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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Richard B. (Dick) Atkinson

Campaign Position: Research Department

Fayetteville, Arkansas

January 9, 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. Richard B. (Dick) Atkinson 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: What was your position with the campaign?

Dick Atkinson: I worked in the Department of Defense with Diane Blair and Betsey Wright, et al.

DB: What were you doing immediately before you came with the campaign?

DA: I was working at the University of Arkansas School of Law, teaching law there.

DB: When did you officially join the campaign?

DA: Officially, at the end of June.

DB: When you say you were working in the Department of Defense—just walk me through a typical kind of thing that you would be doing.

DA: I'm not sure anything was typical. It seemed that each day brought its own new challenges. A typical issue would be getting involved in the controversy of whether Clinton was, in fact, a tax-and-spend governor and, if not, how do we establish that he was not. That was a major problem that presented itself early on—a theme which was consistent throughout the campaign. Sometimes there was a high visibility picture like the controversy over the number of taxes and fees which had been raised. Other times, it's much more specific. For example, the Republicans' daily fax attack would assert that Clinton had taxed farmers excessively. My job was to determine what, in fact, was the record on agricultural taxation then to attempt to respond to that issue.

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

DA: I think there are a variety of reasons for that. Certainly one of them, and the chief one, was the belief in the candidate and his program. That to me was the unifying thread that created the true community. Then it was the individual talent of the various members of the team. I use the word team as all-inclusive, from those of us with not very high visibility to those on up. I was extremely impressed with not just the enthusiasm—the belief in the needs of this country to have change—but also the raw talent that folks brought and were generous in sharing. There seemed to be a relatively little staking out of personal claims and much more subordination to the general good. That to me was the most exciting part of the campaign. Other than the notion that the country needed this was the sense of community that permeated that place. One was immediately embraced with that. It didn't take long, two or three days, and you were a part of it. Remarkable. And no one seemed, the best I could see, to resent someone coming in. They looked forward to sharing, getting additional help for the cause.

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

DA: It seemed to be sort of an organism with symbiotic parts. People working toward a common goal. Listen, they could certainly instill a sense of urgency in us at any given moment—focus us on a particular issue. We could think about the debates. Diane, for instance, under your leadership, we focused on a particular problem and everyone worked on that and got it out. So there was certainly that sense of being able to prioritize. But there was also considerable autonomy, I think, throughout the various groups and even in our group—how you wanted to focus

on an issue, what issue you thought was your priority, and how you spent your time. So it was that mixture of combining the talents of folks and being able to focus on a specific, centrally directed mission, and also capitalizing on independent thinking and prioritizing at other moments. So, in some way, it got the best of both worlds.

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

DA: Just because of the historical association with the candidate, I think I was hesitant to admit to myself that he really was going to win this election. So I didn't want to allow myself the luxury of believing that, and then to be, perhaps, disappointed. I think around the first of November I was convinced.

DB: No, the nomination, not the election.

DA: I wish I could say I was in the group that was absolutely convinced early on. I wasn't. I was confident that he would be the best person, I had no doubt of that. But whether or not the country would recognize that—I'm trying to think back to the times of the New York primary and how he was suffering. But I believe, by about that time, I'd decided that he was going to be able to win it. And there was really no one else who could take him out. I knew that Jerry Brown was not going to be effective. My hopes were high early on. While I was convinced he was the best candidate, I was not convinced he would emerge as the nominee until late in the process.

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

DA: The low point, which I was not involved with, was some of the primary issues.

My personal low point involved the decision to pursue the counting of taxes and

fees. The decision to engage the state folks in the count. And the result of that was I was on vacation in New York Labor Day weekend, taking a couple of days off. Betsey called me and said, “I want you to be aware that this article has appeared in the *Washington Post* that is very disheartening, from my perspective. It makes it look like we tried to mislead the public on his record.” I felt sad about that. I felt that I had not adequately staked out—made clear to the press and decision makers what exactly they could have expected. I thought I had communicated it, but I wondered if I communicated it better. I felt guilty that I hadn’t done a better job.

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

DA: There were different kinds of high points. There was the global perspective, where you saw where the candidate was being so successful. That was sort of built up by the aggregate. There was the sense of the broader community and high points within the “War Room.” There was this incredible energy in coming together as one—sometimes a funny song or a mistake by the Republicans. On another note, it was another personal high point in the sense of our group working together as a unit and feeling the camaraderie and the enthusiasm of the kids. I guess there really was not just one that I could point to. I would point to a variety of different types of moments. Each of which provided me with a unique experience.

DB: Have you ever had a birthday cake with 128 candles?

DA: No, I never had a cake with 128 candles.

DB: That was kind of a high and a low, wouldn’t you say?

DA: That was a high and low. Everything about those days constituted that. I had some great times with it, and horrible times.

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

DA: That the people involved in the campaign were unified in their vision that there could be a better America. I guess I've been around long enough to be a little cynical. There's a great song, "Had enough birthdays, watched enough mornings," to have enough perspective. But that's what we really wanted, a better America for Americans and a better America for the world.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]