



## OPEN SURGE; OPEN PRIMARIES

Sunday, February 22, 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 22, 2009 after watching selections from "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," and a Charlie Rose interview.*

**Salit:** We watched a couple of discussions about partisanship, bipartisanship, post-partisanship. Chris Matthews interviewed Hendrik Hertzberg from *The New Yorker* who says, 'Bipartisanship is a mindless category.' He goes on to say it's really a "stand in" for something else, for the American people wanting changes in the way that politics is done. So we start there. Is bipartisanship a "mindless category?"

**Newman:** A "mindless category?" I didn't know that categories had minds. I thought that categories were created by minds. But, it's a strange kind of discussion, this discussion about bipartisanship. It's like asking two boxers why they're hitting each other. If you put two guys in the ring and tell them that the person who will get the most money is the one who hits the other the most, the likelihood is that they'll hit each other. So, if you have two parties in the political ring, which we've had for a very long time now, the likelihood is that they'll be antagonistic towards each other. If they agree on some things, that's fortuitous. But what they'll be doing, in general, is fighting with each other because that's what they're set up to do.

**Salit:** So when historians talk about how after the war, there was bipartisan unity for the Marshall Plan, that there was bipartisan unity for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution...

**Newman:** There are some tedious draws in boxing.

**Salit:** OK. Here's what Obama is doing. Obama is saying, *Well, I'm going to make the post-partisan, the nonpartisan appeal. I'm going to reach out. The Republicans will do what they do. The opposition will do what it does. That's their business, not my business. I'm reaching out.*

**Newman:** Or, as he said in his most honest moment, "I won."

**Salit:** And, "I've got the votes in Congress."

**Newman:** There you go.

**Salit:** Obama is leading by making a statement about how he does business. That's independent of what the short term outcome might or might not be. That's a part of the new politics. He's making an ethical statement, a political statement about the way things need to be, the way things should be, a place that we should try to get to...which

is honest and principled disagreements, civil debate, constructive decision-making. Isn't that part of how he provides leadership to changing the political culture?

**Newman:** Yes, I think he's saying, *There's a way that we've conducted business for hundreds of years – all kinds of business, political business, social business, economic business. And, if you just look (don't analyze, look), what it's led to is something resembling what could reasonably be called the collapse of the United States of America as a coherent working social system. So, says Obama, who knows how to look, we probably should do something different.*

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** And a lot of people say, *No*. Remarkably enough, some people say, *I don't care if the American system has been destroyed by the old ways. Let's keep doing the same thing*. That's the unstated debate that's taking place in the country. Obama has played a major role in creating that debate, which is wonderful. That's what he's doing.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** That's often how history works. Something fails for so long that the patient is not only dead, but the corpse starts to rot. Then someone comes along and says, *I think this medical procedure has not worked out*.

**Salit:** *We have to come up with a new one.*

**Newman:** And still there are many people who say, *No. Let's continue on the same path*. So, the country and indeed, arguably, the world is in something like that position. What's going to make things better? I don't think there's anything in the current paradigm that's going to make it better. I don't even know if there's anything outside the paradigm that's going to make it better, but at least there's some reason to believe that doing other things is not going to keep making it worse and worse and worse and might make it better. I don't know. I don't want to be an old fogey Marxist once again, but if you look at all this stuff, even if you've never heard of Karl Marx in your life, it does lead you to say, *Why don't they plan the economy? What??* Maybe if you planned it, wealth creation and overall social development wouldn't be counterposed to each other. But then the horrified response is: *Don't you know what a planned economy is?*

**Salit:** The "s" word.

**Newman:** They'll throw you out of the room. However, in the meantime, they proceed to try to control the economy, which is somehow, in their feeble minds, different than a planned economy, which it is if you do it piecemeal. The worst possible kind of planning, namely planning after everything has failed, is OK. But if you plan this before it all happens, that would be the "s" word.

**Salit:** That's what's happening right now with the auto companies. The automakers just submitted a plan to the government and all the high ranking Treasury and White House people are going to review the plan and decide whether it works, or tweak it, or send it back for rewrite. And it's all about restructuring the companies and how many layoffs there are going to be and what the pay scale for the executives is going to be and what the union contracts are going to be. They're redesigning the whole industry.

**Newman:** And then there's the critical decision about what the horn should sound like.

**Salit:** I think Geithner asked to have sign-off on that one.

**Newman:** I'm voting for "beep, beep."

**Salit:** Speaking of redesigning, we watched a Charlie Rose interview with Thomas Ricks.

**Newman:** He's one of my favorite writers. I like Ricks a lot. He's honest.

**Salit:** Yes. He's a very good reporter and really pierces the veil when he gets inside a story. He has a new book out on the surge and General Petraeus, basically about the redesigning of the American strategy in Iraq. Ricks reports on how the entirety of the military establishment, from the Defense Secretary on down, the Joint Chiefs, everybody, was against it, except for General Odierno and then Petraeus, who was pushing for it from the outside because he wasn't in Iraq at the time.

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** So, we're losing the war. And Odierno, and later Petraeus, come in and say the thing has to be completely redesigned and here's what we have to do. We've got to put more troops in. We have to turn the American army into the "glue" that holds the society together.

**Newman:** And we have to pay the Sunnis. That's how we win the war.

**Salit:** Yes. And, as you're referencing, Ricks goes on to talk about how, as they got to know the insurgency, both on the ground and in detention, they learned that most of these guys were being paid to fight us. And all the Americans had to do to turn the situation around was to offer them more money than Al Qaeda was paying them.

**Newman:** A dollar more.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Maybe that's what they discovered by torturing these people. And people said, *Stop torturing me. Pay me. I'll work for you. I'll put on an American flag and I'll work for you.* Big discovery.

**Salit:** There were two things that I found interesting in Charlie Rose's interview. First, Ricks demolishes the popular myth that the surge was essentially an acceleration of traditional American military might: We bring in more troops. We bang the hell out of the insurgents. We get control of the situation. And that's why the surge worked. But actually the story of how and why the surge worked is a much different story than that.

**Newman:** The myth is a much more classical, traditional story. It just doesn't happen to be what happened.

**Salit:** Yes. And Ricks also explodes the myth that a significant portion of the insurgency is an ideologically-driven, anti-American jihad by Islamic extremists. As he reports, a lot of the insurgency are guys, Iraqi government employees who wanted extra income for their families, who were being paid by Al Qaeda to fight.

**Newman:** Well, that's how the world works.

**Salit:** You pay people more than the other guy.

**Newman:** There you go. That's why God created money.

**Salit:** Fighting an insurgency is a difficult kind of war to win. No matter how powerful and how weaponized you are, the insurgents have a real advantage. If nothing else, they can keep a conventional army tied down and keep the war going. But if you shift the ground to the U.S. advantage over Al Qaeda, which is that we have a lot more money, then you engage based on your strength, not your vulnerabilities.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** Ricks has two conclusions which I wanted to ask your opinion on. One, he said that the surge has been successful, but we haven't achieved our objectives. The situation continues to be as politically unstable as it was before the surge.

**Newman:** And it will continue to be so.

**Salit:** The other thing he said was that he didn't understand why it took the U.S. four years to redesign a failing military approach.

**Newman:** We're dumb.

**Salit:** Because we're dumb?

**Newman:** Right. There must be some connection between the question of why it took four or five years to wake up to the most obvious things in the world and the fact that George Bush was the dumbest president in the history of the United States.

**Salit:** Alright. Maybe there's not much more to say about it.

**Newman:** The neocons were a bunch of stupid people who gained control over the stupidest president who ever lived, under the auspices of Dick Cheney, who's not dumb but is, as everybody says quite correctly, nearly evil. Not surprisingly, things haven't gone well.

**Salit:** What about, as Ricks says, that even with the success of the surge, it's failed in its larger goal.

**Newman:** He's right. Of course, he's right. How can anyone possibly deny it?

**Salit:** I think Ricks would agree with your point about George Bush. He says he's not a fan of Bush, and after the 2006 midterms, when the Republicans got "thumped," they began to re-evaluate their strategy for the war. But Ricks takes it beyond the White House. He argues that we have the best educated officer class that we've ever had in the history of the armed forces. We have people who are bright and capable on the ground and they should have seen this earlier.

**Newman:** You see what you're told to see in the Army. I've been in the Army. I was only a private, but I learned the lesson almost immediately because I'm relatively bright, as were most of the guys I served with who were poor old privates, too. You see what they tell you to see. So under the neocons and the stupidest president in the history of the United States, the military was told what to see and that's what they saw.

**Salit:** Presumably, at the strategic level the neocons thought they saw an opportunity to assert U.S. hegemony internationally. But it turned out that it was exactly the opposite.

**Newman:** I don't want to argue with you, but there's nothing more futile than trying to give a rational analysis of the behavior of utterly stupid people. There is no rational analysis, because they're not rational.

**Salit:** OK. I won't give a rational analysis.

**Newman:** The neocons' position was that it's alright for the United States to take over the world. Then someone says, *What if the rest of the people of the world object?* The answer was *It makes no difference. We're powerful enough to do it.* Well, does history agree? No. Why not? Well, for a variety of reasons, some of them practical. As in, it will undermine and destroy the entirety of what the American political system is about. It's like a child saying, *Daddy, why don't you just fly and get us there?* A father has to say, *I can't fly.* The kid says, *Daddy, you can do anything.* Well, you can't listen to the advice of a three-year-old, otherwise, you'll jump off a roof and splatter yourself. That's the issue here. Over the course of these past eight years the U.S. has conducted earth shatteringly stupid policies in all kinds of arenas. Can you do that for an extended period? Well, in some ways, yes. But other factors fall into place while you're doing that

and, at some point, what looked like it might have been doable, if not smart, is no longer even doable.

**Salit:** And then what?

**Newman:** That's why I'm happy that Obama's in there. I don't know if he's a socialist or not...

**Salit:** I heard a radio host the other day calling him a "neo-Marxist."

**Newman:** Well, whatever he is, he's got a brain.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** That's nice.

**Salit:** That's a change.

**Newman:** A huge change.

**Salit:** Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger gave a no-holds barred endorsement to open primaries on the Stephanopoulos show. This is an issue that the independent movement is pursuing very aggressively, so it's good to see Arnold come on board. George said to him 'You seem to have unified both parties with that idea. The Republican Party leadership and the Democratic Party leadership are both against it.' This is true and Arnold gave a reasonable response. He said 'It's always great when the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are against something, because it means it's good for the people.'

**Newman:** I think the importance of the open primary issue and the fights that independents are having in the courts, in many different state legislatures and on the ground, goes beyond engaging the narrow self-interest of the parties, though that is certainly a part of it. In the context of a major social and economic crisis, the controlling institutions of a society assert their control very aggressively. The political parties are among the most powerful institutions and they're reacting to the greater participation by the American people – on the Internet, in the Obama campaign, and, not surprisingly in open primaries. They react by trying to "stabilize" the society by reinforcing the authority of establishment institutions, even as institutions and the paradigms on which they're based are out of sync with what's happening. The fight to achieve open primaries is all about that. The parties are asserting themselves as the fundamental mediator between the American people and the political process but many Americans don't want to participate in that way anymore. It's a very important fight about the core principles of our democracy, about the nature of the American political experiment.

**Salit:** Thanks, Fred.