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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Al From

Campaign Position: Advisor, Clinton Representative,
Platform Committee

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 18, 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. Al From 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 was your association with the campaign?

Al From: I am president of the Democratic Leadership Council. My association with the campaign was as an outside advisor—a friend of Governor Clinton’s. I was Governor Clinton’s personal representative on the platform drafting committee.

DB: And you have worked with Governor Clinton for how many years?

AF: I worked with him for seven years, and probably for the last four or five years, pretty intensively.

DB: You say that you consulted with him. Can you be a little bit more explicit than that?

AF: Sure. I will be happy to give you a whole chronology.

DB: You are a key figure in this—the ideas, the concept, the substance, the message—don’t be modest.

AF: Okay. My association with the campaign, or what came to be the campaign, really began, I think, in April of 1989, when I came down here from Washington, to talk to Governor Clinton about becoming chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council. He assumed the chairmanship of the DLC in March of 1990. At the time that he assumed the Chairmanship, we issued a statement of principles called the New Orleans Declaration, because the conference was in New Orleans. That was really a philosophical statement, articulating a new Democratic philosophy. In a lot of ways, the statements—the “what we believe” section of the New Orleans Declaration—which I will be happy to give you—turned out to be the philosophical underpinnings of the message that Governor Clinton delivered in the campaign. In that same

document, we laid out, very briefly, ten ideas, and I think eight of them turned out to be major ideas in the campaign. When he took the chairmanship of the DLC, Governor Clinton in his inaugural speech said, “The intellectual renaissance of the Democratic Party must precede its political renaissance.” What we tried to do during his Chairmanship at the Democratic Leadership Council—which lasted until an hour before he announced his exploratory committee—was to build that intellectual basis, to lead the intellectual renaissance of the Democratic Party. We did that starting with that philosophical statement. Over about the next fifteen months or so, he and I traveled all over the country talking about specific ideas. Some that he had developed here in Arkansas. Others that were being developed by our think tank in Washington—the Progressive Policy Institute. Shaping a real governing agenda. In May of 1991, at what was a very contentious convention in Cleveland of the Democratic Leadership Council, we actually passed a series of resolutions called the New Choice Resolutions, which, I think, really took a giant step toward redefining the Democratic Party. The themes of those resolutions, interestingly enough, were opportunity, responsibility and community, which later became the themes of Governor Clinton’s New Covenant.

DB: I have to stop you right there. I have had so many inquiries, interestingly, primarily from the foreign press—where did the New Covenant come from?

AF: Well, it came from a couple of places. One, I think in his inaugural address as governor of Florida, Governor Lawton Chiles talked about the new covenant. But I think Bill Clinton picked it up from a memo that Will Marshall, who is president of the Progressive Policy Institute, did right before his announcement speech. I

remember coming down here for the announcement, and Bill saying to me, “I read Will’s memo, it was terrific. It just came here too late to really have much input into the announcement speech, but I want to pursue it.” Right after his announcement he did a series of speeches called the New Covenant speeches, including the first one.

DB: The ones at Georgetown?

AF: Yes, at Georgetown. The first one took a lot of the stuff that Will had written in that memo. He stuck the New Covenant words into the announcement, but really defined it in the speech at Georgetown on October 23, 1991. But I think a key part underestimated at the time was the Cleveland convention in May 1991. It wasn’t really the campaign, it was the pre-campaign, but in my view it sort of launched the campaign. It was very important for two reasons. One, it was the first time that anybody had taken on the Democratic establishment in a fundamental way. In the New Choice Resolutions, what we did was defined an agenda that challenged in a lot of different areas of Democratic orthodoxy. It came out against racial quotas; it came out for fast track of the North American Free Trade Agreement. We came out for ideas like public school choice and charter schools. We came out with a new what we called a post-welfare state, an anti-poverty agenda that is built on empowerment, rather than on dependence. We came out with a new foreign policy. It was in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, and this party was split terribly. The DLC was split terribly. We came out with a new budget plan, a framework for dealing with the budget—interestingly enough, a past, present, future framework for the budget. A lot of those things weren’t popular. We came out for the Brady Bill, when both the Democratic leaders in Congress, Mitchell and Foley, were still against

it. What we did, was both coming in from what some would say the left, and some would say the right, we took on this party orthodoxy. Governor Clinton could legitimately say in his speech that the ideas in the New Choice Resolutions were neither liberal nor conservative. They were both, and they were different. They sort of transcended the old debate. A theme, incidentally, that was critical throughout his whole campaign.

DB: Let me stop you for a minute. What you are articulating is something I think is very important to clarify for the record. As I go around and do these interviews, somebody, when I asked, “Where do you think the real heart of the power lies in this campaign?” said, “In a focus group.” You’re saying the ideas came first.

AF: I think the tacticians believe that the power, or the heart of this campaign, is in the focus groups. I believe that the heart of this campaign is in Bill Clinton’s vision. You could throw out a lot of the focus groups, he would have done just fine. They may have decided that one word worked a little bit better than another. The reality is that Bill Clinton came to this race knowing exactly where he wanted to go—what he wanted to do for the country—how he was going to make this campaign a cause greater than himself. He worked a long time. A very long time. I was lucky enough to work with him for about a year and a half, intensely, to help frame a message that we could take into this campaign. The heart and soul of this campaign, in my view, is still at the beginning in the New Covenant speeches. Bill Clinton decided he was going to run a different kind of campaign. What he did, unlike any candidate that I know running for the first time, he started this campaign with three speeches at his alma mater. He said, “This is the vision I have for America. These are the ideas I

want to run on.” He took them to the American people.

DB: Whose idea was it to give that series of three speeches, which were so important to us?

AF: There may have been a lot of people who had that idea. But right before he announced the exploratory committee, in August, I brought a group of sort of the advisors, who had been advising him and me, and the DLC together, including people like Bill Galston, and Doug Ross, and Will Marshall and others. Out of that meeting we did a memorandum. I think Bruce Reed probably did the memorandum suggesting those speeches. He was the policy director of the campaign, but he was then working for me as policy director of the DLC. I don’t want to claim credit for those, because in reality, I am sure others suggested them, too. Bill may have had that in mind. I can remember being down here several months earlier when he talked about how he wanted to really lead off by articulating what he believed. But I just think—look, I think we are in a different era of politics, an era where ideas are the key to building a coalition. I can remember one time—and this was probably in the spring of 1991—Bill and I were in Oregon. We talked about that. We had a meeting with the Oregon DLC. In our presentations, we talked about how you had to build a different kind of coalition in an information age because the old kind of laser-work appeal to the interest groups doesn’t work anymore. Because if you had a separate appeal to every group, in an information age, everybody knows what you tell everybody else. So, what you needed to do is lay out your ideas and let people rally around them. Bill Clinton has always believed that we should lay our marker down. He said, “We don’t have to look for fights; you will get plenty of them.”

People will agree or disagree with you. That's what we try to do in the DLC, in the Cleveland resolutions, and then the New Covenant speeches. The New Covenant speeches were to say, "This is where we stand. If you like it, join us. If you don't like it, vote for somebody else."

DB: I was so struck on the night of his acceptance, when he said with such pride, "These are the ideas I started with." You must have taken a particular pride in that, but, Al, you had to battle along the way.

AF: We had a lot of battles along the way, but Bill Clinton told me when we started this exercise, that change is never easy. We did some battles along the way. We took some hits along the way. There are a lot of events in the campaign that those with short memories think were the only times some of these battles took place—the Sister Souljah episode and others. But we took a month of hard hits going to Cleveland because we told Jesse Jackson that he could participate in our convention, but he couldn't have a special role. We couldn't have it because this was a business convention and we were trying to consider a different kind of an agenda. We weren't going to make this just a free-for-all for anybody who wanted to say whatever he wanted. He could participate like anybody else. We took some hits for that. We took some hits for having a tough foreign policy resolution. We took some hits because Bill Clinton said he wanted the ideas that we were talking about in Cleveland to be what people thought about when they thought about the Democratic Party. There were some in an official establishment of the party group, where loyal soldiers in the campaign were not "so infatuated" with that statement. We took hits along the way.

DB: I know you had to do particularly fierce battle at times, being his person on the Platform Committee.

AF: The interesting thing about it is, by the time of the Platform Committee—a lot of the rancor we had to go through in the Platform Committee—we had to go through and defeat a whole slew of amendments, particularly in the full committee. A lot of the rancor was gone by then. I think Bill's success in the primaries had basically resulted in the change. That really changed the definition of the party. While we had some battles around the edges in the drafting committee and on the platform, we basically were able to control that process without a lot of trouble. My connection with the campaign—in the early days through the New York primary, I was involved in the daily conference call, and worked pretty closely with the campaign in developing and trying to shape the campaign strategy. After that, I think the conference calls were discontinued, or at least they were discontinued with me, which may have been the case. I wasn't always the easiest guy to get along with on those calls. But in mid- to late May, I had come down here for one strategy session. I think you were there, actually. I tried to get people to face up to why Bill was having such a hard time being defined as a New Democrat. That night, Betsey Wright and I were at a party, and Bill and Hillary came up and said they really had given some thought to what I had said, and they thought that a lot of what I said rang true. A couple of days later Mickey Kantor called me and asked me to do a strategy—this was at the time when it looked like Bill could very well be third—to help him be identified as a different kind of New Democrat by the time of his acceptance speech. I laid

out a strategy with the help of David Osborne, Doug Ross, Bill Galston, and Will Marshall that, with pretty good consistency, Bill followed. We made the platform a different kind of platform. I wish I could take credit for suggesting Al Gore. He really wasn't one of the people I suggested, but the general principle that we talked about in our strategy meeting was a vice presidential nominee that didn't balance the ticket but reinforced the message of the ticket. I never would have dreamed of Al Gore. I was thinking, frankly, of somebody like Joe Lieberman, or Sam Nunn or somebody who was ideologically close to Clinton, but necessarily regionally or generationally. We talked about scheduling, going to audiences with the UAW, and did the Rainbow Coalition saying some things that the traditional Democratic interest groups wouldn't want to hear. Those kinds of things. So the platform was part of that. We had great help on the platform. Roy Roemer was an excellent chairman. Bill Richardson, who did the drafting committee very quietly but very firmly, came to us at the DLC in PPI and allowed us to do the first cut of the platform. We were to frame it so that no matter what kind of damage really was done to it—by the traditional forces of the party, during the process—it was going to look like a different platform than usual, no matter what. As it turned out, Bill's success in the primaries reduced the amount of damage that anybody was willing to do to the platform. Bruce Reed is the class of this campaign, no doubt about that. Bruce really guided the platform through the committee. Anyway, there were little battles, a word here or there. Some of the interest groups wanted to have particular things of concern to them, some of which we cared about. The art of running a successful platform, in my

view, was not to iterate everything we were for because we are for a lot of things that are good and decent things. They are not the things you want to run for election on. The art of running a platform is telling people the central concerns that you want to take to the American people that are going to define and drive your government. That means that it has got to be on the big issues, the economic, the national strength issues, issues that demonstrate leadership, the equity issues—not just every concern that every constituency in this broad-based party has.

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?

AF: Bill Clinton, pure and simple. I agree with what Paul Begala said at the last press conference—the post election press conference. Bill Clinton came with a message, he never varied from it. The campaign strategy and tactics were built around it. In the end, he wound up where he started. Here is my perspective on the election; it is real simple. Two things turned this election. One was the state of the economy. It wasn't Clinton's economic program—wonderful program—when the truth be known when it was compared to the presidents, and the terms that the press used, didn't always cut for him. The press likes to say “Clinton” means “Raise taxes more, spending more, regulation more, bigger government.” On all those counts, Bush did all right. It was the state of the economy, the fact that people's incomes were growing slower than inflation. I lived in the Carter White House, and Carter ran under those same circumstances. It didn't matter what he said about the economy. Carter was in trouble. It didn't matter what Bush said about the

economy. He couldn't get beyond that. It was the state of the economy that drove voters from Bush. Voters, who in the last twelve years, the last three elections, all voted Republican. The second dynamic in this election was the fact that Bill Clinton was a different kind of Democrat. He was a Democrat who was pro growth, who believed in values like work and responsibility, and unlike most Democratic candidates, was willing to stand for programs like welfare reform, enforced child support, capital punishment. A Democrat who believed that people who got something from government ought to give something back to the country, i.e., national service. He was an internationalist. He came out for the free trade agreement with Mexico. Most importantly, he understood that if we are going to be the party of activist government, we had to revolutionize government, and made it more responsive to the needs of citizens, offer more choices and services—all the things you don't expect from Democrats, that combination, that made people comfortable voting for Bill Clinton. I think those two factors were the key in this election. That was the juggernaut. My contribution, which was very minor—in the general election I had very few dealings with Little Rock. I had dealings with the plane—but my main contribution was that when Bill Clinton started getting into this fight with Bush over how many times he had raised taxes—I got about an hour with Bill and Hillary and delivered what I just told you, then I put it in writing. Clinton used that for the guidepost for the rest of the election. Just to close out my relationship with the campaign, in the last five and a half weeks, I went to eighteen states as a surrogate, representing the DLC and Bill Clinton. The same speech, eight, nine, and ten times a day.

DB: You used the phrase “juggernaut.” I wonder if you had any kind of comments on the organization, per se?

AF: It was pretty good. I mean, the ability of Bill to deliver a consistent message in the campaign and the general election, I think, is a tribute to the organization of the campaign. As you recall, because we were at that meeting together, one of my concerns in May was the political strategy, and the words coming out of Bill’s mouth didn’t always jibe. You can’t say, “I’m a new different kind of Democrat,” even if your policies reflect that, if all of your endorsements are from the traditional suspects—the old-fashioned, old-line Democrats” because people don’t stop and dissect everything that you say. What they see is television with somebody who they don’t think is much of a New Democrat, so it makes it hard to be credible. That is why the Gore selection was so important, a real turning point. That said, there is a changing of the guard coming in the Democratic Party. But in the general election, with the exception of the battle of the taxes, where we almost made a very important mistake which was to not understand the difference between Dukakis’s tactical mistakes, and strategic mistakes. His tactical mistake was that he didn’t respond to every charge that Bush had. The strategic mistake was that he let Bush define him. What happened was, in our desire to respond to every charge that Bush made against us, we almost fell into the trap into letting Bush define us on the tax issue. That is what made me go to see Clinton in September in the first place. I told him, “The way to respond to the tax issue is to talk about the fact that you want welfare reform—two years and out. You’re for capital punishment. For making kids who get aid to go to college give something back to their country. You’re for the free

trade agreement, all the kind of things that said to a citizen, this isn't the same kind of guy. He can't be a tax-and-spend Democrat. You can argue until you're blue in the face, "I only raised taxes 57 times, instead of 128 times." Most voters would say, there he is, he wants to just raise our taxes.

DB: What, from your perspective, was the low point of the campaign?

AF: I guess there were a couple. I mean a personal low point was the day we first knew about the Gennifer Flowers story in the *Star*. I was on my way to visit my friend Arthur Sulzburger, who had just become publisher of *The New York Times* a week before, or two weeks before. I got off the eleventh floor elevator at the *Times*, and Arthur said, "You've got to call your office, it is an emergency." I called my office and somebody reads me the *Star* article. I walked in there, and I wasn't about to say a thing about it because I didn't want to be responsible for it going into the mainstream press, knowing that within twelve hours, people would think I was an utter fool. That was a pretty tough time. He took me down then to see another old friend of mine, Jack Rosenthal, who is now going to be editor of the magazine, and has for a long time been the editor of the editorial page, who, in fact, at one point after Super Tuesday, wrote a very nice editorial about Clinton and me. Rosenthal and I had a seven-year fight over whether the kind of message that I have been pushing could unite the minorities and middle class Democrats. I kept saying it could, he kept saying it couldn't. That day, he told me that I had won the argument, and I knew that he wouldn't think I had won it quite so well the next morning. That was one of my more interesting experiences. The New York primary was a terrible experience. It was just awful. Bill Clinton is not an

interest-group pandering Democrat and that was all the New York primary was about. So that was not a very good time. I suppose when Clinton called me at home in June, and sounded so down because he had won the primaries and was running third, was a pretty low time.

DB: High points?

AF: Intellectually, the great high was the announcement and New Covenant speeches. I thought that first New Covenant speech was the speech of the campaign, bar none. A real high point in sort of the pre-primary season when Clinton emerged as the front-runner, basically on our message, was really exciting. Having Bill come back to New Orleans—people thought it all started as the presumptive nominee of the party at the DLC convention. I guess it was late April. It was a real highlight, a high point. In fact, the police officer the mayor assigned to drive me while I was in town—while I was there for the convention, our convention—was the same one who drove Bill and me in 1990. He was so excited. The real high point was the convention. I had worked for seven years to try and change this party. At that convention, my wife told me—had been telling me for the last six or eight months that she wanted me—I am a fanatic Chicago Cubs' fan, as I gather are Hillary and Bill to an extent. She had told me that she wanted me to go for my fiftieth birthday to the Cubs Fantasy Camp. I told her after that convention that I didn't have to go there. I had already had my fantasy. To see Bill Clinton be my nominee of our party, and to see people who a year earlier, or fifteen months earlier, would have crossed the street when I walked down, try to be my best friend, was something that I will never forget. It wasn't so bad on election

night, either.

DB: Two questions. When in your mind were you certain that he was going to be the nominee, and then when were you certain that he was going to be president?

AF: I was pretty certain that he was going to be the nominee when he got in. I guess, for sure, the night of Illinois. Just personally, I went to New Hampshire because after Gennifer Flowers and the draft, I was afraid it might be the end. And I was with Bill at the beginning and wanted to be with him at the end. So I went up to Manchester that night. And then I went to Illinois, because I figured that would be the night we clinched it, and I think it was in fact the night we clinched it. Even though a couple of things, including what happened in Connecticut, sort of delayed the obviousness of that. I guess I felt by Labor Day, when Bush couldn't close anymore, that Bill was going to win. I was certain he was going to win when I went on the road, because you could just feel it in the audiences. I am certainly not Bill Clinton, but you could just see it. There was just a different feeling among Democrats around the country. What I did—I literally would go and do the same speech, thirty, forty times a week, either to small groups of Democrats or, most often, just radio, television, newspaper and press people. My job, as I saw it in this campaign, was to hit editorial boards and see press people, give credence to the message of the campaign, the second message of the campaign, that Clinton was a different kind of Democrat. You could feel it. You could feel it when you talked to press people. You would certainly feel it whenever you were in front of an audience. I went to states that always were sort of the states on the edge, the uncertain states. Those are the states that the Democrats had the toughest handling. I felt pretty certain. I just got nervous

in the last week.

DB: Didn't we all. Al, what is it that you would really like history to know about this campaign?

AF: I think what I would like historians to note about this campaign is that Bill Clinton, and I hope the DLC to some extent, helped reunite the Democratic Party with its real tradition. That we sort of brought the party back from a twenty-year, twenty-five-year detour. We once again reconnected the Democratic Party, really for the first time since Bobby Kennedy was shot, with its real coalition, which are people who are in the middle class struggling to stay there and the people who are aspiring to get there. That is what I hope people will remember about Bill Clinton. It is the most important thing to me. I grew up in an ordinary family. When I grew up, if you wanted to get ahead, you were a Democrat. We lost that in the last twenty to twenty-five years. I think we have regained it, and that is what I want people to understand.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]