



DOING NOTHING

Sunday, February 1, 2009

Every weekend CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, February 1, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," a Charlie Rose interview, and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: We just watched Lee Hamilton, formerly the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and co-chair of the Iraq Study Group, talk about the international situation on *Charlie Rose*. What can we do to leave behind a maximally stable situation in Iraq?

Newman: There is no such thing as a "maximally stable" situation in Iraq. It will be as stable, or unstable, as the circumstances allow.

Salit: Then how do you think about what to do in Afghanistan? Part of what President Obama is looking at is how do we demobilize out of Iraq but intensify our efforts in Afghanistan?

Newman: With all due respect to Lee Hamilton, who I think is a very smart man, and a very straightforward man, how can you begin your discussion of this by saying "We can't accept Al Qaeda." How can you not "accept" Al Qaeda? Al Qaeda exists. You can say it's a criminal organization and that they're all criminals, which I think they are. Then you devise a police action – one that crosses national borders – to arrest them. But it's not a war. It's a police action. And that's what it should have been beginning on September 12th.

Salit: It seems to me that Hamilton, who's an important advisor to Obama on these matters, is inching his way towards that police action position. When he says Afghanistan is not a nation, and it's a mistake to relate to it as a nation, that it doesn't have the characteristics of a nation state and it never has, that it's really multiple countries, and that every world power for a thousand years has gotten burned there, what Hamilton is saying, in effect, is that our strategy in Afghanistan has to be to hunt down Al Qaeda and kill them. That's the single thing that we should be doing there.

Newman: But that's not a strategy for Afghanistan. That's got to be our strategy towards Al Qaeda. I don't know why they even have to use the word Afghanistan.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I mean, if Al Qaeda were holed up in the Eiffel Tower, that's where we'd be going. Or if they were hiding in the base of an Egyptian pyramid, that's where we'd be going. They're criminals, they committed a crime here against the American people. And our police, in cooperation with other police forces, should track them down, either

kill them in the process, or put them in jail. That's the deal. They're in the world. They're not "in Afghanistan."

Salit: Maybe you and I had a different reaction to Lee Hamilton. I liked the interview with Hamilton.

Newman: Oh, I liked the interview.

Salit: OK. Part of what I liked about it – and let's give some credit to Obama – is that it was more serious and more respectful in terms of talking to the American people in real ways about what these situations actually are and what we need to do to respond to them. Hamilton's saying, in effect, all this talk about spreading democracy and liberty and freedom internationally, forget about that. It's not what we should be doing and moreover, it can't be done.

Newman: It goes the other way around. You don't put "should" before "can." You put "can" before "should."

Salit: Exactly. And so much of our position in Iraq and in Afghanistan has been about what "should" be. So he says, look, here's what we should do. We have to crush Al Qaeda. We have to go to Pakistan to do it. We have to go wherever to do it. Let's do it. It doesn't diminish the United States, it doesn't diminish love of country to talk about these things in these ways. That was what I liked about how he was discussing these issues.

Newman: I agree. Put it this way. There were 3,000 people in the World Trade Center on September 11th. Suppose the plan that Al Qaeda had actually devised was to have someone in their outfit shoot each one of those people wherever they happened to be, including if they weren't at the World Trade Center. Would that be treated as an attack on the United States of America? No. They'd be treated as 3,000 murder cases. And you'd have to mobilize your police force and go get the perpetrators. I think that's how the whole thing needs to be looked at. So, I'm agreeing with Hamilton.

Salit: Yes. And, I thought that part of what was important about his remarks was his posture: Let's stop being hysterical and let's stop ginning up a lot of unnecessary hysteria – a major characteristic of how the Bush administration related to the American public. Let's talk seriously. So, Charlie Rose asks him about Iran and Iran having nuclear weapons. Hamilton says, well, if it turns out to be the case that they do, it's not the end of the world. It's not a good situation. We'd like to take as many steps as we can to try to avoid it. And here are some of the things we should do. A big diplomatic offensive, etc. But, we've lived in a world, Hamilton says, where for 40 years, we were locked into a super power rivalry with the Soviet Union. They had the same level of nuclear and military capability that we had and we spent 40 years talking to them, and the U.S. survived and prevailed. So we shouldn't be so infantile and naïve as to think *Oh my god. What if Iran has a bomb!* It's not a good thing, but let's get over that and do what we have to do to engage – to deal with that. I happen to agree with that from a

policy point of view. But from a posture point of view I appreciate it, too. Because it's relating to the American people as something other than a bunch of dumb flag-waving idiots.

Newman: In dealing with human beings, with whom we often get into all kinds of intense relationships, as well as the intense relationships between nations, it seems to me, that when we're considering options of how to relate to certain situations, we undervalue the option of doing nothing. It's really profoundly undervalued and it can have a huge impact. So much of the underlying dictate within a still religious world, and I include nationalism as a religion, is the dictate that if something happens, you always have to react and respond to it. But you don't. In fact, most often, you don't. So I think underlying a lot of Americans' attitude towards Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan, is why are we doing anything? I don't think that's isolationism. It's simply asking "Is all of this our business?" Is it going to take another thousand years for democracy, even presuming that to be a good thing, to take hold in Iraq? What the hell are we doing there now, trying to rush it? Because we think it's the right way to live? How did it become our job to determine that and to effect that? And how can you not get into trouble if that's what you're doing?

Salit: Interesting.

Newman: So, psychologically speaking, this is very misunderstood. We live in a culture which says you have to make something happen. Well, you don't. You simply don't.

Salit: I don't mean to suggest now that Obama is necessarily keyed into the precise thing you're talking about here. But I was struck in the interview that he did on *Al Arabiya*, talking about dispatching George Mitchell as his personal envoy to the Middle East, when he said that his instructions to Mitchell were to go and to listen to people and that the U.S. has too often begun by dictating rather than listening.

Newman: See, Obama could have cut to the chase here: *You want to know what your mission is George? Just go. That's the totality of what we can do.*

Salit: Yes.

Newman: *Just go. Listen. Better listening than not listening. Don't be offensive. Don't get too drunk in a bar in downtown Beirut. But just go.* And Obama can say, *That's what I'm doing. That I can accomplish quickly. And I have.*

Salit: *I just put him on a plane.*

Newman: *I just put him on a plane. He's on the way to listen.* You see, the issue is not even whether you do make something happen or whether you don't make something happen but the language of "you *have to.*" No, I don't have to. I really don't have to.

Salit: If you are focused on what it is that you're trying to create and organize and you have sufficient trust based on what's being created and what you're seeing develop in the course of doing that, then you do the things that you're doing to create and develop them.

Newman: And create new positive things.

Salit: And you try not to get distracted or derailed or overly involved in things that you don't have to respond to and that aren't really about what you're doing.

Newman: That's true. I agree with that formulation, but again, I want to take it even a step further. Not responding to something, *is* responding to it. It's just not responding to it on terms set by those who are doing things differently than how you would like them to.

Salit: Let me ask you some questions about the economic stimulus package. We have an economic crisis of huge proportions. The federal government is trying to respond to this. Obama is trying to respond to this.

Newman: They are responding, yes.

Salit: So, the talk is "We have to put partisanship aside in order to come up with this plan."

Newman: How do you put partisanship aside when you have a two-party system?

Salit: Well, that's my question. You have the Bob Herberts and the Nancy Pelosis of the world, one a commentator, one a politician, but their positions are not all that different. Their position is *OK, fine. Bipartisanship, sure. We'll sit and we'll talk with the Republicans. We'll hear what they have to say. But the bottom line is that the Republican policies of the last eight years have been a complete disaster and it's now time to put a stop to all of that and to do something different.*

Newman: Or, as Obama succinctly and cleverly puts it, I won.

Salit: Yes. I won. So, does the term "we have to put partisanship aside" have any real meaning in this context?

Newman: No. I'll tell you what the whole dialogue means.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Obama is saying: *I won. You lost.* He's saying to the Republicans: *We can come up with something which we both take ownership of and then we will jointly get the credit or the blame for the effectiveness or the non-effectiveness of this plan. If people think that we stink, we'll all stink together.* And Obama says, *If you don't want to*

do that, if you want to be the opposition and obstruct, well, one of two things will happen. I could get this program passed without you. It might be close. If I can get it passed, and if it doesn't work, then only I will get blamed for it. And you'll be the opposition and maybe you'll get something out of that. But the more likely thing, if you oppose me, is that nothing will happen and we won't get anything done. Then people are going to have to decide who's responsible for that. Me, Obama says, or you, you guys in Congress. And, Obama says, If that's what turns out, then I'll put my capacity to convince people that I'm not the one responsible up against yours. Who's going to fare better if that's where the fight goes to? Me. Because I'm better at it than you are. Don't forget, Obama says, I won. I can beat you guys if nothing happens.

Salit: But is the "you guys" in that just the Republicans?

Newman: It's whomever is oppositional to him. Doesn't make a difference if they're Republicans or Democrats. When it comes down to it, Obama's got some cards to play. He's very skillful, apparently, at moving the American people into thinking that he's right. He ran for two years selling nothing but "change." Well, the issue is not even what change means, it's just that he talked that talk and he became the best orator in the United States of America right now. That's what he was able to do. That's the game that they're playing. Now the problem is that as they're busy playing that game, which is an ongoing game that's only gotten more intense, the world and the country are coming apart.

Salit: It's a risky game to keep playing.

Newman: If you're playing Monopoly and all you've got is the paper money, it's a low risk game. If you start using real cash, it's a higher risk game. But I don't think it particularly changes how you play the game. I don't know that one affects the other that much. So is it a different game? I'm not convinced it is.

Salit: OK, it's not a different game. But if the game fails, the repercussions are more significant.

Newman: What do you mean?

Salit: What you're seeing in Congress right now is the usual political stuff that goes on. There's horse trading going on. They cut this program out, they put this one in, blah blah blah. And basically Obama's position is *That's all tolerable so long as the bottom line here is that a stimulus package gets puts together which is going to dramatically impact on the state of the economy and improve the conditions and the prospects for the American people.*

Newman: No. That's not the bottom line. The bottom line is history. What's going to happen will happen. That's the bottom line. I was watching some of news shows yesterday and they're actually good comedy. Mike Bloomberg has proposed tax increases in New York City that will take the sales tax from 8.375 to 8.625 and people

on the street, when they were presented with this, know just what they're expected to say. They say *God damn that _____ !* That's .25%. Does that make any difference? No. None at all. Are you going to live your life any differently because the sales tax has increased by a quarter of a percentage point?

Salit: No.

Newman: Now could tax increases on bigger items impact more? Yes, of course. But that will simply be certain things impacting more. History continues to go forward. Does the country become poorer? Yes. The country's been rich. Now it will be poorer. So, we'll live in a poorer country. And what happens from that? Will the people in DC still continue this game? Yes.

Salit: We saw Ken Duberstein, who was Ronald Reagan's chief of staff, say 'Well in my view Obama gets it and the American people get it, but the congressional Democrats and Republicans don't get it.' I agreed with him.

Newman: What are the figures right now? The president has a 68% popularity rating and Congress taken together is still at 31%?

Salit: Something like that, yes.

Newman: So they're going to act differently. Could that poll change tomorrow? Yes. But part of the equation is that, by and large, we'll continue to exist, no matter what happens, even with this dreadful, dreadful crisis. That doesn't mean that I don't think that there are some better outcomes and some worse outcomes. But what's the alternative to continuing to exist? What's your alternative to history? What are we going to do? This is not a movie. At some point it's not going to be "The End" and then we all go home. This is it. And there's a lack of understanding of that because we still live in a seriously religious and teleological world and people just don't understand *that*. I'm not saying these economic stimulus debates are useless. I'm just saying that they're useless. In some existential sense. Yes. Could they impact objectively? Of course. Could America become something other than the number one country economically in the world? Yes. My guess is that it probably has already. Is that going to be like the old Bugs Bunny cartoons where "Night falls," boom? No. it's going to be subtle changes. History is like that. But history will go on. Democracy is a good thing, but on the down side, it sometimes tends to create the illusion that everything depends on it. Everything doesn't depend on democracy being operative. Afghanistan is probably not even a nation, no less a democracy, but people still live, they still go on, they still get up in the morning, they still have their lives. I think American democracy is wonderful. But we do tend to take it much too seriously. Sometimes it impacts dramatically on history. And it sometimes doesn't impact at all. So it can be misleading in that way. People want to say *Oh my god, what if McCain had won?* I think we'd be in roughly the same debates if McCain had won. Would it be different in terms of the various sub-plots that are playing out? Yes. Are they important? Yes. Are they interesting? Yes. We're deeply involved in them. But, all I'm suggesting is that the model which suggests that if all that weren't

going on we would suddenly go out of existence the way that “Night falls” in the Bugs Bunny movie is ridiculous. That’s not what happens. We would, as a specie and as a world, accommodate.

I think the Great Depression and World War II story is fascinating here. There was this Great Depression. Endless things were tried and done, but now most people agree, and I think it’s probably true, the Depression came to an end because of the actions of the Japanese, the Italians and the Germans. They started a war. And the war is what got this country out of the Depression. So, what about all that energy that was spent trying to come up with 70 billion solutions to this Great Depression? There weren’t any. Did some things change this or change that? Yes. But in general there was no “solution.” FDR didn’t solve it. You’re living, you try to effect this and that, and you wait for the next thing to happen in order to respond to it. Now is that passive? No. You’re not passive about that. In fact, you can be quite active about that. But you mustn’t confuse being active as meaning you’re the thing that’s going to make it happen. It doesn’t happen that way. It’s a complex mixture and that’s why if you take “God” – in whatever form – out of the picture, I think you get a more accurate picture. Is it much more accurate? No. But a little more accurate.

Salit: Thank you, Fred.