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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Adam M. Samaha

Campaign Position: Research Assistant

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 3, 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. Adam M. Samaha 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 came with the campaign?

Adam Samaha: I had just graduated from college, and I spent about a week or a week and a half at home going crazy, and then just came down to Little Rock. I'd met a couple of people on the campaign from when I was in New Hampshire, and I called and said, "Give me some advice—like who would want to hire somebody?" They said the research department might be one place. So, I sent in a resume to Betsey and a couple of weeks later I was down in Little Rock.

DB: Can you give a brief description of your responsibilities?

AS: Not really, not briefly. A lot of things. When I first got here it was basically going through the governor's papers, just box after box after box.

DB: Looking for?

AS: Well, at first it was a very limited search, and then by the end it was anything good. Anything that was useful, anything positive written to the governor from a Republican, anything the governor wrote to a federal agency, any kind of correspondence like that—even campaign brochures. Basically anything that might be of use. And that, I will say, was a real—at least speaking for Steve and myself—really, it was pretty incredible. Even just to see what you knew was the governor's handwriting and Hillary's handwriting on something. Even if it seemed far removed from the speeches he was giving out on the road. Even so, these were real live documents. And I was a history and government major in

college and I wrote my senior thesis in history, and that's why those documents were so interesting. They were real things that people left behind and that was a real thrill, even though it seemed like the most horrible endless task. It was tremendous. That was a real honor and I felt that we were really being trusted with something. And we tried to treat it with as much respect as we could.

DB: And what else have you done?

AS: Well, we went to the convention in New York and basically just watched all the speeches. After that, things got a lot more hectic and it was more job-to-job, as I remember. A lot of it's really kind of a blur. A lot of it was very technical work. And the most important thing, though, was to stay organized. And it seemed like sometimes people would be underorganized and it's better to keep yourself overorganized to compensate, so nothing falls through the cracks. That was a big thing. And just doing small research tasks. Find this. What's the number on this. What's a short, brief history of this. So it was a lot of digging.

DB: Working up subjects, anticipating criticism—

AS: Exactly. And trying to keep everything in one place—as centralized as possible.

DB: And then you went to another convention.

AS: And then I went to another convention, the Republican. And basically that was, for some reason, not the horror show that I thought it might be. And it was largely because I think maybe just the way they formatted their convention did not really merit very much response. It scared people enough, and they didn't really need our help.

DB: What scared people?

AS: The right-wing fundamentalism—which really is just fundamentalism—that I know a lot of northeastern Republicans are very uncomfortable with. I don't know if you want to call them yuppies, but those who have some sort of social liberalism but really are joined to the Republican Party because of the tax issues and finance issues, small government issues. You can't do that. And it really scared people by talking about these religious wars and things like that. And I was there with Betsey and it was much more lighthearted than I expected. I thought it was going to be real “Bunkeresque,” but it wasn't. We had a good time. It was a lot of work that I never had done before in my life—advance work and scheduling and getting phone lines dropped—I hadn't even heard that term before I got down there. I hadn't even purchased a plane ticket for myself before. I mean, I know something about computers. I had never used a fax machine—maybe once or twice—before I got here. And it's about double-checking everything and getting all the right lines. It's really the communications, which you just had to make sure things were integrated and people were in the right place and how you are going to get back and forth with thousands of people jamming the streets for the convention. And it was a test, but I had really good people working around me, and maybe they didn't know what they were doing, but they sure acted like it, and that gave me a lot of confidence.

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?

AS: Well, I would say that historical circumstances are more than half of what made this campaign successful. And I don't think that this campaign ever really had to

get tough—as tough as I think most people were prepared to get. They really didn't have to do it. Either the way things were, or the way Republicans made them or whatever, but a lot of it was on their doorstep and I think that the Republicans never fully got the ball in our court. They just never did. And we had to hit back and respond, but I think that that was good enough in this campaign. This campaign was not very proactive, but I think that that was good enough for this campaign because the fundamentals—the talking heads say—the fundamentals were with the Democrats. I don't feel like it ever really got that tough. I mean, I know about losing campaigns.

DB: Well, you're a Democrat.

AS: Exactly. And a Cubs' fan. But I think that the most effective thing was almost the overreaction to every little—try not to let anything get by. Even if responses just sort of went down a dark hole and no one would ever print them. It was just the vigilance that everybody felt.

DB: From your perspective, how did this organization work?

AS: I think it was the strength of the individuals. Another way to describe it, I think that there were a lot of incredibly capable people, not necessarily efficiently organized, but that organization I think is supposed to be something of necessity. It's not supposed to be just a format, and so when you're under a lot of pressure and there's a necessity to organize, you organize. And I think that the organization just came through in the panic. Maybe just winging it by the seat of your pants, but I think that it really is a lot of very intelligent people who are

incredible individuals. I don't know why things weren't sort of lockstep organized, but I think that that allowed for a lot of flexibility at the same time, too

DB: What, from your standpoint, was the low point in the campaign?

AS: The low point in the campaign was probably sometime around when I got here. It wasn't a low point for me personally, but Bill Clinton was in third place. I came, I think, June 15. And we were running third and nothing much happening. But for me, personally, I didn't come down here because I thought it was going to be over soon or we were going to win or we were going to definitely lose. I just came down because I wanted to come down. I wanted to do it and I wanted to be a part of it. And I'd worked on campaigns before and this is what I enjoy doing. This is what I believe in.

DB: Have you had a personal high?

AS: Yes. I think the day that Gore was selected, that was incredible. And a couple of times, maybe when I did a response to something, worked something out and it went out right away and just to know it went out and, even if it was a small thing, got something together, took like half an hour turnaround time and bang—it was gone, and it felt great. And then the one other thing was finding the Carroll Campbell letter.

DB: Tell the story about the Carroll Campbell letter.

AS: Well, we'd gone back through the NGA boxes—boxes from the National Governors Association—and we were just combing through for anything positive. And this was just really by luck, by fortune, like two days before Carroll Campbell held a press conference and hit the governor on economic development.

Just totally by luck we found this letter from Carroll Campbell to the governor praising him on his economic development program he'd done and this package he'd written up. So it was really coincidental, but it was a thrill, too, the idea that all these hours, these twelve-hour days we spent in this dark room all congested, that there was good in that.

DB: What do you want history to know about this campaign?

AS: Well, I think that there are more things I'd want history not to know about this campaign probably than what I want history to know about this campaign. I think that a point should be made over and over that the geographical location made an incredible difference. And I can't even imagine this campaign being in Washington, D.C., and I wouldn't have been here if it would have been in Washington, D.C. Being in this setting is just much better I think for human beings in general. I don't think it's just not wearing suits and ties every day. I don't think it's not having the tubes, mass transit—which isn't a great thing anyway. I think the people that came down to Little Rock are just in some ways a different bunch than would have gone up to Washington, D.C.

DB: In what way different?

AS: I think motivations were different. I spent a semester and a summer in D.C., and I really, really disliked it a lot because I think that there are a lot of negative incentives about how you act personally. And that you're close to the big people and so you just strategize about where you're going to position yourself and how you're going to make out in the end. And I don't like thinking that way. I don't like thinking about where I'm going to be at the end. I like to think about where I

am then. And that way I think you're not going to step on people and you're not going to hurt people. And people that came down here—they just love being here. They love working on the campaign. They love getting Republicans or whatever, and they like Bill Clinton and they like listening to him, and they wanted to win one for the good guys for a change. That's what I felt. People wanted to win one for the good guys. And this wasn't about White House jobs.

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

AS: I was always certain that he would be the nominee.

DB: From the moment he announced?

AS: No, actually I wasn't really sure. I was going to sit this one out. I really was not going to work at all in the campaign until Harris Wofford won. It sounds corny or whatever, but that night sitting in my dorm room I was thinking, that's right. We can do this. We have the right message. And I thought, this Clinton guy has something. I thought he was our best hope. And the message of opportunity and responsibility.

DB: When were you certain that he would win the presidency?

AS: Yesterday. I think I never want to say—I have a really hard time, because you just set yourself up for a fall. And things are so up and down and up and down—it was incredible to think that it just kept going up and up and up.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]