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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Paul Begala

Campaign Position: Strategy Consultant

Washington, D.C.

February 2, 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. Paul Begala 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 were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

Paul Begala: I had just finished the Wofford Campaign.

DB: What was your position with the Clinton campaign?

PB: I never had a title. I was a political consultant. It was one of the things I liked about the campaign. I never saw an organizational chart. I never had a title. I had a job. It sort of evolved relatively early. It involved traveling with him to help him with the rhetoric and the message and also, I felt anyway, just generally trying to keep us focused on the things we had to be worried about. Keeping your heart and your mind in the right place.

DB: Speechwriting?

PB: Some. I get more credit than I actually did. A lot of speech editing, particularly at the end of the campaign when we got David Kusnet on board. We had some really good writers in Little Rock, but because I had been a speechwriter for years, I think the press gave me a lot more credit than was due. I would go over it with an eye to “this is what he thinks—he wouldn’t say it this way.” Bruce Reed and I would always get the drafts and, both for substance and politics and for style, the two of us would try to collaborate to try to put it back into something that was closer to him. Then we’d give it to him and he’d do it over.

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

PB: It was very difficult and enormously painful to arrive at a point where it became a

good campaign. It was a bad campaign for an awfully long time. I think what changed it was, finally, there was clarity of focus and clarity of vision. We were, finally, after months of really painful and failed attempts to distill all of these big, broad, diverse, multi-faceted issues down into something that was tight and focused and right for Clinton—right for the times. It was what James wrote on the board, which was not just “It’s the economy, stupid”—which was the mythology. Above that was “Change versus more of the same.” It’s much more important. And “Don’t forget health care.” Those three things. It was interesting, right below that it said, “Staffer of the day.” Because one of the things that was different about it, and it should be well remembered—one of the good things was people were empowered, they were entrusted. In that “War Room” or on that plane. In the War Room there were probably fifty people who knew everything. Stan Greenberg would sit in a room full of people and go over poll numbers. On the plane, you can’t keep any secrets. We never had leaks, we had very little backbiting or dissension because people felt empowered and involved. They felt empowered and involved earlier in the campaign, too, though, and it had led to chaos and stalemate.

DB: So how did the transformation take place? Both of them were highly decentralized in many ways—free-flowing—but it worked later, and it didn’t earlier. So what happened?

PB: In the early days we were nonhierarchical, yet it was a total bottleneck because the only final arbiter was the candidate.

DB: Was that when there were thirty or so people on the conference calls?

PB: Right. And anyone could stop anything because everyone was perfectly equal and every single decision, practically, was being made by the candidate. Once the governor gave us his clear and distilled strategic vision, I think in mid- to late summer, decisions flowed more easily. It was less confusion about whether something should or should not be done because we then had a person who would push everything. And frankly, James was empowered as probably the first among equals to drive and execute that vision. For those two reasons it became easier.

DB: So that, in a sense—once you had the vision, the message, the discipline kind of came from that, and then everybody could be empowered to go fulfill it?

PB: Right. Because the people who were there—I was against it, putting the campaign headquarters in Little Rock, but it was a stroke of genius—were there because they wanted to be there. They had to be there because they believed in this guy. The loyalty in this campaign was incredible. There is a class of people who only work in presidential campaigns, who I generally have contempt for because they just sort of retread from one to the other to the other. But some of them worked for us and some of them were good people. But many of the people who were doing this were doing it because they believe in this guy. They believed in what he had to say. It was remarkable, strategic and message unity. Everybody did agree what we were in this for. It's very different from governing.

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

PB: On the night of the New York primary, clearly. There was absolutely no change after that. It just wasn't an option. In fact, backing up—when we won in Illinois and Michigan on the same day that became pretty inevitable.

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

PB: The final, final moment, I mean, I really did think if we could get ahold of Bush—it just wasn't close. I just knew. I just knew he'd beat Bush. What finally closed it was on the Georgia bus trip. I can't remember when that was. I guess late summer, early fall. We had gone through this horrible mud-soaked, rainy bus trip and we finished up in Columbus. I got a poll from Greenberg like we did every third day. But this was it. We tested every attack on Clinton—none of them worked. We tested every attack on Bush—all of them worked. I sat back and giggled. I was so tired, and this was so good. I called George, who's always dark, and I couldn't hardly talk to him. I was just giggling. I said, "We're gonna win. We're gonna win. I know we're gonna win." From that moment on, really, it was an article of faith, like the sun coming up, or the fact that gravity worked today. I was that certain because, getting back to my earlier point, it was the person and the times joined together. I've done campaigns that were different. Wallace Wilkinson got elected on a lottery—the governor of Kentucky, '87. We worked for him. He ran for a variety of reasons, none of them because he wanted a state lottery, to tell you the truth. But he hit upon this lottery, we ran on it, and we won. That was good, that was fine. Winning is good. But what was better is we had a guy who's being utterly true to everything he believed, and it was exactly what the country wanted. There was just this coalescence of the person and the moment that was just not to be denied.

DB: Now, you're telling me about giggling, and everything was great—tell me what, from your perspective, was the low point of the campaign?

PB: June 2. California primary. Bar none. New Hampshire always had this sense of mission and excitement and “you and me against the world” that was so wonderful, even though it was painful, what these people were going through. But in California, the frustration was more than I could bear. We were playing by the rules. We were doing everything we were supposed to be doing. Clinton was working on distilling his message and he was getting it better and better and better, and no one noticed because Ross Perot had completely eclipsed us. No Brown heir had lost a primary in California history. We whipped his ass. We won more primaries than anybody who’s run for president, ever. We won more primaries than Lyndon Johnson, than John Kennedy—more primaries than anybody who’d ever run. No one cared. The day of the California primary, R. W. Apple, Jr., on the front page of *The New York Times* says, “It’s likely to be a brokered convention because Clinton’s so weak.” It was so monumentally frustrating for me—it was a few days, actually, before June 2. It was a day, and Rosenthal did a column that said, “Clinton had been cowardly in Los Angeles by not speaking out.” He had given three of the best speeches I’d ever heard anyone give—not just Clinton—in my life. He gave speeches that moved hard-bitten reporters to tears about those riots. He gave them to the press, to the DLC, to publishers, to community leaders. He was passionate and poetic and committed. And here was one of the leading voices in American journalism saying that Clinton had not said anything on it. That’s how totally we were being eclipsed. Despair is the greatest sin, and that’s the closest I came to despairing.

DB: What turned it around?

PB: Clinton. I know he went through the same thing—we all did—but he brought us out of it. He just said, “We’re just gonna push through this.” And there were creative ways to go around it. All the non-traditional media. And a lot of that has been mythologized, too, some of it for good reason. It was always out there. Nobody had really tapped into it before. He just kept trying and trying and trying. He was sorely tempted, but he didn’t sink into bitterness or bashing Perot.

DB: Which was a big temptation.

PB: Yes, because Perot’s a bad human being. He decries lobbyists and he’s made \$2 billion off of lobbying. I have strong feelings about him. But the governor was able to resist this enormous temptation that George Bush could not resist, to make this about “me.” “Poor me.” Bush made his whole campaign about “me.” “Ross Perot is attacking me, aren’t I sad. The media is unfair to me—annoy the media, reelect Bush.” Clinton always at every critical juncture made the campaign about “you,” never about “me.” It was easier in New Hampshire, when you didn’t want it to be.

DB: He did use biography very, very effectively to convey or reinforce the message.

PB: Yes. But my current travail is what Bush said. The story of a person’s life, particularly in an executive race, the type of person is important. A biography rooted him in America. He used to say, “I come from someplace. I’m not like these guys.” That was something about the governor and Hillary that was different than what people had always seen. They were very real. That put some people off, but it really endeared them to most people.

DB: I have heard you do the litany of what was really news the day that Gennifer

Flowers got all the publicity. I just want it for the record.

PB: I am going to speak to the editors of *Knight-Ridder* to give this speech. I went to a symposium on the First Amendment. On January 27, the following news events occurred. Boris Yeltsin disappeared from the Kremlin. No one knew where he was. Macy's, America's largest retailer, declared bankruptcy. The Supreme Court, for the first time ever, limited the scope of the Voting Rights Act. The president of the United States stopped his budget in midprinting because he couldn't decide whether to tax health care benefits. Stopped the whole budget in midprinting. The president was also putting the final touches on his State of the Union address, which was the next day. It was billed as the speech of a lifetime. The Middle East peace talks, which had been stalled, opened anew. All of those six things happened on January 27. All three networks and CNN led with the story of a failed lounge lizard who was paid \$190,000 to tell lies about Bill Clinton. As Yogi Berra said, "You can go look it up." When I go speak to these reporters I say, "The flag should be at half-mast at journalism schools. Reporters should have to wear black armbands every year on January 27." When you say it, they never argue. They argue everything, but they don't argue that. They just kind of look at the ground because they are deserving of contempt for that.

DB: Thank you. One interesting thing to me is when I talk to people and ask them what were the low and high points, for many people who were there, New Hampshire was both the low and the high point. It was like it couldn't get any worse, but when you saw that through, nothing else ever reached that emotional high.

PB: One of the high points that few people remember that I do was the New York primary night, which had been so painful. The low points, as a campaign—nothing compared to late May, early June. What Bill Clinton was going through then was awful. It was so completely frustrating, having been through all those other things. Having paid such a price because he believed in his ideas. He was finally able to talk about his ideas, but no one was listening. It was like the cruelest thing you could possibly do to Bill Clinton as a person. That's why, for me, it was the worst point. But in New York where he had been personally attacked and his family had been attacked—to triumph from that, that night. Again, it was never about “me.” Best speech he gave in the whole campaign. Nobody noticed because it was given in the middle of the night. It included a poem by Robert Kennedy who, after Martin Luther King was killed, asked people to say a prayer for our country and our people. He started this long litany off of that. “Say a prayer for the people here in New York who are dying of AIDS. Say a prayer for mothers who are trying to feed their children and can't earn enough money to do it. Say a prayer for the homeless people who were burned to death in the subway this week by a gang of kids. Say a prayer for those kids who have lost their soul.” It was incredible. My sister was there—she helped in the New York primary—she was weeping. He was really extraordinary then. Again, it was something that was so personally awful for him, and yet when he emerged from it, he didn't talk about it in terms of his own personal resurrection. It was always about the things he cared about.

DB: Tell me about the role that Hillary played. I know the role she played in your

personal life, that you should stay home when the baby's born. But insofar as the campaign is concerned?

PB: She's the best thing that could have happened. I think you never could have crystallized the message without Hillary, who has an enormous ability— incredible ability—to take complicated things and bring them into focus. The president has an enormous ability to deal with lots of complicated things all at once. That's good, but without bringing it together and bringing it into focus you can't communicate to anyone. Maybe it's the difference in their background or in their talents. Hillary has had to communicate very complex things to twelve ordinary people to get them to agree. A lot of what the governor did was communicating complicated things to people who were specialists in that complicated area, whether they were from academia or business. Her constant emphasis on plain talk, clarity of thought, consistency of message, and always her sort of unrelenting commitment to doing this and trying again—coming back to it. It was very easy to get lazy, particularly because we were in a weak field. We were going to win the nomination. We didn't have to go through all that agony to win the nomination. Had we not gone through that agony during those rough months, we would have never been ready for the general election. Every time she came on the road things were better. I always liked the bus trips. Not because of the bus trips, per se, but the governor's spirits were so much better when she's around. Her staff was also more fun than our staff. They were so nice, so smart, so good-natured. It's just a quality of life issue. We laughed when Hillary was around. We'd go sometimes a couple of days—even though Clinton's a good-

natured guy—with no laughter. And then, it's such a difference, if you'd be there slogging through this feeling alone, then all of a sudden there's this injection of energy and sunlight and fun. It would bring us back to life. She's the best thing we had going for us.

DB: Now that you've told me what was the low point, what, from your perspective, was the high point of the campaign?

PB: There are so many. For one, we had the biggest rally I've ever seen at the University of Texas. I saw the same spot where Ronald Reagan had a rally in 1980, I guess, and it was the biggest rally at the university. Ours was bigger. There must have been fifty thousand. It must have been one of the biggest rallies in the whole campaign. It was my alma mater. I saw all my old friends from all the campaigns I'd ever done in Texas and the president was so good. He was spectacular. It was beastly hot. Everybody stood and waited.

DB: When was that?

PB: Late August. Just after the baby was born. He was just so good.

DB: Wait a minute. Let's not just say "the baby." Let's give some details here.

PB: August 13. This was the nicest thing, of course. It has become legendary. I have told this story to the press. This is true about Clinton. It's exactly what he's like. What was interesting is I've told the press what Bill Clinton and what Hillary Clinton did when we had the baby. No one in the press has ever written what Hillary Clinton did because it doesn't fit their story. She was as instrumental in giving me a month off as the president was. She was in Hawaii when the baby was born. It was during the Republican convention. She came back and they

said, “Diane finally had her baby.” She called right away. I was sitting in my office at home and was so angry about the Republicans, I started in on her. I said, “Hillary, get these bastards. Here’s what we can do.” She cut me off. She said, “I don’t want to talk about that right now. I want to talk to Diane and I want to hear about that baby.” She was like a big sister. She talked to my wife, who in person she had only met a couple of times, but my wife really admires Hillary. They talked for half an hour about the baby. This was when Hillary was being trashed in front of 90 million people. It is so emotional to remember it all. It’s a telling thing, that the press was willing to tell the story about how Bill Clinton had been so good to me. It was during the Maine caucuses. We went up to Maine. It was freezing cold, driving through sleet. It must have been mid-February and I told him my wife was pregnant and due in July. He got all teary-eyed and told me about the night Chelsea was born. Told me how important it was to be there. At that stage, there was no real prospect of me having a job by July anyway, so it didn’t sound that difficult for me to be there. He must have said it ten times, “It’s the most important thing that will ever happen to you. You have to be there.” He paid my way home for Lamaze classes. He always asked about them when I got back. “What did you learn? What did you talk about? Oh, I remember when this happened with Chelsea.” When the convention was over he sent me home. The baby was supposed to be due right at the end of the convention, mid- to late July. The due date was the 23 or 27, but the baby didn’t come until August 13. He sent me home, and I did no work to speak of. I kept calling George or James. Writing things. But my job was to be with Bill Clinton, to keep him focused. Any other

campaign I would have come back, they would have given me a job, but it would have been radio actualities or something. Any other campaign would have cut me out. When I got back, my seat on the plane was there. Everybody on the plane was just as wonderful as they could be. It was really extraordinary for me. I'm sure that's why everybody who worked on the campaign has a real personal bond with the Clintons. That's the reason I do. Because they did that for me. It was harder than I imagined, leaving after the baby was born. I had no idea. I had dated my wife before we got married for eight or nine years. We had been married two and a half years. I was used to being away from her—and that's hard in one way—but it was almost impossible being away from that baby. Hillary would always ask—and not in a perfunctory way—she would encourage me, “It's okay.” There were times I decided I was a bad person—that I had bad values and priorities. She would get me through that. It's been very interesting that the press has been very willing to tell how active Bill Clinton was and how emotional he was and supported me emotionally. They don't want to write that Hillary Clinton was even more supportive emotionally. Because it doesn't fit their image. They want to put her in a narrow box. They're intrigued with the complexities of Bill Clinton, but frustrated with the complexities of Hillary Clinton. They want to say, “Oh, she's narrow and mean. She's in it for the power.”

DB: So that, obviously, was the ultimate highlight. Anything else?

PB: I think the big rallies and the bus trips. I didn't go to Arkansas, but knowing Bill Clinton, knowing so many people from the campaign, the Fayetteville rally must have been wonderful.

DB: That was so good for him.

PB: There was no strategic reason to go to Fayetteville.

DB: None. But I just felt that he could go the last ten days on fumes after he'd been back in touch with home. What is it you really want to be sure the future understands about this campaign?

PB: Well, I guess, the reality of the bad as well as the good, mechanically. I don't learn enough from victories because you don't ever go back and question. We made a lot of mistakes, especially early on that I think we have to be very candid about. Were it not for the talent of our candidate, we would have been knocked out. This is a mechanical lesson I need to keep. People still don't understand—the people in Washington—why we won. And they look at the campaign and say we were so mechanically astute. And the Republicans were so inept, but that was not it. It was that we had a candidate who believed in what he was doing and saying. But it was not just a message that came from Greenberg or Begala. It came from his life and his work. And nothing in the world would make him turn loose from that, in the darkest moments of the campaign. In fact, in May, when nothing was working in terms of getting through, and we had to bring more focus to the message, we drew all the experts together and all the political people together and basically decided to get right back to the announcement speech. And sometimes that would frustrate the governor. He would turn to me and kept saying to me, "I need a new stump speech." I would give him one and he would say, "There's nothing in here that wasn't in my announcement speech!" And I would say, "That's because on announcement day, you knew why you wanted to

be president, sir.” And I was always proud when he would say that. I had nothing to do with the announcement speech. He set the message before any handlers or anything got ahold of that. He never backed away from it. That’s why I know we would have won in a strong economy. That it was not the “economy stupid” in terms of why we won. It was in terms of the focus. The reason we won was Bill Clinton inspired hope, which was—I would have told you a year ago, two years ago—that was impossible. We don’t live in a heroic time. This is not like Roosevelt’s era, or Kennedy’s era. I never knew hope. I don’t remember when President Kennedy was killed. I have no memory of that. I have a very, very vague memory when Bobby Kennedy was killed. I was about seven. I just remember my mother crying when we watched TV. I never knew hope. I remember when Johnson was president, when Nixon was president. I’m thirty-one. I always thought that it was a little bit like getting toothpaste back in the tube—that you can always go from being hopeful to being cynical, but I never believed that a country or a generation could go from being cynical to being hopeful. And we have. That’s frightening, but it is also magical.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]