



THE STARTER ISN'T ALWAYS THE CLOSER (and a few notes on ethics)

Sunday, March 9, 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, March 9, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: There are a series of cul de sacs that the Democrats are driving through right now and trying to figure out how to get out of. You've got Barack Obama ahead with delegates, ahead in the popular vote, but Hillary having staged a "comeback" in Texas and Ohio. Mathematically, the experts say, no matter what happens in the remaining primaries, Obama still comes out of the primary season with more delegates, however slight the edge. There's a debate about the role of the superdelegates. Is it their job simply to ratify what the pledged delegates have already done? If they take things in a different direction, does that spark some kind of uprising inside the party? Here's what people are saying. There's got to be a negotiated settlement to this. So let me ask you what I think is a threshold question. Do you agree that there has to be a negotiated settlement?

Newman: Looked at in one way, the primary process always ends in a negotiated settlement, even if your negotiation is a function of validating the vote count. Someone selects the ticket. So if the vote count doesn't give the Democrats a candidate, then they'll have to do something to make a decision. It's kind of tautology. And it's also a way of filling up time on 24-hour cable news shows. This is a presidential primary and it's a close one. That's what you've really got when you strip away Michigan and Florida and the rules committee and Howard Dean and the superdelegates. You've got a close primary between two candidates, both of whom have negatives but both of whom have enough positives to be the nominee. There's little more to say about it.

Salit: OK. The process is moving along and it works itself out somehow or another. There are a lot of variables along the way, as you said. What to do about Michigan and Florida, how the superdelegates are going to play this...

Newman: But someone wins. That's what's going to happen.

Salit: Yes, someone wins.

Newman: That's the thing you can be absolutely sure of. They're not going to fail to put up a presidential candidate.

Salit: OK. With that as a backdrop, let's get into the politics of the current moment. Hillary and Bill are floating the dream ticket scenario: 'We're ready to make a deal. Clinton/Obama.' Some people have opined: 'This is a political play that they're making going into Mississippi where there's a big African American voter bloc. They're sending a signal to black voters that she's positive on Obama. She can make this happen, open the door, blah, blah, blah, blah.' That whole thing. She's hoping to deflate the black surge for Obama to help her in Mississippi. Another side of the message perhaps is: 'I can be the unifier, but Obama can't be the unifier. You can't unify the Democratic Party if you just got here. And he just got here.'

Newman: Obama's not claiming to be the unifier of the Democratic Party. He's claiming to be the unifier of the American people. They mean two different things by unify, don't they?

Salit: That's an important distinction. If you look at the coalition Obama's created, you see the difference.

Newman: Clinton's notion of what needs to be unified is the Democratic Party. Her message to Obama is 'You can't do it. You just got here.' He's saying to her 'You can't do it. You've been here too long. You're the same old stuff. That's not going to unify the American people.'

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And this talk of "comebacks." I don't know that you can call what Clinton did a comeback. How would Hillary have done in Ohio and Texas if the primaries were held three months ago? You don't know because they weren't held three months ago. But if you had to take an educated guess, you'd say she would have won handily. So, what's the comeback? Comeback from where? There's not that level of connection between what happens in the different states. If the Founding Fathers had wanted the states to be more connected, they would have written the Constitution differently. But they didn't. Most Americans, I think, don't fully appreciate that, and that's because of the level of miseducation. The electoral process, like lots of other processes, is state-controlled. It's state-controlled legally. It's state-controlled politically. So this notion of these state-based primaries being connected is...

Salit: ...a fiction.

Newman: It's a complete fiction. It doesn't happen that way. If they wanted to have everyone vote on the same day...

Salit: ...they could do that...

Newman: ...they could take things in that direction. You'd have it all over with in one day. You'd count the votes and make sure that, if you get down to two candidates,

someone's going to have more voters than the other. Then you're all done. No problem. But it's not done that way because the states won't allow it. That's exactly what happened with Michigan and Florida. The states won't allow it. The "campaign as a race" metaphor, which makes good sense in one way makes no sense at all in another way.

Salit: How do you think about the issue of what Obama should do? There are two alternatives put forward. He stays on the high ground. He stays true to his "We need a new politics" message. He doesn't engage at the level of attacks and continues with his message of hope and unity, and so forth. Or, he gets "down in the trenches" and slugs it out.

Newman: He's done both of those and he'll continue to do both of those. And there will be discrete decisions about each particular attack and whether and how to respond to it. Are you asking me how I would run the campaign? Well, it would be different than what Axelrod and Plouffe are doing, but they're running the campaign well. More importantly, Obama's running it how he's running it. And I guess he'll continue to run it that way until something happens that they call the end. The end will be when they reach a conclusion as to who their candidate will be. I don't think there will be dramatic changes. I really don't. I have some that I would recommend to him, but that's neither here nor there. I don't think he's doing any dramatic changes.

Salit: Here's the question that gets posed: If Obama counter-attacks against Hillary...

Newman: Which he has.

Salit: Which he has, but if he does that more consistently or more forcefully...

Newman: He won't.

Salit: ...then he's violating the core principles of his candidacy.

Newman: That's nonsense.

Salit: George Will observed on the George Stephanopoulos show today 'The term "negative campaigning" is a redundancy. Campaigns are negative.' He's right.

Newman: Of course, he's right. That's like saying *Boxing bouts are violent attempts to get the other person to submit*. Well, they are. That's what they are.

Salit: That's why people go to the fights or watch them on TV.

Newman: Exactly.

Salit: Obama argues 'It's completely fair for me to counter-attack Hillary Clinton on this issue of Iraq because that's a policy issue. That's a presidential issue. She made the wrong choice when the phone rang, her 3:00 a.m. moment.'

Newman: Well, except that the phone didn't ring.

Salit: Meaning?

Newman: She wasn't the president and the phone didn't ring. She was in the United States Senate and pretty much the entire party that she's a member of, which is his party also, voted the way she did. That's what actually happened. So, a phone ringing is dramatic advertising. But that's not what happened. And it's worth thinking about.

Salit: His point is that you can attack her record, you can attack the things that she's done as a political figure...

Newman: Not without attacking the Democratic Party.

Salit: OK. Not without attacking the Democratic Party.

Newman: That's right.

Salit: He's not attacking the Democratic Party.

Newman: He also went along with the Democratic Party on subsequent votes, once he was in the U.S. Senate.

Salit: That's Obama's dilemma.

Newman: It's a dilemma, yes. He's saying that it's not just the Republicans who have produced what's been produced in Washington. It's the system, which means it's both parties. But he's running in the Democratic Party. His fundamental problem is to try to finesse that. How's he doing it? He's doing it by bringing in a broad coalition and by running a very personal campaign. She's running the campaign of the Democratic Party. So she has that going for her. That's not insignificant in a Democratic Party primary. He's running a personal campaign, appealing to Americans on the basis of a broader vision. Those are two very different kinds of campaigns.

Salit: The present situation is defined by the deadlock in the Democratic primary and the extent to which the upcoming contest with McCain has the potential to be close. McCain is a competitive candidate. Somebody remarked that it's amazing that given that 70% of the country thinks the country's on the wrong track, that people oppose the war, that the economy is going into a recession, and so forth, that it could still be the case that the Republican nominee could be competitive.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: One could make the argument that the whole situation, on the Democratic side and on the Republican side, was brought about by independents. That Obama's capacity to be competitive with Hillary is based on the support that he's garnered from independents. That McCain's capacity to revive his dead candidacy relied on support he got from independents in New Hampshire and then subsequently. That what you have is a highly engaged, very split, deadlocked situation with a potential for a very close race in November. And that entire situation has been created by independents.

Newman: Think about your language now carefully because it's interesting. What you're saying is 100% right. Look at your language. I'm quoting your words. "The whole situation," you said, "was brought about by independents." Yes, it was. But it can't be concluded by independents.

Salit: That was my next question.

Newman: That's the dynamic. That's the answer. Independents do not have the capacity to conclude it because they're not an organized force with anything like the weight of either major party. Independents can begin things. So I think we've done our job. Should we continue to do all that we can? Yes. But, it's rather close to the moment where we can properly say it's out of our hands. You can make the argument – I think it's a valid argument – that independents have played an enormous role in determining the candidates. The candidates are going to be McCain on the one side and either Obama or Clinton on the other side and that's all been determined by independents. So, you can make the case that this year – leaving Ralph Nader and all that aside – the independents have already won.

Salit: I'd agree. And then there's the general election still to come.

Newman: Yes, the second game of a double-header.

Salit: I'm getting some calls from independents who say if Hillary is the nominee, they're going to vote for Nader. They won't go with Hillary. Period.

Newman: They have every right to do that. But I'd respond *You have a right to vote for someone who you think most corresponds to what you believe in, even if they lose. Many independents have done it again and again and again. So, you can do it this time, too. But, your vote, by and large, will have no positive impact on the outcome. But that's your prerogative to choose to do that.*

Salit: Independents have played a defining role in the first round. It's not clear they'd want to opt out for the second.

Newman: Can I go back to the issue of how Obama further distinguishes himself from Clinton?

Salit: Absolutely.

Newman: You asked me before what Obama should be doing in his debates and dialogues with Clinton. I think there's a profound ethical debate to be had although it probably won't happen, because people are afraid to make ethical statements. But Obama could be raising with Clinton, and the Democratic nominee could and should say to McCain, the following ethical argument. Very simply put, the ethical position on which McCain's and Bush's support for the war rests is that if you do something, whatever it might be, and come to see that it was the wrong thing, you can pretend that it having been the wrong thing to do isn't still the critical factor. That's their argument. 'OK. We made a mistake going in. But now that we're there, the fact that we're there for the wrong reasons no longer exists.'

That's ethically corrupt to the core. Ethically corrupt to the core. You would never invoke that. If you smack a child and afterwards say *I'm very sorry about that*, it doesn't erase the fact that you hit the child. These things go on. They don't stop at the point when you realize the error of your ways or you achieve something in the wrongfully created context. So, it's not as if it makes any sense ethically to say 'Well, it was a mistake, but now that we're there, we'll go kill Saddam Hussein or we'll go spread democracy throughout the Middle East.' It's unbelievable that one could take that position.

This country once had a high ground. In World War II, when this country had its highest ground morally, it wasn't as if we said at some point *Well, we have too many troops being killed so we'll pull out*. No, we were going up against a genuine evil, that's why we entered the war, and it became more and more clearly true as the war went on. So, we called for unconditional surrender. That's not the usual thing to do, but that's an example of what an ethical position is. This one is the exact opposite and it's ethically flawed, on the grounds that it never stops being the case – historically, ethically, in every way – that we're there for the wrong reasons. That just doesn't go away once you say 'Oh, well, now we're here.'

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I think that Obama could articulate that and he could undermine both Hillary's and McCain's positions. I do think people are getting tired of Obama's refrain "I was against the war from the start." Well, hello, who cares after a certain point?

Salit: You have to deepen the argument. You have to give the rationale for why it's important to even say that. I think that's what you're offering here.

Newman: But I don't know if anybody will take that on.

Salit: Is the implication that people who have the ethical lapse, both in the original judgment and then in the attempt to move beyond it...

Newman: The judgment is not an ethical lapse.

Salit: OK. The judgment is a misjudgment. The effort to act as if that doesn't matter any longer is the ethical lapse.

Newman: Yes. If you go to the wrong place, what do you do as a response to the recognition that you've gone to the wrong place? You get out of that place. You don't stay there and think of a reason for being there. One might be drawn to that for pragmatic reasons, but it's not ethically sound. If you're going to your grandmother's house to give her a birthday present, but you wind up instead going to...

Salit: ...Las Vegas.

Newman: Something like that. You don't say *Oh, now that I'm here, I'll gamble*. That's not the ethical thing to do.

Salit: No.

Newman: You get out of that place. What I'm saying is that it's not just a pragmatic question. It's an ethical question and the standing of the United States internationally has plummeted off of a failure to understand this ethical question. The United States failed to respond to its own mistake. What do you do? Get the hell out. Do you do it so as to minimize troop loss? Of course. But that's what you do. The issue is that they want to make the mistake simply go away. 'So, now we're here in Iraq. There are some worthwhile things to do.' That's not a positive ethical argument. But it does expose something about the two party deadlock. You give up your ethics in favor of pure pragmatics. That leaves you in a very, very bad position with the world. And that is what's happened to the United States.

Salit: Thank you.