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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Peter Alexander Dagher

Campaign Position: Assistant to the Field Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

December 11, 1993

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. Peter Alexander Dagher viewed 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: What was your position with the campaign?

Pete Dagher: At first I was an assistant in the political department and later became Craig Smith's assistant, the assistant to the field director.

DB: What did your responsibilities include?

PD: Everything from assisting them in the most basic of ways, answering phones, opening up the mail, preventing a lot of the lower staff from ever reaching them. Also ran the recycling program, fixed cars on the campaign.

DB: Is recycling a commitment that you came into the campaign with, or did it just become one?

PD: Right before the campaign I was a construction worker in Chicago. I used to tear out a lot of places before we started rebuilding. Every day I'd spend three or four hours just hauling out the old infrastructure. I just kind of wondered about it, so when I came down here I saw all this paper getting thrown out and it reminded me of, "Gee, couldn't we do something about it?" So I thought, "Hey, is anybody recycling around here?" Nobody was.

DB: Eventually it consumed a great deal of your time, didn't it?

PD: Yes. Until August I was hauling all of it myself. We turned in about 3,000 pounds of white paper a week, about 100 pounds of aluminum cans a week. Just from the end of the campaign we made about \$500 from turning in paper and such.

DB: And what did you do with it?

PD: A lot of the money went to buy the containers. I wanted to make a program without cost. We have a surplus of about \$220. Craig wanted to have a beer party, but I wanted to buy a tree and have Governor Clinton plant the tree—sort of a campaign tree—so that thirty years later you could take your grandkids by and show them.

DB: How did a construction worker from Chicago end up in a campaign in Arkansas?

PD: The more I studied the Democrats in the fall, the more I knew I wanted to work for one of them.

DB: Had you ever done a campaign before?

PD: Never. Never. I didn't really like Bush and I wanted to see what was out there. The more I looked at the various Democrats the more I really liked Clinton. It wasn't just that I didn't like Bush. It was I couldn't believe that there was a guy—if I were going to tailor-make someone—that believes in things I believe in, somebody whose background shows that he's an overachiever, that he's a fighter. This is the guy. He's my boy. So I said, "The heck with everything." I quit my job and showed up.

DB: That was when? There were just a few people here then.

PD: November 19, 1991. There were thirty in Little Rock. It was a fluke that I got hired because—I showed up and when I went to the front door—I had sent four résumés down there and had called about eighteen times. Mr. Watkins was the one who hired me. He didn't look at my résumé. When I walked in the front door, I figured if I just showed up—and I brought my tools with me so I could work as a mechanic on weekends—if they didn't pay me, I'd just work as a volunteer until they found something for me. So I showed up. The person at the

reception desk said, “Oh, you’re here trying to get hired?” And I said, “Yes.” She said, “You’ll have to speak with David Watkins.” Just as she said that, Mr. Watkins happened to be walking by. His ears perked up and he looked at me and thought—because I was in a blue suit with a suitcase—I’m that salesman that he was going to meet with. So he backslaps me and says, “Hey, come on upstairs.” I’m thinking, “This is so easy, I should have done this October 4.” So we went up to his office and he sat down and said, “What kind of deal, what do you have for me?” And I said, “Sir.” I gave him my résumé and he said, “What’s this?” I said, “I’m here trying to get a job.” He figured he couldn’t run out either—he was trapped. They hired me at \$200 a month. He took me by the arm and walked me to the issues department and asked, “Do you all need any help?” They said, “No.” So we walked over to press, “Do you all need any help?” “No.” Walked into political, “Do you all need any help?” “Yes, we could use somebody.” Henceforth, I was in political.

DB: Who was there at first?

PD: At first it was Stephanie Solien and Craig Smith in the political department. Stephanie was the political director. Craig was the deputy campaign manager for Super Tuesday. Because that was critical.

DB: This campaign is now being called the most effective presidential campaign in American history. What, from your perspective, made this campaign so effective?

PD: I think first and foremost credit goes to Bill Clinton. Not like sucking up to him, but the bottom line—what I saw here—I couldn't believe the kind of people I met here. I'm young, but up in Chicago—I've never met people like this.

DB: Like what?

PD: The best image I think was Maria Haley. She's a very petite woman, and I remember her telling me about marching through New Hampshire before the primary, going door-to-door telling people, "Hey, I'm an Arkansan. Let me tell you about my governor." I can imagine her walking through eight inches of snow—which would practically cover her up to her knees—walking around door-to-door, talking about Bill Clinton at her own expense with a lot of other people that I saw—loading up in vans and driving all the way up there just to talk about Bill Clinton. Giving their phone number in the newspapers, and things like that. If Bill Clinton were from New York, I don't think we'd be here right now. It's just the people and the kind of people that Clinton inspires. He sort of gets energy from people and becomes ever more roused up. That, in turn, feeds the crowd even more. It sort of just keeps growing. It's really him.

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

PD: I think in the beginning it wasn't that much under control. They relied on people's common sense to do different things. Even at my level, I did many different things in the beginning because they just didn't have time. There wasn't a bureaucracy. There were too few people to be a bureaucracy. Bureaucracy in some cases is efficient, because each person has a specific job, but in the

beginning, you just couldn't do that. So the organization in the beginning relied strictly on people's common sense. There were a lot of things we missed, but we were also able to do it quickly and fight back quickly. That really helped us very much. As the campaign grew, we became more bureaucratic. It became more authoritative. It became more what the top needed, and filters down. You had fewer and fewer decision-making capabilities at my level—less discretion. I mean, we still had a lot of discretion, but it just kept getting less. Then after the convention, when it was Clinton/Gore—that was a 600-person bureaucracy working within headquarters. If you needed anything, you had to fill out a form.

DB: Did it feel like a bureaucracy?

PD: I think towards the end of the campaign it did because in the beginning I remember all the Arkansans—and I remember everybody—and it grew slowly. And suddenly, after the convention there was another 100 people. We didn't have time to meet and go out. We didn't go to Petit Jean with these people. We didn't drive around. And there were distinctions. We walk around and say, "Who's so and so?" "Well, so and so's been working there for two months."

DB: In the beginning, you knew everybody?

PD: Yes. People would invite you over to their homes for dinner. My first Thanksgiving here, the Lindseys said, "All those that are here in Little Rock, come over to our house." There were about twelve of us that went to Lindseys'. Then after the Lindseys for dinner, we drove over to the mansion for pie. This is the first time I'd met Governor Clinton. He's in jeans and a T-shirt. Just sitting there. There were no Secret Service, no state troopers. Walk in and there's the

governor having pie—eating more mincemeat than he should have. I remember the first thing we all were asking him was, “What the heck is mincemeat?” He said, “I don’t know, but I like it.”

DB: Mincemeat—you don’t want to ask about.

PD: Exactly. I figured.

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

PD: I was convinced August of 1991. The more I looked at him, the more I read about him, the more I knew about him. The things that really grabbed me were education, which he’s very strong in that. Education is what pulled him out of his poverty. He’s able to achieve a lot of things because of education. I said, “This guy knows what’s afflicting America. It’s education. He’s going to hammer on the economy. He speaks well. He’s good-looking.” His wife—there [were] a lot of people who said she ought to be the one running. He had it. Everything was there for him. It was for him to lose. It was never for him to win. It was for him to lose.

DB: But at the time he announced, people thought a Democrat couldn’t win. When were you certain that he would win the presidency?

PD: I think I knew it the night that they made the draft letter public. When they announced that and I read it—actually, Ted Koppel read it verbatim. I said to myself, “Anybody at that young of an age, who would write a letter that eloquently, knew damn well that someday he’s going to achieve very high goals. That he’s going to be planning. He’s going to hone his skills. He’s going to listen to people. He’s going to become a true representative of the people.”

That's when I knew. So everybody was walking around with their heads down, like, "Oh, we just lost the election." Making plane reservations. There were ten to fifteen people that quit after the Gennifer Flowers and the draft thing. I was smiling. I knew. That's it. It's a done deal. The guy's a fighter. He fought back. My mother would call worrying, "Oh, Pete. I'm worried." I said, "Ma, it's a done deal."

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

PD: I think the time we probably got discouraged was right before the California primary. We all knew it was over. We knew we had it. The fight had really begun to leave people. I sort of lived for the weekly battles of the primaries. But I never was discouraged. I really, honestly, never was. The night he was up there speaking, I was happy as anybody, but in my mind, I just figured that this was going to happen anyway.

DB: Was there just one particularly memorable night for you?

PD: I think the biggest high point was the night of the Illinois and Michigan primaries, which was tough, because it was going to be us and Tsongas. They flew me up to Chicago to close out the Chicago office. Since I was from there and my mother had been volunteering at the Clinton office, I invited her to the Palmer House. I arrived in Chicago about two hours before Clinton went on. By the time I got to the hotel, he had just begun speaking. I remember walking into the Palmer House, just seeing this place packed with people. Up until then, I had been in Little Rock and I was on the inside, but I didn't have a clue to what the people thought out there. Suddenly I see this, and I remember the balloons coming

down. They had those confetti cannons. Seeing Bill and Mrs. Clinton up there, everybody waving and they were playing “Lean on Me.” I remember thinking to myself, “This is something else.” Afterwards, my mother and I sat down and I was introducing her to people that I worked with in Little Rock, because it seemed like half the campaign was up there. Mr. Wilhelm was giving interviews on CNN and he had twelve people lined up, live TV all over the country and had the local reporters from Chicago. In the middle of an interview he looked over at me and my mother. As soon as that interview was over—there were still five or six more people—he told Martha Phipps his assistant, to hold on a moment. He walked over and introduced himself to my mother. My mother was just ecstatic. And also that day my mother met Mrs. Clinton and the governor. My mother makes baklava, and she had been sending it to me and I had been giving it to the Governor and Mrs. Clinton. My mother said, “Oh, I’m Pete’s mother. I’m the one who made you the baklava. Do you like it?” And Clinton said, “Yes. I know. I know.” That was my night. March 17.

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

PD: For me, it is a campaign that is really going to change America. That’s how I view it. Because he is so different. He’s from such a different background than past presidents we’ve had. If they look back on his campaign and remember anything, they can remember that this is what happens when you put your nose to the grindstone, because Clinton should have been finished off five or six times. He’s a fighter. You don’t get elected governor of Arkansas five times by being a

wimp. So if the people are going to look back at this campaign, they must realize that we were hungry. That's what really propelled us at any low points was, "Dammit. We want it." If it meant another five hours of work that night, well we'll do it. If it meant pushing Clinton to another five cities, then we did it. Whatever it took, we did it. That's about as eloquently as I can say it.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]