



Sunday, January 6, 2008

Every Sunday CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogue on Sunday, January 6, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: Barack Obama won Iowa.

Newman: True enough.

Salit: And now the action shifts to New Hampshire.

Newman: The primary shifts to New Hampshire.

Salit: The primary shifts to New Hampshire. Okay. You're differentiating between that and the action?

Newman: I am, indeed.

Salit: And, where is the action?

Newman: The action is where it always is. On the ground all over the country.

Salit: Okay. The independents were key to the Obama win in Iowa.

Newman: And will be in New Hampshire.

Salit: And will be in New Hampshire. It's funny, you know, when you're involved in a movement of independents, as we are, and we work with and talk with independents all over the country, and are very connected to the numbers and to independents' attitudes and philosophies and so forth; but that movement is never acknowledged until you hit a moment like this. Now, you watch the TV shows and everybody is talking about the independents, about how we're driving the change, about our commitment to ending partisanship. It's kind of a funny experience, to see the thing that we work on all the time now being fed back to us on national television.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: So, what's the pulse that Obama has that independents are responding to and what's the pulse that independents have that Obama's responding to?

Newman: It's simple enough. At a minimum, independents want change. And they want something more than change. They want a political paradigm shift.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They're fed up with the traditional paradigm in many different ways, but that's what they're unhappy with. And whether you're in Iowa or New Hampshire or New York City, that's a whole lot of what the generational shift to independent politics means. People don't want politics as usual. That's being expressed in very complex ways with Obama. To some extent, it's also being expressed with Huckabee, although I think Huckabee is a short-term phenomenon. Obama, on the other hand, may go on to become president of the United States.

Salit: There are two questions going into the New Hampshire primary. Will Obama do what he did in Iowa, meaning he not only wins it, but in the process he destroys the myth of invincibility surrounding Clinton? On the Republican side, the question is: Is McCain going to win, or do sufficiently well to reestablish himself as a serious contender in the Republican primary? The key to both of those scenarios is what happens with independents. The polling indicates that a majority of independents are planning to vote in the Democratic primary and will go for Obama. McCain's challenge is that he's got to convince enough independents to choose the Republican ballot and to vote for him.

Newman: He'll persuade some.

Salit: In a sense, you could say that New Hampshire is a primary among independent voters in term of whether they go for Obama or McCain.

Newman: Right.

Salit: So, the message of the Obama/independent connection is a desire for a paradigm shift, a new kind of politics, a new way of doing politics, a new voice of political leadership, a new coalition, a new foundation for black-white relations, it's complex. So, how does McCain's appeal to independents relate to the paradigm shift?

Newman: Well, it's the paradigm shift Republican-style, which is different than the paradigm shift Democrat-style. Well, the key here, I think, is the generational phenomenon. Generationally-speaking, if you will, Obama has a significant edge. McCain is somebody people have thought well of. McCain is kind of like an old uncle who was good to you when you were a kid and you still like him.

Salit: And Obama?

Newman: Obama is your fiancée.

Salit: A big difference.

Newman: So when you have to choose between old Uncle John...

Salit: Yes...

Newman: ...and your fiancée, Obama, I think you're going to choose Obama.

Salit: Likely outcome.

Newman: Some pundits today were predicting that it's going to wind up being Obama vs. McCain in the general election.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And they might be right, although I think McCain still has some serious bumps in the road, as does Obama, but McCain more so. I've always had a sympathetic feeling for McCain. I sort of like him. He is a straight shooter and all that. But, I think he's old and I don't mean chronologically. His message is an old message. Plus, with respect to the Republican Party, the far right base doesn't go away. It's getting blown apart, but it isn't gone. And it doesn't like McCain, and has never liked him. That's an issue relative to the Republican primary, because they don't have a candidate who can win. They only have losing candidates. I think Huckabee had his shot. He'll get some votes in the south, but there's not enough there to win. McCain's not a bad choice for a compromise. Romney's getting massacred. Thompson just never got started.

Salit: And Giuliani?

Newman: Giuliani has his down-the-road strategy of coming in late and sweeping on February 5th. But, in the final analysis, he's got the wrong positions for the Republican Party. One way of thinking about Giuliani is that he's saying to the American people, 'I'm the person to have in office in case there's another big attack.' So, what do you do, go vote for him and then wait for another big attack? I don't think his strategy is a good strategy.

Salit: So, Hillary got beat. There was a lot of talk about, whether there's enough time to retool, would there be any authenticity to her retooling. At the same time, more cautious voices are saying don't count her out. The Clintons are still a political powerhouse. The Clintons have a very powerful machine in New York and nationally and she's still the U.S. Senator. If she loses the primary, is the future of the Clinton operation on the line?

Newman: The Clintons aren't going away. On the other hand, it would be a thoroughgoing defeat and they would no longer have anything resembling the kind of power that they've had.

Salit: How does losing, particularly losing to Obama, impact on the political dynamics in New York?

Newman: Big impact. The exact details are hard to say. The Clintons aren't going to last forever. If they lose, forever comes a little sooner. It will continue to implode the Democratic Party in New York State.

Salit: I talked to Wayne Griffin the other night in South Carolina, a long-time independent and part of our network, the head of the South Carolina Independence Party. He is the only African American member of the Greer City Council and early on, he set up Independents for Obama. There was a huge Clinton operation in South Carolina from Day One and she was ahead among black voters there for a time. South Carolina is also an open primary state. So, Wayne said that he thought the Clinton wall was starting to crumble. Black leaders and activists who are backing Clinton are having second thoughts about being on the Clinton bandwagon as the campaign hits South Carolina. "The McLaughlin Group" hit on this dynamic in the most superficial sense. What are the important features to look at, do you think, in terms of the ways that the Obama phenomenon is changing the dynamics in black politics?

Newman: Well, I don't know how else to put it except to say, it's changing it completely. It will be a complete overhaul if this thing plays out as we're suggesting it might. It's moving beyond the old guard of Jesse and Al into a new, more independent day in black politics as well as in American politics. That's a paradigmatic transformation. The exact character of that paradigmatic transformation will have to unfold as things move along.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, that's what we're looking at.

Salit: Some commentators characterized the paradigm shift as a repudiation of Jackson and Sharpton and Civil Rights-style politics. Would you characterize it that way?

Newman: No. A new paradigm is not a repudiation at all. A repudiation is an acceptance of the old paradigm, while critiquing it. A new paradigm means the creation of something new out of the history which has preceded it, including the critical stages in which Jackson and Sharpton played their role. That's not to be conveniently thrown away.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: It's that something new is going to be created out of a lot of different things, including that history. That's what a paradigm shift is.

Salit: We haven't touched on him in our conversation yet. How do you see John Edwards now?

Newman: I think he's finished as a presidential candidate. He'll still play a role in the process. But he's finished as a presidential candidate.

Salit: I know he won't, but should he drop out of the race today and support Obama in New Hampshire?

Newman: It wouldn't make a difference. He's not a factor in New Hampshire. There's nothing in the numbers that suggests that he is.

Salit: Okay.

Newman: The real question is: Should he drop out of the race after Obama wins in New Hampshire and support Obama in South Carolina? That would be of value.

Salit: Okay. To be continued. Thank you.