simon's victory, Wilhelm returns to Citizens for Tax Justice. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1986** Wilhelm takes the position of Iowa Campaign Manager for Senator Joseph Biden's (D-DE) 1988 presidential campaign. While working in Iowa, Wilhelm meets his future wife, also a Biden staffer, whom he will wed in 1989. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1988** After Biden withdraws from the presidential race during the primary season, Wilhelm returns to Ohio to run for Congress, seeking the seat occupied by Republican Representative Clarence Miller since 1967. Wilhelm does not secure the Democratic nomination. (*The Associated Press*, 02/17/1988; *The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- One month after the Democratic primary, Wilhelm is asked to manage Richard Daley's Chicago mayoral campaign.
- 1989** After Daley's victory, Wilhelm remains in Chicago, becoming a ward precinct representative and opening a political consulting firm. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)
- 1991** Wilhelm again runs a successful campaign for Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. At a later political event in Chicago, Wilhelm is introduced to Arkansas Governor William J. Clinton, who is looking for a campaign manager. Wilhelm secures the position in October, after a meeting with Clinton aide Eli Segal. (*The New Republic*, 06/20/1994)

1992

- March* Working in familiar territory, Wilhelm helps engineer Clinton's primary victories in Illinois and Michigan. (*The Columbus Dispatch*, 03/30/1992)
- April* Clinton sweeps all the "Super Tuesday" primaries and begins seeking the support of uncommitted Democratic leaders in order to secure the nomination. (*The Washington Post*, 04/09/1992)
- Wilhelm and Clinton campaign Finance Director Rahm Emanuel struggle with nearly depleted campaign coffers after spending more than expected to secure primary victories in New York and in the "Super Tuesday" primaries. (*The Boston Globe*, 04/14/1992)
- June* Clinton denounces incendiary comments made by rap artist Sister Souljah in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Riots and criticizes Jesse Jackson for inviting the rapper to speak at his Rainbow Coalition Conference. Analysts see this as evidence of the ascendancy of Clinton's more conservative advisors, and of a strategy of seeking moderate white voters. Wilhelm is among the advisors that caution against a confrontational approach. (*The Boston Globe*, 06/19/1992)
- July* Clinton accepts the nomination for President of the United States at the Democratic National Convention in New York. Immediately after the convention, at Wilhelm's suggestion, the Clintons and the Gores begin a bus campaign tour from New York to St. Louis. The trip is intended to reinforce Clinton's centrist message and image, and to shore up support in little-visited areas of southern Ohio and Illinois, two crucial states in the 1992 contest. The success of this trip prompts the Clinton team to extend the tour from St. Louis, along the Mississippi River up to Minneapolis. (*Newsweek*, 08/17/1992)
- September* Wilhelm sounds an alarm that the campaign is risking a serious revolt among minorities. Cool relations between the Clinton campaign and Jesse Jackson after the Sister Souljah incident, the centrist message of the campaign, and the relatively few campaign stops specifically targeting black communities, are mentioned by black leaders as contributing to this problem. In response, the campaign decides to allocate more funds for targeted voter registration and to study why black turnout in the primaries had declined. (*The Boston Globe*, 09/02/1992)
- November* Clinton wins the presidential election with a plurality of 43 percent of the popular vote.
- December* Wilhelm is asked to coordinate political operations for the Clinton Administration, most likely as Chairman of the Democratic National

Committee (DNC). The problem of how to run a political operation that is not physically located in the White House is discussed. It is reported that Wilhelm is seen as having strengths in party building from the local level up. He also is expected to heal internal party divisions, particularly with minority groups. (*The Washington Post*, 12/15/1992)

1993

- January* Wilhelm is named the next Chairman of the DNC, replacing departing Chairman Ron Brown, who will become Secretary of Commerce. (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 01/14/1993; *The Washington Post*, 01/15/1993, 01/21/1993)
- February* As the Clinton Administration begins to work on its health care task force, Wilhelm and the DNC plan to coordinate a nation-wide, grass-roots campaign to build public support for the plan. (*The Washington Post*, 02/07/1993)
- Wilhelm fills most of the key staff positions at the DNC. In addition to Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) centrists, Wilhelm brings in staff from Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and from women's political organizations. (*The Washington Post*, 02/17/1993)
- The DNC and White House staff brief 50 interest groups on how to help support the President's economic program. Women's groups, environmental activists, anti-poverty groups, children's advocates, youth leaders, labor and civil rights groups are all asked to mobilize their constituencies on the issue. (*The Washington Post*, 02/17/1993)
- March* Anticipating opposition to the Clinton health care reform plan, Wilhelm hires a field coordinator to manage campaign-style organizers around the country. Wilhelm says trained volunteers may go door-to-door answering questions on the plan. Speakers will be available to address local community groups, and technology will be utilized to quickly rebut attacks on the plan. (*USA Today*, 03/30/1993)
- April* Wilhelm advances a proposal for the federal government to match small donations to political parties in order to compensate for funds lost if large donations from individuals, unions and corporations are banned as part of the President's campaign finance reform plan. The plan also calls for limited public financing of congressional campaigns as well as increasing the size of the tax-form check off. (*The Washington Post*, 04/29/1993)
- May* Wilhelm seeks to change the way people interact with the party in advance of any campaign finance reforms that limit "soft money." Hoping to tap into the populism generated by the Perot campaign,

Wilhelm wants to offer a special party membership, which, in exchange for a small contribution, would involve contributors more directly in the daily activities of the party. Using the newer technologies of the “war room,” supporters could get daily faxes and other announcements that would attempt to mobilize public support. (*The Washington Post*, 05/23/1993)

June

The DNC sets up a foundation to solicit money from corporations, unions and individuals for a public relations campaign on behalf of the Administration’s health care plan. This foundation, the National Health Care Campaign, will seek nonprofit, tax-exempt status, which would also allow it to raise unlimited funds without disclosing donor names. (*The Washington Post*, 06/03/1993)

In a rapid turn-around, the National Health Care Campaign foundation is dissolved, and the effort to pass health care reform becomes part of the Party’s regular fund raising effort. (*The Washington Post*, 06/04/1993)

The DNC comes under increasing criticism from House Democrats claiming the President’s economic package is not being competently supported. (*The Washington Post*, 06/23/1993)

At a joint meeting of the DNC Executive Board and the Association of State Democratic Chairs, Wilhelm tries to reenergize reluctant state chairs. With the defeat of the President’s stimulus package, but a narrow victory for his budget, Wilhelm argues that there is a steep learning curve after being out of power for twelve years, and appeals for patience from the state chairs. (*The New York Times*, 06/27/1993)

September

Invited to give what sponsors thought would be a conciliatory message addressing common ground between the Democratic Party and the Christian Coalition, Wilhelm tells the Coalition that the ads it ran against the President’s budget were “mean-spirited” and “misleading,” and that the ads appealed to selfishness and gave “aid and comfort to the economic elites in our society.” Wilhelm goes on to criticize the Coalition’s stances on abortion and homosexuality saying, “I believe that you can be a good Christian and support a woman’s right to choose....I believe strongly that God loves and accepts all his children, regardless of the differences among us, including sexual orientation. That is why I find it troubling when religion is used as a weapon to divide rather than a tool to heal, and hatred is preached in place of tolerance.” (*The Washington Post*, 09/11/1993)

October

Wilhelm warns five major lobbying organizations that the party will do battle with them if they challenge the President’s policies on the economy, health care or gun control. Saying that the Democrats’ foes are

not limited to the Republican Party, Wilhelm targets the National Rifle Association (NRA), the Christian Coalition, the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA), Citizens for a Sound Economy, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses in his challenge. (*The Washington Post*, 10/10/1993)

November Democrats suffer losses in the three most closely watched off-year races; the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia, and the mayoral contest in New York City. Wilhelm says the razor-thin margins do not indicate a trend, and that these outcomes are not indicative of what Democrats can expect in the 1994 midterm elections. (*USA Today*, 11/03/1993)

December In the wake of election losses in November, Clinton consultants James Carville and Paul Begala are given increased responsibilities at the DNC. (*The Washington Post*, 12/15/1993)

1994

January Further reorganization at the DNC brings in new senior staff members including Terrence McAuliffe as Financial Director and Don Sweitzer as Political Director. (*The Washington Post*, 01/27/1994)

March As the Whitewater issue heats up, Wilhelm questions the ethics of the Clintons' chief critics, specifically targeting Senators Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY), Phil Gramm (R-TX), and Bob Dole (R-KS). (*The Washington Post*, 03/13/1994)

April Appearing on CNN's *Evans & Novak*, Wilhelm argues that Whitewater will not be a major issue in the fall elections because the President and First Lady are cooperating with the independent counsel's investigation. (*USA Today*, 04/04/1994)

May Wilhelm begins dispatching Party operatives to key states for the 1994 mid-term elections, forming what is expected to be the nucleus of the President's reelection campaign in 1996. Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and California have all been targeted as critical states. (*The Washington Post*, 05/08/1994)

June DNC Political Director Don Sweitzer is rebuked after saying that Democratic candidates were free to distance themselves from Clinton if it is necessary to win. This statement contradicts the position taken by Wilhelm and the White House that recent Democratic losses were due to candidates' failure to support the President. (*The Washington Post*, 06/09/1994)

July

Recognizing that the HIAA's "Harry and Louise" ads have been effective in undermining support for the President's health care plan, Wilhelm announces a two-part DNC response. First, the DNC releases a commercial spoofing the "Harry and Louise" ads that will be played in New York and Washington and is targeted to opinion leaders. Second, recycling the successful bus trips of 1992, the President, First Lady, Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper will each join separate bus caravans originating in the four corners of the country in order to sell the plan to the American people. The caravans will converge on Washington, D.C. around August 1st, when the health care plan should be on the floor of the House. (*The Washington Post*, 07/08/1994)

Wilhelm announces that Chicago will be the site of the 1996 Democratic National Convention. (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 07/24/1994)

August

In a shake up at the DNC, Wilhelm announces he will step down as chairman after the November elections. The White House asks former California congressman Tony Coelho (D-CA) to work at the DNC as a senior advisor to help quell discontent within the party. Following rumors over the past year that he may be replaced, Wilhelm says he is sick of the speculation about his job tenure and that he looks forward to fighting with every ounce of energy for victory in November, and not to keep his job. (*The Washington Post*, 08/10/1994; *The New York Times*, 08/10/1994)

November

Midterm congressional elections result in Republicans gaining 54 seats in the House, thus taking control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1946.

Wilhelm departs as DNC Chairman. Clinton names Debra DeLee as acting Chairwoman until a replacement can be found. Wilhelm will join Kemper Securities, Inc.'s office in Chicago as Senior Managing Director in Investment Banking. (*The New York Times*, 11/15/1994; *Investment Dealers' Digest*, 11/14/1994)

1995

Wilhelm briefly runs for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Paul Simon (D-IL). (*The Washington Post*, 06/11/1995; *Chicago Sun-Times*, 07/27/1995)

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DAVID WILHELM SUGGESTED TOPICS

Prepared by Kelly Erickson

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 9/21/2004

Origins of Relationship with Clinton

- How did you first come to know William J. Clinton? What were your initial impressions of him?
- Discuss your observations of Clinton as Governor.

1992 Campaign and Transition

- How did you come to join the campaign?
- What were your main areas of responsibility as Campaign Manager? Comment on how the campaign was organized, and who else played significant roles. Discuss the relationship between the group in Little Rock, those on the plane and the Washington group.
- What were the key challenges of the campaign?
- Comment on your role in the selection of Vice President Gore. Describe the process through which the campaign identified and researched potential candidates. How active was Clinton himself in various stages of the process?
- Were there any lessons from your experience in the Biden and Daley campaigns that were especially helpful to you in 1992? What lessons for campaign organization and management can be drawn from the 1992 campaign?
- How did the scandals or missteps of the Clintons during the primaries and general election affect your management of the campaign?
- Discuss your role and responsibilities in the transition.

Chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC)

- Discuss the circumstances surrounding your selection as DNC Chairman.
- Describe any discussions you may have had with the President about your role and responsibilities. What activities and issues most occupied your time?
- Talk about the first 100 days of the Clinton Administration. What were some of the challenges the DNC faced in this early period of the Clinton presidency? How were decisions made on the sequencing of policy initiatives?
- Describe the efforts to coordinate policy between the White House and the DNC. Explain the role the DNC played in the policy formulation and implementation processes. Discuss the DNC's role in early Clinton policy initiatives (budget and taxes, deficit reduction, health care, gun control, etc.). Describe the extent to which the White House relied on the DNC to push its legislative agenda and also to block unwelcome initiatives.
- Talk about the role played by the DNC in health care reform. How effective was the interaction between the White House and the DNC in moving this program forward? What factors aided or hindered this project?

- Discuss your relationships with the White House staff. With whom did you work most closely and on what issues? Describe your relationships with George Stephanopoulos, Dee Dee Myers and the rest of the White House Staff.
- Discuss your relations with Congress and congressional Democrats. How was Democratic strategy coordinated between Congress and the White House?
- Describe Clinton's relationship with other Democratic Party leaders. How would you characterize the relationship between the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) and the DNC? Discuss the internal politics of the party during your tenure. How successful were you and the White House at managing tensions between the liberal and moderate wings of the party?
- Talk about the electoral outcomes in the off-year and midterm election in 1993 and 1994, and the role the DNC and/or the White House played in those outcomes. Why, in your view, did the Republicans regain control of Congress in 1994? Was it avoidable?
- Discuss the development of unified Republican opposition to the President leading up to the midterm elections. Evaluate Haley Barbour's role as your counterpart at the Republican National Committee.
- What impact did presidential scandals (the death of Vince Foster, Whitewater, etc.) have on the Clinton White House? Did they affect the President's policy agenda?
- How would you characterize Clinton's management style and decision-making style?

The Clinton Presidency in Retrospect

- What do you consider your greatest accomplishments during the Clinton Administration?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton presidency? What features of the Clinton presidency were overlooked or misunderstood by the press?
- What did you learn about the organization of the Democratic Party that would be most beneficial for your successors to understand?
- How effective was Clinton as a public leader, a legislative leader, and a party leader? Discuss your views about Clinton's legacy for the Democratic Party.
- How should the Clinton presidency be viewed in history?