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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Amy Zisook

Campaign Positions: Co-National Finance Director; Democratic
National Committee Victory Fund Director

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 5, 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. Amy Zisook 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: Can you walk me through your positions? You came with the campaign when?

Amy Zisook: I joined the Illinois Steering Committee the end of September, first of October. Then I was hired right around the first of November. Stayed in Illinois for the first six weeks, and on the twelfth of December, I moved to Little Rock. Then the seventh of June they shipped me off to Washington.

DB: You say that with great resentment. Surely you hadn't really looked forward to Little Rock as paradise.

AZ: The big joke—I'll never forget this—we had our first big dinner in Chicago on December 11, and when John Schmidt, who is one of the finance co-chairs in Illinois, was introducing the governor, he was thanking people and all, and he said that I was making the ultimate sacrifice because I was leaving for Little Rock the next day. The governor was a tad bit offended. It was really funny. I had no clue what I was going to find here.

DB: What did you find when you got here in terms of organization? What existed at that point in terms of finance?

AZ: Well, Rahm had been here for about six weeks by then and had really expanded the finance committee and the staff. The staff was, you know, a decent size when he started. We rented two big halls that I remember trying to fill in California and Florida. I think those were the two big ones that we tried to fill right away. So there was a good organization in place by the time I got here, which had really

evolved over the six weeks that Rahm was here. It was a skeleton crew before Rahm got here.

DB: I remember you sitting there at your desk, and I would just see these endless phone messages. How many phone calls would you make a day?

AZ: I haven't a clue. Have not the slightest. It was nonstop. The big joke when we got to the DNC was people would sit in the area outside of Rahm's and my office and literally wonder if we were ever going to come out. The fact that we had a little private bathroom in there made it easier. We literally would come in at eight o'clock in the morning and we would not walk out of the office all day long because we were always on the phone. You know, you hang up, another one comes in. One of the things I'm sorry about is I got to be horrible at returning phone calls just because I couldn't. I could not return them all. I would have to sift through them and decide which ones had to be returned.

DB: Did there come a point—and if so, when—when it was not like pulling teeth? When people began to get on board?

AZ: Well, there were a couple of different time periods. The first time that you saw that was in early January after all the great press stories on Bill Clinton, and all of a sudden, he was going to be the front runner. You saw the first wave of people contributing because they thought he'd be the nominee. Then obviously that changed. And the day that I saw the campaign turn around was June 30. And I remember it because we had a huge national Jewish leaders' event in Washington, so I remember the date. And that was the day that I think it was the ABC-Washington Post poll came out that was the first poll to show Clinton in the lead,

with the three candidates still in. Without question, that day the entire campaign turned around. That's when the momentum started. It started with that, and whatever else happened in the next few days, and then Al Gore, and then the convention. And it was June 30. The mood changed. You could see it in the press when they came to that event, and then there was a whole new attitude.

DB: What do you think—

AZ: I think it was the poll. I think it finally was the validation that people needed. I remember it very vividly.

DB: So then there were more phone calls coming in than going out?

AZ: Well, at least as many. I don't remember all the specifics that well, but I remember the mood changing when people became excited again. The problem was not just what the general public felt, but you know, our supporters were down in the dumps. They were discouraged. The worst fund-raising period for us was May and June because he was clearly going to be the nominee. There was no sense of urgency. People didn't feel any reason that they had to contribute to win the next primary to get the next state because it was inevitable at that point. That was the worst period for fund-raising.

DB: You just must feel so proud. What you and Rahm have done is precedent shattering. You must have thought about that. What were the ingredients of such a successful effort?

AZ: Well, Bill Clinton was the main ingredient. We were very lucky, because he has this incredible network of friends both in the state and around the country. When things got tough, his friends did not abandon him. So it wasn't like one of these

campaigns where you had all these traditional Democratic fund-raising types who were the core of our financial operation. There were some of those, but you had all these people who were absolutely 100 percent devoted and dedicated to him, who knew in their heart of hearts he would survive so they never gave up. There are all these little things that I'll always remember. We're in Cleveland for a fund-raiser on April 16. And for some reason, they decided that I should ride in the car with him. And he said to me that if it wasn't for the money in January and February, we could have never survived.

DB: Nice tribute.

AZ: So it makes me cry.

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

AZ: I think in the primary certainly it was a very cohesive group. I'm trying to think of why. Yes, there were some of us who came here as friends. Some of it may have been just sort of our—

DB: You came in through Rahm, Wilhelm?

AZ: Yes. Initially though, when I started volunteering in Chicago, I was just a volunteer. Called Kevin O'Keefe and the rest is history. For whatever reason, we jelled very well. And everybody did work well together. And you know, it was such a small staff then, even by the end of the primary although it had grown tremendously, it was still relatively small. And people just worked well together and stuck together, and obviously the fact that we had some horrible times made

us stronger. We all had to stick together and depend on each other. So I think that was it. To be honest, being in Washington, I really felt very cut off from the campaign. So I can't really speak to what happened in the general election that people thought it was so good. Obviously it was an incredible group; you had some really great people.

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

AZ: It's almost impossible for me to talk about the general election because I don't feel like I was a part of it at all.

DB: What, for you, was the absolute low point?

AZ: Being in Washington with the DNC.

DB: And the high point?

AZ: Do you say the high point is Tuesday night? What is the high point? I don't know.

DB: When were you certain he was going to be the nominee?

AZ: That had to be sometime before Illinois. I will say that before New York I was concerned that he was going to be a very weak nominee. But I think before Illinois when I . . . I'm sorry, I haven't stopped crying since Tuesday night.

DB: I haven't either. I started at 4:00 a.m. Tuesday.

AZ: The first time I cried was when they flashed up Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Michigan. So there was a brief crying spell there. Then I was fine until the speech. Bawled my eyes out through the entire speech and have not stopped.

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

AZ: Maybe that good can win out. That the American people are not as stupid as we might think. When I heard Bill Clinton speak the first time—

DB: Which was when?

AZ: Either September 6 or 7. It was the Saturday after Labor Day in 1991. And I still swear at the person who made me go to that speech because I had retired from politics. I knew that this was the right message and the right messenger. So that everybody else realized that, too. You know, it defied conventional wisdom. He deserves to be president of the U.S. I don't envy him. I worry that the economy and government and all is so bad. I'm dreadfully worried that this could be a one-term presidency. Just because things are so bad. I wasn't nervous. I have not been nervous. And Sarah was so nervous. And I said I'm not nervous at all. I'm not worried, I'm not nervous.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]