



FUZZBALLS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Sunday, March 8, 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, March 8, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews," and a Charlie Rose interview.

Salit: The story of the week was about Rush Limbaugh.

Newman: It's kind of funny.

Salit: Do you think it's a sideshow that is kind of entertaining? Or, even if it is entertaining, is it about an ideological divide in the country that continues even with Obama having won?

Newman: The divide is not in the country any longer. That's not the main issue. It's a divide in the Republican Party. It's all about the fight for the future of the Republican Party.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That's who Limbaugh is laying down the gauntlet to. Limbaugh's message is *We got creamed. And I'm saying we got creamed because we wouldn't go all the way with conservatism. And we can't take them on – the Democrats, the liberals, whomever – unless we are willing to go much further with that.* And he might be right. I'm not supporting that. I'm not a Republican. But, he might be right.

Salit: He might be right that you can't compete with the Democrats by trying to play at the middle?

Newman: Yes. Limbaugh's advice is *Don't go back to New England-style moderate Republicanism. That's exactly the wrong direction. We have to go the other way.* Who was it who said today – and they're right – that Limbaugh doesn't represent the Republican Party?

Salit: Larry O'Donnell said it on *Hardball*.

Newman: Right. Limbaugh represents conservatism. And a conservative regime, which lasted eight years, did disastrous things to the country. Limbaugh's point is that conservatives have to go even more firmly to the right, and likewise for the Republicans, to be major players. Going to the center is futile, in his view. I think that's what he's doing and that's a fun fight to watch.

Salit: I liked when he called himself a “fuzzball.”

Newman: Yeah, I’ll bet. It’s nice to see Lawrence O’Donnell and Pat Buchanan together again.

Salit: Yes, they used to be the big stars on *The McLaughlin Group*, but they’re never on together anymore. Rashid Khalidi, a professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University was a guest on *Charlie Rose*.

Newman: I liked when he remarked, ‘Whatever you say about Kissinger, you wouldn’t say that he’s a fool.’

Salit: Exactly. And Charlie Rose seemed surprised that Khalidi would agree with anything Henry Kissinger had to say because Khalidi’s a radical.

Newman: And Khalidi said, ‘Who said I’m a radical?’

Salit: Well, he’s got something of a reputation.

Newman: As a radical?

Salit: Yes, and as an Arab nationalist.

Newman: OK.

Salit: Khalidi is trying to offer a roadmap to normalizing U.S. relations with Iran. He argues that there are certain patterns that the U.S. established during the Cold War that over-determine our contemporary foreign policy; that, in some ways, Iran has supplanted the Soviet Union as the strategic enemy of the United States that has to be contained, defeated, overthrown, whatever. And he talks about missed opportunities to develop a new architecture for our relationships in that part of the world. In his view, much of the potential for success in the Obama administration, in terms of its foreign policy, turns on its ability to examine the failures of the last three administrations, basically the post-Cold War presidencies: Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43. Examining those failures is part of figuring out how to move beyond them.

Newman: It’s an insight but I think it’s a little bit of a platitude. That goes without saying. What else should they be looking at?

Salit: Maybe implicit in the question is he’s not sure that they will?

Newman: I think what’s implicit in the question, more importantly, is that many of our foreign policy approaches, strategically speaking, have not been very good.

Salit: Relative to the Middle East, Khalidi argues that the American obsession with defeating Communism, with defeating the Soviet Union, led us to pursue certain policies in the Middle East that were dangerous and for which we have paid a terrible price. He gives the example of Iran and the U.S. involvement in the overthrow of the Mossadegh government in 1953, on the grounds that it was too influenced by the Soviets and our drive was to contain Communism. But, he says, that was ridiculous because Communism wasn't going to take root there. So, his starting point is that, because we were playing the superpower game and playing it stupidly, we undercut our own national interests in the region.

Newman: The assessments made about Iraq prior to the war, which were profoundly mistaken, were not the first set of mistaken assessments by Washington about the rest of the world. Our "reads" have not always been bad, but they've often been problematic. And so we've gotten locked into positions that are hard to get out of. U.S. policy in the Middle East is a hodge-podge. We support Israel. We are allied with the oil-producing Arab nations. It's hard to piece together all of the interests into a coherent and positive policy in the world, in general, but particularly in the Middle East. It has left the U.S. in a weak position. If that's essentially what Khalidi is getting at, and I think it is, I definitely agree with it.

Salit: He thinks there is an opportunity to strike or to develop what he calls a "Grand Bargain" in the region, centered on Iran. To get there, however, you have to talk to the Iranians and you have to, for example, explore with them why it is that they want nuclear weapons in the first place. His argument is that they feel threatened. America has military bases in every country that borders Iran. The U.S. has a \$1 billion covert program to destabilize them. But, if you dial back the hysteria and the propaganda around Iran and you actually engage in Kissinger-style politics – as he said, 'Kissinger might be a lot of things, but he's not a fool' – which is to identify the interests and needs of the different players and figure out how you meet them, then we can get somewhere on this.

Newman: I would add that to do that you have to, first of all, establish who's doing it, who's striking the bargain. There are enormously complex interests in the picture, each of which is pursuing influence with Congress and with the White House for their own thing, whether it be Arab oil or Israeli security or whatever it might be. But, you have to be able to find a way of establishing a U.S. policy, in the interest of our country as opposed to simply accommodating high-powered interests. Because of the way U.S. policy is constructed, because of how policy is formulated domestically, the U.S. doesn't often have a coherent foreign policy. Instead, we respond to a range of influences and try to satisfy so many people that it's hard to put it together and come out with a coherent policy.

Salit: So, do you have to get rid of the practice of responding to interest groups in order to come up with a policy, or do you come up with a policy and then you fight the fights that you have to in order to implement it?

Newman: You can't get rid of that practice. That's what American politics is. But to change situations for the better in many areas of the world, there has to be, in my opinion, a clearly stated U.S. policy.

Salit: We watched James Baker and Lee Hamilton interviewed by Jim Lehrer. They've jointly put together an alternative to the War Powers Resolution of 1973, initially adopted by Congress over the objections of then president Richard Nixon. Baker feels that the 1973 Resolution is unconstitutional, although its constitutionality has never been tested. The Baker/Hamilton alternative requires a higher level of consultation between the president and Congress and gives Congress somewhat more power over the president, with respect to going to war. Basically their argument is that the 1973 War Powers Resolution hasn't worked, a reference to the fact that we've gotten into wars that ended up being unpopular.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: Do you think there's a little bit more of a temperament or an inclination, both in Congress and, more importantly in the country as a whole, for dialing back the president's capacity to rush into military conflict?

Newman: What Baker and Hamilton are saying is that with Obama as president, there may be an openness to protecting the country from falling into actions, including military actions, which don't represent the best interests of the U.S. I think they see in Obama – and I think they're correct – that Obama might be better able to stand up to some of these lobbying interests (not all of them, but some of them) and shape a pragmatic, but nonetheless coherent, U.S. policy in various parts of the world. Is that true? I don't know. I think there is some indication of that. Whether he is really able to do that will come out in the detail and practice of his presidency. Not only don't we know whether new approaches are going to work, we don't even know if they're going to be carried out. But it could be an opportunity for big changes, both domestically and in foreign policy. We always have to remember that the inertial pull in all these things is towards conservatism, not towards big changes. We'll see. Will there be universal health coverage for all Americans? A decent quality health plan instead of our having one of the worst-for-the-price medical systems in the world? We'll see. That will get determined in the practice, in the carrying out. Are we able to reposition ourselves in the Middle East? We'll see what Hillary can do. We'll see what Hamilton can do. I think there are some intelligent people out there and Obama is relating to them in a way which starts to make maximal use of their intelligence.

Salit: Why are you so cautious?

Newman: You're always a little wary, at least I am. I'm always a little wary of gradualistic approaches to major paradigm changes. On the one hand, these things can't, and I don't even think they should, happen overnight. On the other hand, I think they should happen. And, in my view, revolution is the engine of social development. In some sense, it all comes down to this question, if you follow the logic of this. Can there

be a restructuring of revolutionary change? Is there a way to have a revolution which is not as destabilizing and potentially dangerous as the way it's been done in the past? Obama is trying, I think, to construct that. If he's about anything, I think that's what he's about. I think he believes in it. I'm more cynical than he is. I'm certainly open to seeing another way you can deal with bringing in new societal paradigms. At the same time, I remain both a Marxist and a revolutionary. I'm not ready to convert to being an Obama-ite Democrat. Not at all. But I'm certainly open to whatever positive development can come from what he's doing. Yes, if he can bring about something resembling universal health care at a reasonable standard of quality in this country, I'll applaud him. I think it's a big step in the right direction. I don't think it's socialism, but it would be nice if it were at least on par with Western European democracies. Can that be done? I don't know. Many, many people I've talked to, bright people, don't think so because they think that our not having that is part and parcel of what has been America's edge economically. But then we're having to re-examine the question of what America's core strength is economically. We have to keep our eyes open in the next few years.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.