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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Matthew D. Smith

Campaign Position: Director, New Flow

Little Rock, Arkansas

October 21, 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 D. Smith 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?

Matt Smith: I was Mayor Daley's news analyst. I got in very early in the morning to assemble a compilation of the morning newspapers in Chicago—all five of them—for the mayor. That's usually after about four-hours sleep. The night before, I had been monitoring since 4:00 in the afternoon and doing analysis of about five local stations' newscasts. And it was probably more intense on TV than it is here. I was up for a promotion within the City of Chicago to be the number two person in communications of the Chicago Park District. I was monitoring my news, and there was a piece by a local journalist Walter Jacobson on Channel 2 News in Chicago, the CBS affiliate. And he was talking with Mayor Daley. And he said, "Who do you like in the presidential race?" And Mayor Daley went, "I really like Bill Clinton. I sort of like Bob Kerrey, too. They're both okay. I like Bill Clinton." I called David Wilhelm in Little Rock who had just taken over as campaign manager.

DB: And this would have been?

MS: This would have been in probably late October of 1991. Basically, David was a friend from the Daley campaign. I never would have really asked him for a job. I would have considered coming if he needed me. So I called him up and I somehow miraculously got through to him.

DB: Did he answer the phone?

MS: No, he wasn't in the paint store. They were in the old school building. And I think I was going through Martha at the time. But I got through, I started talking, and I told him that Walter Jacobson had just given a tantamount endorsement to Bill Clinton. We started talking and he says, "Matt, how do you think we're going to do?" And I started talking and I said, "Well, I think Bill Clinton has a better shot than anyone in years," and he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, first of all, he's a moderate and it's been liberal Democrats who've lost the election and not by that much." I said the swing was the Reagan Democrats. And I said Bill Clinton could recapture the "bubba" vote. And the phone went sort of blank. And David sometimes likes to think and take pregnant pauses, but I said something else and he didn't answer and I said something else as well and he didn't answer. And I'm figuring, is this guy going comatose? And right when I'm starting to get frustrated he said, "Matt, how would you like to come and work for me?" We could use a guy like you down here." And it was like *The Blues Brothers* movie—when they're in the church and they realize that the way to save the orphanage is to get the band back together. Music played, a beam of light hit me, and I knew right then and there this was—I mean, really, it was tunnel vision. I knew that no matter what trouble I got into with the City of Chicago, no matter how it would uproot my life or anything else, this was the calling. I was sort of in a path in that direction and it's been one of the guiding things ever since. I just know that this is destiny. That doesn't mean you could slack off or anything.

DB: And he asked you to come and do what?

MS: Well, he said, “We got to find out what we could have you do.” I was well known for my clips and analysis. I had a big following of about a hundred and something people in the City of Chicago by the time I left who were reading my briefings every day. It’s called the “Daley Daily.” Anyway, he got in touch with George, and we talked back and forth, and this other job thing was looming over my head, and essentially George said, “We’d like you to come down and run the news department and also do a briefing.” Two days before I was scheduled to come down, I got a blood test back. I had been sick for a little while and didn’t know what it was. The blood test said that I had mono. My doctor said, “Well, you can stay home with mono and I can’t give you any medicine. Or you could go to this place.” So it was really tough starting out. And running the news department there was Richard Mintz, who had been acting press secretary. Dee Dee Meyers had been in a week before me. There was some time between when I actually left and when I agreed to come down. I moved my apartment and got mono, all in a couple of weeks.

DB: When did you actually start with the campaign?

MS: Late December.

DB: So has your position changed?

MS: Radically. It just expanded.

DB: Walk me through what it was originally, and then what it evolved into.

MS: The initial offer, as I said, was running the press office. But we had Dee Dee, we had Steve “Scoop” Cohen in there, and Max Parker, I think, was in by about that point. So there were a lot of people, and I had all these clips coming in from God

knows where. Hundreds and hundreds of them, it seemed, being put on my desk and people asking me to do this and do that. So essentially, I started trying to get the clips out. That sort of took precedence over anything else.

DB: With limited copying facilities.

MS: It was really like a job from hell initially. I remember turning the corner on it. I remember also making a plea for help to Dee Dee saying, “Hey look, at 8:50-something when I was supposed to do the clips, this department came to me and wanted me to research this. At 9:00 a.m. so—and—so called and needed this.” I said, “Basically, this is why we’re not getting the clips out as much as possible. I need some help.” Dee Dee said, “There’s this guy who used to work with the *Gazette*. He is pestering me. He wants to come work. He’s called me like twenty times. Why don’t you give him a call?” And of course, that was Ken Chitester who is now working down in press. So that was the first start of the empire building. Then we had an intern help out. Then eventually, Don Owen came on board. We grew in response to the needs—the news needs of the organization. I guess the Gennifer Flowers and draft crises really put a heavy emphasis on our department and really pushed us to perform. Slowly people started coming on board.

DB: One of the things I think that most people will remember about this campaign is the nightly meetings. How did that evolve?

MS: Well, this all started with the creation of the news room, I mean the Rapid-Response “War Room.” Sometime after the convention—a couple of days after—I got these frantic calls from Judy Steelman that Betsey wanted the wires

moved upstairs and it was like, “What’s going on here?” I don’t know what they’re doing upstairs, but it sounded like something big was in the works. And that was the rapid-response room. James Carville had actually mentioned to me weeks before that he was considering doing something, and that I might be able to help out, but I didn’t put any mind to it. So when they created rapid response, James sort of gave an overview of what he wanted and they wanted the news done, an analysis done, but they wanted it given orally. James—you could put stuff in front of him, and he’ll put his glasses on and look at it. He just doesn’t like to be bothered with that as much. He does read and he does that thoroughly, but to him oral communication is the key. So he and George seemed to be the ones to really encourage it. And even back in college I used to go to these sales and marketing executives of Chicago meetings of a thousand people and do a newscast before them. I’m a little bit of a ham, I admit that. It was a little bit of humor training. So that’s what happened, essentially. I started doing these newscasts.

DB: So now just walk me through a typical day.

MS: Well, it’s easier, a lot easier now there’s a staff. I really didn’t have a staff in Chicago or my early days here.

DB: What do you do?

MS: I get up usually about 6:00 a.m., get in for the seven o’clock meeting. Don Owen is usually in there doing clips. I’ll go there and pull any stray clips I can find and sort of group them for him. It took a lot for me to stop ripping the papers. It’s one thing I sort of said was a condition of running this department—is I can’t rip

papers and still do my job. Although I love it. So I'll usually make sure Don's off on the right foot. That our tapes are in. Walk over to the meeting. I usually hover toward the back of the room because I know there's something I'll hear or something coming off that I might have to pop out of the meeting for. Quite often it's Ken Segal doing the news summary, and we're doing that ourselves anyway at this point. So usually I wait till the meeting's done. So I'll go back and check and usually I'll try to relay any information for the morning meeting, which some of our department people go to. Go back, check on things, check my e-mail, see if there's any information that came through. One thing I've started doing is—really it's more for morale and it's more that it keeps everybody out of the routine—I'll call up the D&D and order breakfast. Or I'll get muffins sent in. Sometimes I'm the one getting the bill; sometimes, you know, they'll take up a collection. Sometimes I'll come out ahead. So the morning part is part serious, part social. I usually go in and sit down at one of the vacant wire machines and try to pick up as much information as I can. I get to actually take lunch most of the time, although I'm hooked up to a beeper now, so I don't feel as guilty about that. Late afternoon is when things get crazy. We get several editions of the Clinton–Gore Clipper and More out. There are two versions of that. There's a Clinton–Gore Clipper just for posterity. So usually when the news comes on at about 5:30, that's when things really start hopping and I go into autopilot. It used to be that I'd do all the networks and—

DB: How do you get what you get from all the networks and put it together for the 6:45 meeting?

MS: I used to do one station myself, and then hit two other people to give me their analysis of a station. Done in forty-five minutes. Before the War Room, we were doing this in like three hours. So you could see, we really hustled. Actually, we have three sets going at one time, all major networks. I take a notepad, and I sit and watch ABC and NBC. CBS is down at the end, but it's tough for me to watch three at one time. Two, I find I can sort of take competent notes. I turn the notepad sideways—you know, ABC, NBC—and I'll take some basic notes. I'm trying to lay off that a little bit because now I have three people each doing a network. Tell them to be concise, and hopefully before the meeting starts they will have printed out—in close to outline form—their analysis of the news, and I can just walk in there with their analysis and my overview and present it. Now, usually right after the news, I'll take all the news tapes and go back and watch them again and write down some key points for myself. So much news I really can't view everything, so I'll pick out pieces to play in that room. Like, there was a good report the other day on, let's say, NBC reality check on dealings with Iraq. How are we right or wrong. How are Perot's people right or wrong. Or "Bush's people right or wrong? So, I might cue that up to put into the meeting, or to have Don play in the meeting in the evening. And hopefully I can go in there with enough common sense and no fear of performing before an audience to relay the information. Try not to read. Try to have some kind of mastery of the facts. And, as you know, there's always some kind of funny angle. I like using kicker stories. I think a laugh is great for everyone. Like last night there was a story about a Frenchman in Malaysia who was on tour, he and his wife. An orangutan

leapt out, the man froze in fear, the orangutan stripped him down, took off his underwear, his clothes, bundled up the clothes, and ran away. And the naked man went screaming for help. That's something I liked.

DB: I can remember back when the Governor was having to compete for attention, and now he's the lead item on all the networks.

MS: And you hear so many criticisms. Before, you know, it was the press playing up a story based on a tabloid. That almost knocked us out of the race—this whole Gennifer Flowers thing that had been brought up during campaigns before and disavowed. And then the draft situation. It was basically the press that snowballed and rode that and punished Bill Clinton, and he stood up. And I think the American public was at the right time in history where I think justice prevailed, where a person wasn't going to be persecuted and knocked out of public service because of an impression of taint. So back then it was the media that almost did us in. Well, now everybody "knows" that the liberal media favors Bill Clinton at the expense of George Bush. And no one looks back to those early days, except us. You know, in the pit of our stomach we still feel it. But yeah, Bill Clinton is a big story. The scandal was one thing and all the people want to hear dirt and this and that—and our opponents, some of them Democrats perhaps at the time—during the primaries, might have been happy to oblige. I know there was a Harrison Hickman, a pollster, who tried to leak stuff on the draft status, and Bob Kerrey publicly supposedly denounced him—as a matter of fact, called him "Harrison Hitman" at the time, so it wasn't just a Republican effort. But now I think that the big surge of attention for Bill Clinton came probably at the

convention, and after the convention when people saw who he was, he defined himself. That's when it really started. And we had the foreign press calling up a long time ago wanting to interview him and spend a day talking with Bill Clinton. And you know, a radio station from Hong Kong or something really does not have as much clout as NBC News, you know. But we had all these odd small requests. But now it's the networks that want him. And the papers. What I get humored at is the other day, after everything—we'd just had the *Penthouse* magazine come out with Gennifer Flowers in it, and one of the British papers picked up on that and read that it was like a scandal all over again. When in reality, it's something that's dead. It's absolutely dead. And also another thing, George Bush started trying to attack Bill Clinton's character, and his surrogates started attacking the character, so that became a bigger issue than normal. Family values—Dan Quayle with the *Murphy Brown* situation brought attention to family values and the Republicans started saying, “Well, here's Bill Clinton, how does he uphold family values?”

DB: One night you called attention to the fact that on television, Al Hunt described the Clinton campaign as the most effective presidential campaign organization in history. From your perspective, what has made it so effective?

MS: You've got a lot of young people—in the sense of people anywhere from college age to the fifties, pretty much—who are very dynamic—on a mission—really have a deep down feeling, burning really deep, that there is something wrong with this country, that something's out of balance, that we have to right the scales in a manner. But I think even more than that, there's a tremendous amount of

competent people on all their fields that have been brought together for this. It's not just an army of drones. It's not like the Iran-Iraq war running thirteen-year-olds across minefields at the enemy. It's people who are really good. People who I don't think are jaded, unlike many people in the profession. People who have a good sense of right and wrong. I mean, we've got problems. We've got personality cases. I'm not exactly the textbook example of pure normalcy, but you know, it's everybody basically blends well together. When we yell at each other, we can patch it up. There's a sense that we're on the right side. I mean, it gets really strong when you hear the religious right backing our opponents and hitting us on this and this. When you start hearing about promoting women's rights as the next step to lesbianism, witchcraft, human sacrifice, then you know there's something twisted on the other side. I really think people here are on a kind of crusade and they're talented. Because of that, you can hire them and they don't burn out.

DB: Do you have a sense that there is a powerful organization, or is there a lot of decentralization?" Is there a lot of spontaneity?

MS: Maybe like a loose chain bracelet. You know, we're all together, we're not pulled too tight, the leash isn't tugged too tight except when necessary. I think it frees people—it's like the old Soviet system or something, or China, where you think of these people working all day without using their minds, without thinking. We're given enough creative leeway. We have enough, I want to say, idiot savants. We have enough borderline genius people in their areas around here who are given enough chance to follow personal initiative and pursue it. Give you one

example. Danny Reich from my office. He loves news. I love news, too. When he gets a story, he's like, "Oh, yes, this is wonderful, this is really good." He'll sound like Floyd the barber from *The Andy Griffith Show*. We were sitting there during the debates the other night and George Bush said, "Watch your wallet, they're coming after you." And we both said it at the same time, "That's Carville's line." Well, the difference is, Danny went back and found the Carville tape. Like someone came and asked me, "What about this piece we're looking for?" And the few of us will go at the same time, "Yeah, that was *Good Morning America* two days ago." I gave the example of a chain. Did you ever see a chain that sort of dangles on the ground? It's a little loose, but when you pull it real hard, it doesn't break. I think that's the best thing about us. We can take pressure, but we don't break.

DB: Would you feel free to go to anybody in this campaign and offer an idea?

MS: Yeah. Although I will tell you there are some personalities that are easier to get together and deal with than others. And by his own admission, James Carville will say, you know, "Come to me with an idea. I may yell at you, but it doesn't mean it's not a good idea." But who wants to get yelled at?" For instance, I came to him with something right here. And I interrupted his phone call. He didn't have to stop talking. But I handed to him the fact that the Russian parliamentary speaker endorsed George Bush on Wednesday. I mean, maybe this was something we could use. So in that case, no, there's no one—if I had an idea, there's no one I would hesitate to go to. I think for some reason, just my personality type, I'm able to go to a Betsey or Eli or a David Wilhelm or a Ricki

Seidman pretty much and give them ideas. I think there's an accessibility. The great thing about James is, and this gets to be a pain sometimes and historically maybe we'll look back and this was a plus or a minus, but the meetings are packed, and they're not too tightly screened. And it's an inclusive policy, an all-inclusive policy, and lots of people in there. But it's sort of like the Japanese management style. When you let the workers on the assembly line write out their ideas and develop them, there's a pride in the company. And I know a lot of people, I'll say to them, "Oh, why don't you come to the meeting, everybody else does, you might enjoy it, you might get something out of it." So in that sense, that's the ultimate inclusive policy. You know, who would have thought of James Baker calling up the people in the mail room and saying, "Come on, we're going to talk policy."

DB: And what do you think of our commercials?

MS: Some of them I sit back and get a—the only movie I ever got a real lump in my throat, and probably a tear in my eye, was *Brian's Song*, the movie where Brian Piccolo is dying of cancer. I think of that and get a lump in my throat right now. I saw a couple of our commercials about workers in Tennessee who are out of work. And there was one scene where they showed a "Crafted with pride in America" thing. It doesn't mean anything anymore. It's sad. Yeah, in that sense I think they're great. I don't know how nasty we can get, but we've been doing a great thing. They show George Bush saying, "Are you better off—"

DB: "How're you doing?"

MS: “How’re you doing?” Yeah. Just a little thing. They have him saying, “Read my lips,” and, “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” And says, “Well, how’re you doing?” It’s just a real quick thing. Frank is real good with that. It’s not just him. It’s Mandy. It’s a whole group of people. Some of the ads in the past I’ve seen are very much like morning in America. They show Bill Clinton and him hugging ladies and playing patty-cake with small children, and that’s really good, too, but there are some commercials once in a while that just sort of move you and I figure, am I working too hard? Do I have too much of an emotional investment in this campaign? I like the commercials.

DB: When did you become convinced that Clinton was going to be the nominee?

MS: I really have been following—it’s sort of like the old streetcars. They’re running freely, but they have a little arm that hooks up to the cable on top of the street. Since my decision to come here, I’ve felt that cable riding above. And during Gennifer Flowers and the draft and some other situations, it was a little rocky and I sort of wondered, but it’s almost like a belief in God. And maybe I’m tying both of these things. I really believe that this is destiny and we just got to pursue it. We’re going to have all sorts of crap thrown against us, but . . .

DB: You’ve never really doubted it?

MS: I never doubted it. It was a tough sacrifice, you know, to leave a lot of my—I had a dream, I was in my parents’ house in Chicago and all these strange people were walking in and looking at me and I was getting furious. I got up and I yelled at my parents in the dream, “How can you let this happen?” And I told someone here about that and they said, “It sounds like you were dead and they were visiting

you.” And I said, “No, that’s not it, but I know what it is.” They said, “What?” I said, “I’m going to be a stranger in my own house. I don’t think I’m going to go home again for a long, long time.” And I really have felt that all along. If we go on to Washington, I’ve embarked on a journey and it’s more than a three-hour tour. You can go home again, but I just don’t foresee it immediately.

DB: What was your personal low point?

MS: I think coming down here and being sick and having all—I mean, mononucleosis is a horrible thing, because in a campaign you get tired. With mono, you can’t get enough sleep and you never feel like you’ve had enough sleep.

DB: Then you had tooth problems, too.

MS: Oh, yes, that was really fun. You haven’t lived till you’ve had a root canal in Arkansas. It’s sort of rustic. And it was great, because I needed a dentist badly and I got Skip Rutherford’s dentist. And the guy was cool. It was in a converted house. To be sick and came down here and I hit the ground stumbling. I was portrayed as the clip god or something like that, and I had all this stuff dumped on me and no help to do it and I was feeling lousy. And I was sleeping on David Wilhelm’s couch for three weeks. That was, perhaps, the low point because I was wondering if I could make it. And I know this thing had destiny to it, “How can I, short of complete collapse, avoid fouling it?” So that was the low point. The root canal was kind of fun, because, you know, Demerol really does things for you.

DB: What was your high point, other than the Demerol?

MS: It’s been an ongoing high point. I think probably the creation of the rapid

response team has been a real plus. It's sort of like being part of the Navy Seals. Actually, my high point was my birthday. I've had to forego my birthdays the past few years while working for Daley and a lot of rain checks. I still have people who owe me lunch from two years ago.

DB: Tell posterity about your birthday.

MS: I knew something was up, and I figured enough people knew it that I was going to get a cake or a surprise or something cute. People were acting sort of funny all day. And I remember saying to a couple of people, "Look," I said to my assistant Gladys, "Look, I have a friend in correspondence who is Shannon." I said, "I don't know that you're doing anything for me for my birthday, but if you are, for any reason, give her a call. I don't want to know anything." I went in the meeting and I started doing the newscast and I asked Don to go to a tape. I turned around and there was a picture of Dave Leavy holding a microphone on the VCR, and I think, "What is this?" And they played it for ten minutes and it was just running around saying, "Oh, this is horrible." At first I didn't know what it was. Like there was some bad secret about Matt Smith, or something—Matt Smith turning twenty-nine, or this or that. And it was funny because I was sitting back and I was sort of enjoying it, but you get to the point where you get a little self-conscious. At one point Carville yelled out, "What is this, *Gone With The Wind*?" And so we got through it, and then I did a little bit more and then afterwards I got done with the newscast, I read a funny story about François Mitterrand getting a surprise prostate operation. And there was an exchange with Betsey. We had a lot of good exchanges. You know, a lot of people are afraid of

her. She admires smart-ass people, I guess. Anyway, yeah, I went through that and then Jeff Eller started talking about something in the field and about a special radio interview about Al Gore.

DB: He'd just been named the all-time hunk or something.

MS: Oh, yeah. And I said something like, because I have a reputation as a smart-ass, "Well, that's a hard one to top." And then the whole room just broke down. Was that on the birthday? That might have been after. But there was some stuff on the birthday. They said afterwards, "Everybody, let's go to the cafeteria up here." Why are we going to the cafeteria? There's a Mexican buffet. The easiest way to sum it up is, I basically felt I was hugged by everyone here, and it was really touching.

DB: You used to do parties for everybody, after primary wins, out in the parking lot.

MS: That came back to me. I sort of somehow became the party arranger until the California primary. It was great.

DB: Those things really kept us rallied.

MS: It was really cool. And the best thing was, you know, you need a scapegoat. I was the guy who never got enough chicken, never got enough beer. There were always five people who didn't get to eat because I came and they were too late or something. And when we had this barbecue with Sims, or whatever, on the parking lot, I was coming down the line and David Watkins sees me and sort of like gives me a hug and says, "Matt, remember the old days?" And it just came back to me for a second—the old place at Third and Pulaski, lined up outside. We'd have our recycling bins that Pete Dagher never wanted to surrender filled

up with ice and beer stuffed in them and everything else. We'd have that and soda pop. People would always come in before it was chilled, and we'd line up and eat. Then, of course, there was one time when I told the bunker, as we used to call the old research facility, "Well, I don't think we're planning anything, so why don't you just come get the food?" And I took hell from Betsey, like, "Sure, don't invite us."

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

MS: I was probably in diapers when Kennedy was killed, but I heard about the energy and the dynamics of the Kennedy campaign. I think that we have an even tougher direction in this country now, and I think that not only did we harness that energy, but we've doubled or tripled it. I really think that this has even gone beyond what—because this is a tougher world, a bigger world. And a country that's not coming out the most powerful—and a country that—we got to reverse things around here. So I think, as Winston Churchill said—if you look back at these people, you will say that this was their finest hour. I really think this is the hour that this country made an effort to turn things around. Four more years of the same will lead into four more years, and then we'll be the Roman Empire, which fell from within. They absorbed so many outside forces, that by the time it fell it was no longer the Roman Empire. We're still America, but that's starting to slip, and I really, really think that these are the people who—though no one's been stabbed or shot at or whatever, we did lose Paul Tully, and that was a guy I wish I knew more. He was a hell of a guy. I was going to say we don't have any

physical casualties really to relate to the campaign. That could be argued in his case. It really was an incredible time where people who are just very human, very formidable, have their talents, their strengths, and their weaknesses, just got their best. We're like a team where everybody had a real good year. And I pray to God that we are the ones to make history. I know it sounds mushy, but there is some direction that we were headed in and I think that we've righted some kind of wrong.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]