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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Matthew A. Gorman

Campaign Position: Deputy National Finance Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 22, 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. Matthew A. Gorman 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 the time you joined the campaign?

Matt Gorman: I was working for the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, Richard Gephardt. And he was thinking of running for president, and since he decided not to run, I got on the bus and came down here.

DB: You just volunteered yourself?

MG: No. Dick Gephardt was thinking of running for president, so for eight months I raised money for the majority leader to sock it away. And since he decided not to run, Bob Farmer [my mentor and treasurer of the Democratic National Committee] said, "You should really go down to Little Rock." He kept pestering Betsey Wright and Bruce Lindsey to let me come down. And they said, "No, no, no, wait until it's right for Bill Clinton."

DB: When did you come to Little Rock?

MG: August 11, 1991.

DB: So you must have been one of the first staff, one of the first-hired people?

MG: I think I was the first hired and also the first person, definitely, from out of state. We had not gone exploratory, so I wasn't paid, and I wasn't staff. You know, you couldn't raise money, and the governor didn't know what he was going to do. It was like, "You can leave the majority leader, but you have no guarantees." So, I just came down to organize his files by state, and to go through all those letters

that he likes to write people and all those business cards that he takes from people and writes little notes on. That was real fun, trying to read those hieroglyphics.

DB: Has your position changed since you became official staff?

MG: No. Deputy national finance director.

DB: For the record, what do you do?

MG: I basically call people up and ask them to donate to the campaign. Now that we're in the general election, we can't raise money for the campaign. It's for the DNC. So basically you go through your Rolodex, ask your mother to go through her Rolodex, ask your business associates, friends, Romans, countrymen—just calling people, that's all it is.

DB: Is that tough?

MG: Once people know who Bill Clinton is and his message, it's not tough. But it was tough in the beginning. Bill Clinton has an extensive network, be it Georgetown University alumni, Yale Law School alumni, Rhodes Scholar alumni, what we call the Arkansas diaspora. So if they know him, it's no problem. Paul Prosperi, Christopher Hyland, Jeff Orseck, Clay Constantinou. All these people that knew him. Well, Clay didn't really know him but other people that knew him, it was no problem. Other people that didn't know him, didn't know where Arkansas was, didn't know what the DLC was, didn't know what the Democratic Governors Association was—that was hard. So we went to our strengths, like the Renaissance Weekend people. We immediately went to our strengths, real quickly, to get a base to pay the salaries, to open the door, to keep the lights on.

We had a little meeting over at Bruce Lindsey's office right when we had gone exploratory. And they said, "Okay, if we go exploratory, how many phone lines do we need?" And I said, "That's all I do is use the phone. And if I miss one call, that's one check that I missed." Because you're calling somebody for a check, if they call back once, they're not going to call back twice because they know you're asking for money. So I said, "We need fifty phone lines." And Bruce Lindsey and Webb Hubbell just about choked. And Dave Watkins. We had this little meeting in Bruce Lindsey's office. Webb Hubbell, Bruce Lindsey, Craig Smith, Carol Willis, David Watkins—there were about six or seven of us. I said, "If we go exploratory"—and I represented to these people the fact that Bill really might run—because you guys have known for twenty years he's going to run. Or that he should run. But I was really the representation that he might run, since I was from Washington, D.C., and formerly with Gephardt. So they looked at me like I was the expert on presidential campaigns. I'd never done a presidential campaign. They were all looking to me, so I was straightening my tie and clearing my voice. "Well, I think we should order fifty phone lines." They damned near died, and they ordered six, so we were obsolete the first day.

DB: Then you very quickly set up this network of people raising money through the finance councils?

MG: There's no such thing as a finance council that early. Again, we announced the exploratory on August 28. I was really working with Craig because he had traveled with the governor so much. And he just said, "Here are all the files, go

through them.” I worked in Bruce Lindsey's office at that time. They then could have folded up shop and said, “The governor's not running. Bye. Good luck. Go home.” But August 28, we decided to run. Craig took a leave of absence, and it was Craig, Mark Middleton and myself. Then Sarge pretty much opening and closing the door and building these tables. And it was so fun to see Sarge because he was serious. I said, “Sarge, we're only going exploratory. We don't need eighty-four tables. There's no one in here. We don't need sixty-four brooms, eighty-four pen holders.” He was just this cute little man running around. And he knows more than anybody ever will know, but when you first meet him, you think, “Oh, isn't that cute, this old man is going to help Bill Clinton. As long as he stays out of my way, I'll like him.” And here he is and he knows more than anybody. So he took it a lot more seriously than most people. There was no finance council. There was no finance committee. Again, it was just exploratory, and no one knew, really, that he might even run.

DB: When did you hear that the decision had been made?

MG: He announced October 3. I think October 3 was a Wednesday. I think the Thursday before we had said we would have a press conference, but no one knew, still. I looked at Craig and I said, “Listen, he's running, right?” He said, “Matt, until it comes out of his mouth we don't know.” And I said, “I know that's the party line, but you know that we're running, right? I mean, I can tell my mom to go ahead and send the winter clothes.” He said, “No, man, I wouldn't do anything until you know.” I mean, I was in the Legacy Hotel for six weeks. I was saying,

“This is costing a lot of money here. Are we going to go or not go? We need to move out of this gosh-darned place.” He said, “Not until he announces.” He announced the exploratory committee at 11 a.m. on August 28 or 27, or something, and, again, I thought I was the only representation of the fact we might run. I got a call from somebody and they said, “Well, now you can raise money, right?” And I said, “No, no, we're not exploratory.” They said, “He announced it a half an hour ago, it was just released through AP.” I said, “No, no, no. I know what the governor's doing.” So, I picked up the phone and I called Craig and he said at 9:30 the governor called a press conference for 10:30 and he announced. I said, “Craig, I'm eight blocks away, why the hell didn't you give me a call?” And he said, “Matt, we were running around trying to make sure the press knew and put up this and the that.” So I found out we went exploratory through somebody else. So that's the way Bill Clinton—I mean, he really makes up his mind and he just does it. He doesn't really say, “Let's put up the stars and stripes and the flags.” He just does it. So, I never heard that he was announcing October 3 until the Thursday before and then it was like, “We're not sure yet.”

DB: Then the organization started to grow when the decision was made.

MG: Well, the organization started to grow when we went exploratory. We kept saying, “We're not hiring anybody.” You know, people in Little Rock and Arkansas and everybody that really knows presidential politics that well—when they said, “It's an exploratory committee,” people thought eighty-four people sat up on a dais and had coffee and had a committee meeting. You know, people

thought you explored. All the exploratory committee does is allow you to raise money. It's an entity that allows you to raise money. So people would call up from Arkansas, "I want to be on the committee. I've known Bill since 1492, and I got to be on the committee." And we said, "There is no committee. The way you're on the committee is you call your friends and you raise dollars." "Well, how do you do that?" "Go through your Rolodex and just make phone calls." So people would just de facto show up and say, "Gosh-darn, I'm volunteering." We said, "We don't have any money." And they said, "Fine, I'm going to answer the phones or I'm going to clean the window." I mean, Bill has that kind of following that people just—like Sarge. They just show up and they do things. It's amazing. So it really didn't grow, per se. So August 28 we announced, and it was myself and Craig Smith and Bruce Lindsey. The next day we hired Mark Middleton. He was recommended by someone. I don't even know who, but people were, "Well, he's an attorney. He's never raised money before. He's kind of clean-cut. He's never gotten his hands dirty. You know, can he do it?" And the guy's been a hero ever since—a hero. He was hired the next day, so it was really Craig and Mark and Matt, the three musketeers. And there was an article in the *Gazette*, I think on the fifteenth, that's really fun to sort of go back and read to see what we were doing. And then Bob Farmer, the campaign treasurer, hired Nancy Jacobson, I think, on the first, like a couple of days later, to do Washington. And then on the twelfth or the fifteenth of September, Bob Farmer hired Paul Carey to do New York. I was saying to Craig, "We need someone in Dallas, we need someone in

Chicago, we need someone in L.A., we need someone in Florida.” “No, no, no. The governor doesn't want to spend the money.” So Bob Farmer pretty much, the same way he just said, “Matt, go to Little Rock,” he just sort of de facto started making some things happen. He hired Jim Palmer to work with Clay Constantinou in New Jersey. We had two early finance heroes outside of Arkansas. Clay Constantinou and Vic Raiser [in Washington, D.C.].

DB: Matt, what was the low point of the campaign for you?

MG: The low point was being out there alone in Florida. See, their primary was March 10. I'd been there since November. So, after the primary, we folded up shop pretty much. I had never been involved with the political side, anyway, because even when we had a primary and we had Jeff Eller down there and the political people down there, I was never involved. I would be off in my own office in Miami, where most of the money was. They were up in Tallahassee. But at least I could call them and say, “Well, you know Dick Simpson? He just called me and won't do money now because we had a problem last week.” But there was no one with whom to commiserate after March 10. So really being out there by myself, not being able to share the invigorating experiences of a campaign, or getting thrown mustard on all day long. “We won't do this. We won't do that,” because of Clinton's problems during the primary campaign. And having to go home at night alone and still saying, “Darn well, I believe. Why won't anybody else believe?” So, I think the only low point is not—see, when you're in Little Rock, being here, there's energy—you feel a part of it and you don't even doubt yourself saying, “I am right, gosh darn it, he is the best man,” right? You're doing with

that conversation with yourself, but not having other people with whom to do that was the tough part.

DB: Okay. Let me guess your personal high point.

MG: When I looked up at the podium at the convention—that was it. I told my mother it was the fourth-best night of my life. She wanted to know what the other three were. I said the other three are going to be election night when we win, inauguration night, and my wedding night. But I was lucky because I had been—the DNC and the Clinton campaign did not get their act together. We thought we were taken care of by the DNC because it was their convention and we gave them all our lists of names and the DNC had what I call “Christmas presents”: sky boxes, podium passes, booze lounges. Delta Airlines booze lounges. So I guess Rahm and Amy thought we were already taken care of, but it was nobody's fault, I'm not here to blame anybody, but unfortunately we got—our people got lost. For three straight nights the only “Christmas present” I knew about was the Delta lounge. So, I stood outside the Delta Airport lounge and Bill Ranier, Bud Stack, Vic Raiser—“This is the free booze and the ice cream sodas, and the shrimp.” When you're doing that—and it's the cavernous Madison Square Garden—you don't know what's going on inside, so I didn't know that Zell Miller spoke or Jesse Jackson, or anything. Apparently at that point the roll call was going on and Carol Shields, Hugh Westbrook's wife, [they were managing trustees and they're friends of mine from my Gephardt days. Hugh Westbrook was Bob Kerrey's treasurer for president. So I know them from Gephardt, and I told them when

they chose Kerrey in September of 1991 that they shouldn't have done it. Clinton was going to be the person, and all this]. So they came around and congratulated me on my choice for being on board early. And they said “Matt, you've been standing out here for three nights. You've got to get in and see some things.” And I said, “We have just not been taken care of and this is Clinton's convention, and we put this gosh darn finance committee together for eleven months and they're not—Brian Greenspun of Las Vegas is not being taken care of. We've got these terrible credentials. We don't know where the this or the that is.” And she said, “Come with me and I'll show you one thing if you're a DNC trustee—anybody that's raised over \$100,000.” She had this little pass with a gold stripe on it, and I didn't know where she was bringing me. And all of a sudden I end up on the podium and I was just, “Oh, my God, look at the colors and the energy,” and just then—and I still didn't know this was going to happen—just then Ohio put us over the top.

DB: And there you were.

MG: And the balloons come, down from the ceiling and the sparkles come down, and it was so surreal. I was just out there on the podium, and I looked down and there was this swathe cut through the crowd to Virginia Kelley. Now no one had ever announced Bill Clinton was coming to the convention that night so even the staff didn't know this. I looked down, and I still didn't know why there was a swathe cut, but there was Ron Brown and Ann Richards and all of us on the podium—Monty Friedkin. And Mickey Kantor hugged me because I knew him from my

Gephardt days, and Clay Constantinou was up there, and I was just—it was like walking into the Oval Office almost. It was magical. It was absolutely magical. No one up there knew Virginia Kelley, but, luckily, because I had been here in Arkansas, I knew Virginia, and I knew it was her shining moment. Talk about the second best night of her life, or something. So I looked down, and there she was and she looked up at me and she saw me and her eyes went wide and I was like, “Yeah, Virginia.” And she couldn't hear me, but I'm sure she could see my emotion. And I started blowing kisses to her like, “Virginia, this is for you. This is your night.” And tears started coming down my face. And by the time Bill came up—I looked up into the monitor. Bill Clinton was coming out of his limo. And he was coming in, and the crowd and his speech and everything. And to make a long story longer, finally when that was over he walked off, and I helped Hillary because the wall went down when Bill gave his, “I'll be back tomorrow night.” The wall went down and Hillary came up, and I helped her up and she said, “Matt, we will never forget what you've done for us.” And then hearing that was—again, more tears, you know, more crying. So, I went off the stage and Bill went off the stage, but they went off to the left. And then I saw Hugh and Carol. They had gotten me onto the podium. They are such caring people; they are still very genuine. I broke down, just uncontrollable sobbing. And it was just from ten months of absolute fifteen-, twenty-hour days, the same thing Bill Clinton does, and believing and trying to tell people, you know, until you run out of

breath, that this man is going to be the president of the United States, and to finally just know that you were right. I just broke down.

DB: From your perspective, what has made this campaign so effective?

MG: Oh, that's obvious. Bill Clinton. I mean, Bill Clinton—everything begins and ends with Bill Clinton, and I think the quality of the people that he attracts because of his message and because of his energy and because of his passion and because of his substance and because of his record, I mean, that's the easiest question in the world. And like he said at the debate a couple of weeks ago, “Bill Clinton will be in charge of domestic policy.” It's just a great, genuine line. When I heard that something had gone wrong or right, I said, “Well, I wonder if we want to bother the governor with this. It's something that he should probably be aware of.” And it came back two weeks later that, in fact, he had heard about it. He was aware of it. He knows what's going on. He was in control, and he had an opinion on it and acted. It is effective because of Bill Clinton. And whenever we've been drowning because of maybe—and everyone makes mistakes, and this staff has made mistakes, there's no doubt about that. When we were drowning in different places, people would call me up panicking, either supporters or staff members or family members, saying, “We have to do this. Why didn't we do that? Look what he's doing. Look what he's not doing.” And I'd say, “Sure, I could call up and raise the red flag and cause a panic and jump up and down,” because I do have the access, but I said, “Bill Clinton knows about it, and we'll be fine.” I stayed with Bud and Barbara Stack, our finance chairman, for about four

months. They are just sweet, sweet people. And I kept having to refocus them on the money because that's our job. But, of course, they were into it, and they care and they wanted to know about this message and that issue and this poll number and what was going to happen in February and March, and I said, "Go back to fund-raising. Stop worrying. Wake up on November fourth and this guy's going to be the winner. The only thing you have to do is keep notes on those naysayers." I said, "Barbara, stop worrying about it. But take notes, and when they ask you for inaugural ball tickets, 'Sorry, you remember back in February you were negative.'" And I said, "Bill Clinton is in control. Bill Clinton will save this campaign." See, there were times when he could take our support and we could help him, but the final thing, the final savior, the final message, the final organization is Bill Clinton, and that's why I said that.

DB: But what is it that you really want the future to know about this campaign?

MG: I think one of the main things that pops into my mind is that it is not controlled by special interests. We did not do an "Olly, olly, in come free. We're going to run for president so let's have every person that's ever done a Democratic presidential campaign come on board." It was not a calculated deal. People have misread Bill Clinton's letter about the draft when they say, "Oh, look, there's a line in there: 'I want to maintain my political viability.'" They didn't understand what he meant by that. It was not that "one day I'm going to run for president or one day I want to have power." What I interpreted Bill Clinton to mean is that "I want to maintain my political voice." You especially have to remember the atmosphere

of the 1960s—where Nixon was in charge and all these people in charge of the FBI and CIA and all the very conservative people around the country—people would not listen to you if you had long hair or a certain message. So what I understand Bill Clinton to mean is that he just wanted to have an impact on the discussion. He wanted to be able to walk into a university, a board room, a mayor's office, the police station, a television station, whatever, and be able to have his message listened to. I tell you, a lot of times when I was in my twenties, I said to people, “I'm really going to surprise people because I've got, you know, my coat and tie on, and I have this great education, but I am very liberal.” I really want to change this gosh darn Reagan/Bush era, but you can't do it from without because if you rant and rave from without, no one listens to you and they close the door. If you sneak in, “Hi, I'm part of this system. Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, I'm dating your daughter. Hi, Mr. Whomever, I'm going to be part of your corporation. Surprise! I'm changing now that I'm from within and I have the ability.” I think Bill had to maintain his political viability to be able to be involved in the discussion and have an impact and have a voice. So that's the kind of thing that I want people to remember—this is all Bill Clinton. It's not like this was a grand scheme, a grand plan and we have been hatching this for twenty years, and that it is not that all the typical constituencies of the Democratic Party were in charge of the campaign and had puppet strings. You know, I think a lot of our and Bill's generation was disillusioned by corporate America and the capitalistic America and the white men of this world that control our society. I

think people could easily be cynical and say, “Oh, look, Bill's got a nice haircut and he's so effective in communicating, it's another politician,”—Bill Clinton is not another politician. There is no such thing as Slick Willie. I want people to know that I saw this from the beginning and this came from Bill Clinton's heart and this came from Bill Clinton's friends' hearts. I was the only one that read all those letters and saw those handwritten notes on business cards and saw the energy and the passion and the emotion. People begged Bill Clinton to run for president. So, I think I just want people to know that this came from the heart and it was a groundswell. And going back to your first question, he attracted those kinds of people: the George Stephanopouloses, the Mickey Kantors, the Diane Blairs, the people that rallied around Bill Clinton, I mean the substantive people. This campaign is effective and has done well, but what I want people to remember is that these are real people. These are not your typical, “Oh, great, it's an election year. We got a wagon, let's hitch you to a horse.”

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]