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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Sylvia M. Mathews
Campaign Position: Economic Issues
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. Sylvia M. Mathews 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?

Sylvia Mathews: I was working at McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm and I was working in their New York office.

DB: How did you happen to join up with the campaign and when did you come?

SM: I came on July 27, and I hooked up with the campaign through Gene and George and all the folks from 1988. I worked in 1988.

DB: What specifically is it that you do for the campaign?

SM: I work with economic issues so I've worked very closely with the thirty-five thousand private sector job loss and the private sector job creation in Arkansas, and all the economic indicators and our analysis of them showing that there are difficulties with the economy. I also work with education some. So I answer questions on that, and we've done a little bit of paper on that as well. I've done work with labor. I do CAFE standards and carbon tax and have had to work very closely with Senator Gore's office on both of those issues as well.

DB: I have been stunned by the fact that our mantra is, "The economy, stupid," and I have this vision of President Bush with the entire resources of the federal government at his disposal, and then I walk by your little corner office and there's just you and Gene. Have you ever felt just overwhelmed with responsibility?

SM: I think sometimes we're overwhelmed, but we've had all the help that you could possibly want from outside sources. Our outside economists, our folks on the Hill have just been troopers all the way. Gene is very bright and can get to the quick of

things, and often that's what makes it a little easier—to look for the right things and do the right things. But the support and assistance that we have had from outside sources, I would say, is the only way that we have been able to do the job.

DB: Does that include think tanks?

SM: It includes think tanks, private economists, academicians, Larry Katz and David Cutler from Harvard University are—just in the past few days it was in the *Boston Globe*, the workhorses of our economists, and they truly are. These are gentlemen who will come in at three in the morning, if we give them a call, to help us out with an analysis overnight. The folks on the Hill—George Tyler—people who don't like to have their names mentioned—others have been there through all the debates, before the debates, analysis of the budget, the *Mid-Session Review*. They've been there and helped us through thick and thin on all of it. And that includes private sector economists as well.

DB: You're trained as an economist?

SM: I've done both politics and economics all along. My undergraduate degree was in both, and I did public policy at Oxford as well.

DB: I think probably most Americans think politicians just sling statements in commercials with no concern for substantive accuracy, but what I have seen here is this endless, careful development of analysis, fact-checking, etc. How does there get to be such a disconnect between the way the public views this and our own sense of overwhelming obligation to the truth?

SM: I think there's a little of them in us here, and I think that on their side, campaigns have done a number of things that have led to these misperceptions. I think the

desire here to win and change government is extremely great; however, our sense of integrity as part of what that change is, is very important. And I think that's why we do it. And I think that's why you're here till very, very late double-checking, making sure that the numbers are seasonally adjusted, if that's what it takes, or whatever it does take. And I think we all take pride in that, and I certainly take pride in being a team that values that. It's part of the change that I hope is going to happen in two days.

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

SM: I think leadership is a very important part, and that's leadership at the top of the ticket and leadership here within our own organization. This is a nonhierarchical organization that, I think, reflects the candidate and the candidate's understanding and being in touch with the people. Similarly, I think our leaders here in this organization understand and are in touch with our entire operation. Having worked on 1988 and having worked on this campaign—this element is very important to the spread of information, to responding quickly, to having a feeling of belonging, to seeing that we are all pointing in the same direction in a very real way. Certainly at times there are differences on the specifics, and you respect that as intellectual debate. But philosophically and in spirit, you can feel the way we're all pointing in the right direction.

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

SM: I think that the ability to have a little bit of flexibility and still maintain the discipline and the ability to move quickly and change comes from the leadership being fully informed a lot of the time. The meetings—the morning and evening meetings make a very, very big difference. Also, I think the group is very focused on our goal. *The Washington Post* reporter Joel Achenbach had called and wants to do a style piece on “party nerds,” or, “What are we and do these people have other interests—is this all they do?” And I think this is a very special time and a very special situation where people are very closely focused on a goal and know there are certain things you have to shed and certain things you have to do. Flexible at certain times, yet strongly disciplined at others. And it’s people’s ability to switch in and out of modes quickly, as well as their ability to put other things aside. Joel asked, “What do people do for fun here?” And I said, “Well, you know, I really can’t tell you. And I really don’t know and I haven’t been out and I haven’t seen a lot of Little Rock. But what I can tell you is, in these folks’ normal lives, we have artists, musicians—everything—and I don’t know that for a fact, but I’m pretty sure I know that.” And last night it was confirmed when Bruce Lindsey sat down at the piano and just started playing. And it confirms all that I know, that we all have a passion for what we’re doing. We have a passion for many other things in our lives, and I think that’s what makes us the people we are. We do have a broad base, the candidate as well, but our willingness to put that to the side and do what we have to do.

DB: Of course, you’ve not been with the campaign since the very beginning. Have you ever had a low point? Was there ever a time when you were discouraged?

SM: I have not been discouraged. I think there were days when I was feeling a little tired and a little down, but I turn on the TV and I see the candidate and I have to say that is a contrast from the other time I worked. I see him and I get pumped back up. And I think he has that ability. The days that were hard, he was out there just coming out swinging again. Similarly, our folks here, no matter what, even on the days when things weren't going so well, we were all in this and just kept fighting. Nobody changed their goal, nobody changed anything—stay on message, keep on what you're doing, just work a little harder and try a little harder.

DB: Have there been for you any particular high points, other than the glory of being finally out on the road yesterday? Just say a little bit about that, Sylvia, for history.

SM: It was one of the most wonderful days that I've ever experienced. It was being with a candidate all day who was entirely pumped. Seeing how kind and wonderful he is and understanding a little bit about what everyone says about him. Seeing how he treated the makeup artist. Seeing how he treated us. On a day when he was just literally on a death march. All day. In the rain, three out of the four cities. And just was so pleasant, so kind, so interested, so intellectually curious. When we were in the house where we were filming, his voice was tired—it was very late, it was one or two in the morning—yet he wanted to know the history of the house. An intellectual curiosity that, for me, was just wonderful and just very exciting to see. And to be with all the folks out there who we don't get to see here, and they just took great care of us and showed us everything and treated us royally.

DB: And how many people were there in Atlanta?

SM: Twenty-one thousand, including Hank Aaron, who I had my picture made with. Hank Aaron. It was a banner day. Hank Aaron, Sam Nunn, Zell Miller, and the governor—all day.

DB: And you said that there were more people in one section of the bleachers than in your hometown.

SM: Than in my entire hometown which is Hinton, West Virginia. And the other thing that was very special about yesterday is I got to give the governor the “Hinton for Clinton” button that my mother had had made especially for this election as the Democratic chair. And I got to personally give that to him and know that he knows the relevance of it, and that sort of thing. So that was really, really special for me, but I know it will be incredibly special for my mom and her entire Democratic Party.

DB: Let me ask you one more question before you rush to the phone to call your mother. What is it that you want history to really know about his campaign?

SM: I think what I would like history to remember is both the efforts of the candidate and the campaign to do what this country is about—to leverage, in the words of business speak, all our skills and our talents and our desires and all that we can do, and that there was a group of people here who understood Americans’ ability to do that. And we’re already starting to try to do that. Focused on the ends of change and how you can change. Not ideologues, but people thinking about how we can make this better—“How can we help people make it better?” I think that’s what I hope. And that these people were dedicated to doing that—and also the integrity point that we’ve talked about earlier, that I think that in the heat of battle it’s very difficult for people to see publicly, but in the end I hope it does come out that our fine-tooth

combs and fact-checking and what I consider very substantial use of the numbers—
no fudging, no changing, no nothing—will come out as well.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]