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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Atul Gawande

Campaign Position: Health and Social Policy Specialist

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 1, 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. Atul Gawande 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 campaign?

Atul Gawande: I was in medical school, actually.

DB: So how did this come to be?

AG: Well, sort of a complicated route, because I used to be a fellow for Al Gore doing health policy very briefly, then became Jim Cooper of Tennessee's health adviser, general social policies stuff. But one of the things for Jim Cooper of Tennessee was to develop a conservative Democrat health plan that got a fair amount of attention this past winter. I was discussing things with Bruce Reed and I came down for a couple of weeks to sort of bring in some of the things I'd been doing there, and one thing led to another. Bruce and a couple of other people thought I should come on as the health and social policy adviser, so I was more than happy to do it.

DB: How old are you, Atul?

AG: Twenty-six.

DB: This is so amazing, because I think this is one of the defining issues for Clinton, and it's also one of the most complicated, intractable . . .

AG: It's a nightmare of an issue. It's a funny area because it's one of the areas where, if you know the issue pretty well, it's so complicated it doesn't matter how old you are or background or like that. People are willing to give you some credence.

DB: How has it played out in constituency groups out there?

AG: Well, I mean, the economy is the 700-pound bull of this campaign. And I think the polls show something like 75 percent say it's their most important issue. And

health care comes in a distant second, but it is number two in the minds of many people. It connects to the economy in the sense that the costs are a lot of what's killing businesses. It's a lot of the reason why wages have declined, because so many employers are having to spend money on health benefits and not giving it to their workers in the form of wages. And also just the number of people who have been screwed over by insurance companies—every family has a story that they can point to. It really registers on a human level, and it's been a mechanism through which—I mean, it's a very complex issue and people trust Clinton because they know he's smart. It's a very human issue, and they trust Clinton because they know that it's a means through which he can show he cares. And he can show whose side he's on.

DB: How much of your job is shaping policy and how much of it is selling policy?

AG: I was in an odd position because I came on in June when health policy was one of the few areas that was still somewhat in flux. We had some very general principles that had been laid out, and there was a great need to bring more detail to the policy and to give it some particular direction. So, for the first three months, a great deal of it was designing new policy, creating a consensus around new policy, and then trying to sell it later on. But we didn't come around to having the major health policy address where we filled in the details till late September. And a lot of it was internal politics, external politics and fights over the health policy. The stakes get much higher when you lay it out in September rather than lay it out during the primary.

DB: Let me ask you a general question about the whole campaign. From your

perspective what has made this campaign effective?

AG: Boy, that's a really tough one. I mean, it's so chaotic from the inside, it's hard to imagine that it's effective. You see the results out there and sometimes you think that things are happening in spite of itself. I think it is a campaign that is effective, but I attribute a lot of its success to the fact that at its core it represents something that people desperately need. Even for screw-ups that we've had—and we've had many along the way—they've been willing to forgive them because of the general rock solid sense of hope and ideas that were conveyed. And I think if we're effective, it's because we haven't let the dirty tricks get us down and completely swamp the campaign. There have been times where we've been largely fighting the attacks, but we've had many opportunities where we've managed to go out there and stifle the attacks and then step out with a positive image for what we were doing. I think that has been what's effective. We've never let anything sit unanswered. And then there's been an ability that intuitively just sort of recognized when he had to shift and move forward and come out with something new and poke things ahead that one step further, when it would have been easy to have been paralyzed or sit on a lead, or things like that. Health care is a good case in point. Part of the struggle was over whether we remain vague or define something. When you define things, you're picking sides. You're creating enemies, and it makes people very nervous, so we were slow in coming around to deciding to move forward. And it took a heck of a lot of effort. But when we did, it turned out to have been a key thing because Bush was starting to sound credible on health care. And when Clinton stepped ahead and regained

his confidence—had something to talk about—blunt the attack it involved—that this is going to be big-time payroll taxes and killing small business and that kind of thing—it neutralized a potential vulnerability and made it a real winner for us in the sense of just having a straight knockout. I mean, forty points ahead—just on credibility on the issue—has to help.

DB: Let me make certain here. To what extent was the fact that we didn't come out with a very specific, highly articulated policy until September—to what extent was that a strategic timing decision? To what extent was it just that people were still battling over the issue?

AG: It was happenstance. I think what it came down to was Clinton was very nervous. It's an incredibly complex issue. It's not a clear winner whenever you talk about it. You never win a home run with health care. And a lot of it was rebuilding his confidence in the issue. It took a long time to just get the briefing out, get the time scheduled for the briefing, even to lay it out.

DB: How much personal encounter did you have with Clinton in working that out?

AG: I had three meetings with him. The main one was a briefing that we had in mid-September. Sort of a two-and-a-half-hour briefing that was very, very productive. It was a very good briefing. There's an interesting contrast because the other issue I dealt with was welfare, which was an issue in which—he is the recognized national leader on welfare reform. This was one of the first things that got laid out in the primary in tremendous detail. And that's an area where I was doing largely articulation, explanation, and defending against any opposition that came up. And it's been an issue that's worked tremendously for us. We've done more

ads on welfare reform than we have on health care, and it's really helped cast Clinton as a new kind of Democrat, which is the way I also wanted health care to emerge, but it was a little late to start. To start defining it as, "Here's the new Democratic vision for health care."

DB: I was fascinated with your first response when I said, "You know, we've been so effective," and you said, "Yeah, but it's chaotic on the inside." I'm trying to pinpoint—where did the focus come from? Where was the organizational core?

AG: Well, I'm not really sure. There was an ethic that developed that empowered people at relatively low levels to consider themselves empowered. Here I am. I was twenty-six years old. I came on the campaign. I was worried that I'd be slapped into doing Xeroxing even though I knew I had strong opinions about where I thought health care and welfare should go. And one of the first things that became clear was I never once felt stymied in my efforts to push the agenda, push the issue. And it helped a great deal that George, for example, gave relatively open access and I could make my case. I made my case for two months that we needed to do more in order to blunt attacks. And that sense of being given the power to do that and that people trusted you—that within two weeks of arriving on the campaign suddenly I was in Washington being able to hold a meeting with the major players in health care to try to build a consensus document, or to do a briefing with health reporters—those were key things in giving me the sense that, "Okay, I can run with this." So even though we don't have a James Baker at the helm who could direct things from the top and focus things, this sort of hydra-headed campaign had a sense that you could be one of

the heads.

DB: Maybe that's the "new management" at work.

AG: As it gets bigger and bigger, it gets more and more difficult to have ideas filter through and when it comes to scheduling, for example, it's been a nightmare because you've had so many people throwing in ideas and there's been a real need to shape how things develop. At some level, there are times when you really do need someone to just make a flat-out decision, and then you're wrong or you're right. You don't want to drift along. But when it came to issues in the campaign, if you could dig up a hit on Bush or dig up a positive way that Clinton could go out there, you had a decent chance of having it get a hearing. And then it was a good chance of that happening.

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

AG: It's funny—I had this feeling all the way along that he was going to be the nominee. But it wasn't a feeling that—it was that he deserved to be the nominee in the general sense that if anybody was thinking straight, that for whatever warts that that should be—you know, Tsongas didn't ever seem to have the strength in my mind that Clinton did. And I thought he had—you know, as a candidate or nominee, he could have had a decent chance of building supporters, but I didn't think he would. And Jerry Brown is just incomprehensible. So the real question was would there be some kind of convention fix. I just never thought there'd be a convention fix, so I always thought he'd be the nominee. But the real thing for me was, was he going to be a supported nominee? Or was he going to be just attacked? The time when I felt that he became the truly popular nominee, the one

who everyone would really back, wasn't until the week of the convention.

Actually, June was a phenomenal month. I mean, we came out with Putting People First. He had chosen Gore. Did the speech before the Rainbow Coalition, got a lot of credit for going out in front of the group and being critical of Sister Souljah. There were a number of defining moments in June which built the base for creating real popularity. And then the convention really made it all sort of happen.

DB: What was your low point in the campaign?

AG: I was only here in June. I wasn't in there in January and February. I mean, I was watching as a spectator and felt low about that. I'd say I've never had a real low point about the campaign itself. I've had low points personally in the campaign, but everybody has those.

DB: What has been your greatest moment of satisfaction to this point?

AG: I'd say that the personal moment of satisfaction was the end of the briefing I did for the governor. The day before he wanted to cancel the briefing. He was very reluctant to take the health care issue any further. He knew he was getting hit on it big time with taxes and too liberal and all of those kinds of things. And I was convinced that if I had a chance to sell it to him and get the story and walk him through the whole thing, that he'd be very excited about the direction he could go with this. And when he first sat down in the seat, he was slumped—he was looking for other things to do. Even the day before he said, "Let's cancel the policy speech and do a small business event." And when we finally had the chance to sit down and I brought two of the advisers and just had a chance to—I

mean, I thought through the whole briefing of how we were going to do it and walked through it and all. And it went off perfectly. Like clockwork. Presented the whole thing, had people present the numbers and the scenarios. By the end, he was on the edge of his seat. He was excited. He was looking forward to doing it, and it was really great. That was definitely the best time. Now, there were downtimes almost immediately after that, when he was frustrated about the paper that was produced and threw away the speech that we had written for him, and all of those things. Then we got hit really badly in *The New York Times* editorial, but then a week later we had a tremendous number of endorsements. The *LA Times*, *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* even came back and flip-flopped and endorsed the health plan. So it was a real struggle after that. But the end of the briefing was definitely one of the highest moments, because it was just high tension beforehand and we didn't know if we could pull it off at all.

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

AG: Well, I guess the things that sort of attracted me to it. One, that ideas can matter. Having new ideas can actually move people and politics. And I'd like it to be seen as the marking point of a time at which people could rebuild some trust in government. We're going to be held up to, and we've set for ourselves, a very, very high standard of honesty. And just with our own ads, we've never stepped over the line—throwing out the kind of lies that Bush told. The one difference between him and us is that we don't have the balls to go out there and just lie with a straight face. We have set a course of honesty, and I'd like it to be seen that this

set that standard and that honesty can win, and that we would lead the government in an honest and non-cynical way—tell people some of the hard truths that we really do have to face, and let this be sort of some measure of the effort to reinject honesty and truth telling to the political process.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]