



Obama, Clinton and the "Deep Down"

Sunday, March 23, 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 23, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: I'd like to talk about how Barack Obama's speech on race is being talked about. Here's one "measure of success" used in the discussions. Did it "put to rest" the uneasiness about Rev. Wright and, perhaps by extension, about Obama's relationship to the broader black community?

Newman: Obama addressed that in his speech and did so correctly. He said one speech is not going to do that. These divisions are an imperfection in the American union and we're opening up what will be a long and extended discussion about it.

Salit: But there are numbers of people who say, on the one hand, it was great, it was a wonderful speech, it was an historic speech, etc. and so forth, but did it put these things to rest?

Newman: If the speech did "put it to rest" then he would have been wrong in what he said in his speech. I don't think he was wrong. I think he was quite right. He was opening things up and that's why the speech is, generally speaking, well regarded. He didn't try to put it to rest. That would have been both ineloquent and stupid.

Salit: Yes. And the response is another layer of the opportunism in American politics. There is a way in which a presidential campaign is deeply inhospitable to the conversation that Obama is opening up.

Newman: But a presidential campaign is where we're at.

Salit: True enough.

Newman: Americans want "Yes" or "No" answers. And pundits contribute to that by citing polls, e.g. Matthews' polls of his Matthews Meter, which really mean nothing. What Obama's saying – and he's quite right – is that this is a continuation of a long term dialogue which had been, in some respects, placed on hold. And he is taking it off hold. Americans simply have to accept that's what's going on. And it's not going to get resolved by the Matthews' poll or any other poll for that matter.

Salit: That's a good way of putting it. So, tell me your reactions to some of the discussion we heard today. George Will says: 'What you basically have here is Obama pleading the case of extenuating circumstances. Black people say these things but you have to understand why they say them. They say these objectionable things, they say

these bad things, they say these wrong things, but you can't simply take them at face value. You have to understand the "extenuating circumstances."

Newman: It's hard to know how to respond to that. It's a fair enough argument if you're taking a course in debate techniques. On the other hand, to refer to the consequences of slavery, hundreds of years of slavery as "extenuating circumstances..." I mean, George, you've got to give a little bit here, come on. I appreciate your scholarly conservative posture, but you've got to give a little bit. The black community in America is understandably very, very angry in a very, very deep kind of way. It's not that there hasn't been improvement. It's not that there hasn't been development. It's not that court cases weren't won. All that's happened. But that said, we're talking about the consequences of hundreds of years of abject chattel slavery. I'm not sure there is an acceptable measure of anger to measure that degree of anger. That's beyond anger. We're not talking about the kind of anger that requires "anger management." We're not talking about people being a little upset. We're not talking about a bill that did or didn't get passed. We're talking about an entire people being put in chains. We might in the next 50 years take gigantic steps in the direction of social equality. Obama might be president of the United States for two terms. His successor might be black. Then his or her successor might also be black. All that might happen. Will there still be Rev. Wrights in the United States of America who will remain furious at the subjugation of African Americans to American slavery? Yes, I'll guarantee it. Even if the whole problem is, in some sense, "solved..."

Salit: The race problem...

Newman: ...it will still be there. When will the anger go away? I don't know. It probably will, but history is going to have to decide that. Have there been gigantic improvements? Of course, there have. No question about that. Is the rage and anger of black America still understandably there? Yes.

Salit: Today part of the argument in defense of Obama was 'Rev. Wright has given other speeches, speeches that are not just mainstream, they're conservative. He says that black people have to pull themselves up by their boot straps.'

Newman: He's a pastor. He has multiple voices because he has different things to say about different things.

Salit: Some people are recommending that the Obama campaign should put those parts of Wright's speeches out there because it'll be a counterweight to the angry remarks...

Newman: I don't think so. I don't agree with that.

Salit: That it will be a counterweight?

Newman: Yes. I don't think they should get them out there and I don't think that it'll be a counterweight.

Salit: It's revealing isn't it, because their argument is that if you put the tapes out there, it will show that he's not really that angry.

Newman: But he is really that angry. How are you going to help the situation by showing that he's not really that angry? He is that angry. That's the angry voice of black America. And it's there not just in Rev. Wright but in millions of black Americans. Is that the only voice that black Americans have? No. No more than any single angry voice is the only voice that white Americans have.

Salit: Chris Matthews asked his panelists to answer a "deep down" question. Deep down inside, do the Clintons think the battle is lost? It's Sunday morning, March 23 and they're looking at the popular vote – they're behind – they're looking at the delegate count – they're behind. The Florida and Michigan re-votes aren't going to happen. She can't catch up at the level of the popular vote. She can't catch up at the level of the delegate count. Chris wants to know whether "deep down inside" the Clintons have accepted that?

Newman: There is, so far as I'm concerned, not one shred of evidence that the Clintons ever think "deep down inside." It's just not how they think. One of the ways of framing the difference between Hillary and Obama is that the Clintons' approach has always been fundamentally concerned with saving the Democratic Party. Obama is concerned with saving the soul of America. That's a big difference. It's not just his capacity and skill with words, his eloquence and so on. They each have a different perspective on what they're trying to do. And Obama is right on the money in this regard. Every crowd that turns out in the thousands shows that. The Clintons are still fundamentally engaged in saving the Democratic Party. But the attitude of the masses of Americans is: *We don't care about saving the Democratic Party. Nor do we care about saving the Republican Party. We care about saving America. That's what's valuable here.* Obama has hooked into that and his popularity is a function of that. So what you're raising about the Clintons and "deep down inside" is a mismatch. I don't mean that as a critique. It's not how they think. Are they appraising the situation that's now taking place? Yes. I'm sure on a regular basis, by the hour. Is their mode of appraisal "deep down?" No.

Salit: John Heilemann of *New York Magazine* reported to Chris Matthews that insiders in the Clinton camp are saying to the Clintons: *You can't win, and if this thing is going to turn into the destruction of Barack Obama, we're not going to stay around for that. We're loyal to you. We'll stay with you. We'll support you. We'll work for you. But not if it goes there.*

Newman: Of course, there are people saying that. The Clinton crowd has a number of different loyalties but their fundamental loyalty is to the political apparatus as it exists. The destruction of a candidate like Barack Obama can do their resume no good. So, what they're saying is *I won't put that on my resume. I'm not going to do it.*

Salit: Do the Clintons have a route ahead of them that is anything other than trying to destroy Obama?

Newman: Yes. They could lose graciously.

Salit: OK, but that goes up against their sense of entitlement.

Newman: Well, that's still a route. That's supposed to be an available route within the system. Thousands of people have done it. The Clintons might think they're too good for that, but they could do it.

Salit: If there's no "deep down inside" then what's the level of pressure on them required to have them do that? Presumably, Bill Richardson's endorsement of Obama on Friday is part of the equation.

Newman: No one knows in advance what the level is, in this kind of situation, until people respond to some level. Then, after the fact, you can say "that was the level." You can't say it before. There is no way of knowing that.

Salit: Senators Chuck Schumer and John Kyl discussed the state of the economy on Stephanopoulos. Schumer, of course, placed the blame for the Bear Stearns debacle at the doorstep of George Bush and the Republicans. He said: 'It shouldn't have come to this. The problem that we're talking about here is a fairly narrow problem. If you take strong, concerted, well thought out action, you can nip these kinds of things in the bud.'

Newman: You can "pass the bud."

Salit: Pass the bud, yes. But "it shouldn't have come to this." That was his refrain. Kyl, on the Republican side, tried to lay the blame on the doorstep of the Democratic Congress: 'You guys drove the programs to open up mortgage opportunities for unqualified home owners, minorities, lower income people, women, people who weren't properly vetted. So, consequently, this is your fault.' Does any of this constitute economic analysis? Or is it just basic partisan rationalizing?

Newman: Republicans say that the Democrats believe in a welfare state where the government will always bail you out. This will simply encourage people to spend more than they actually have. And the Democrats say it's not a matter of people wanting more. It's rather unscrupulous realtors, unscrupulous lenders or unscrupulous things on Wall St. That's what gets people in trouble. That's the ongoing seemingly endless debate but the reality is that you have to face the immediate situations and deal with them as best you can. And they will. So, it's just some television time for Kyl and Schumer.

Salit: Senator Chuck Hagel was on Stephanopoulos promoting his new book. Maybe's he's running for Secretary of Defense, who knows? He's talking about the extent to which the parties have become irrelevant to the concerns of the American people. He's not advocating a third party, but pointing out that politics reflect history. When changes occur in the world, then politics changes and that's what we have going on here. The Democratic and Republican parties are in the process of adapting to new conditions.

And to make his point, he featured the fact that independents are the largest voting group in the country. He was most “on the money” when he offered his critique of the Iraq war and of McCain’s position on the war, and was particularly strong in talking about how to understand the surge. His argument against viewing the surge as a success – as McCain obviously does – is that, in the long run, it’s going to be harmful because it increases the dependency of the Iraqis on the American military presence. Put another way, it actually goes against the grain of what it is that we’ve been trying to do, in terms of establishing long term political stability there.

Newman: What he’s saying about the war is basically correct. If you’re going to do something that’s honest in terms of measuring the effect of the surge, you have to do it in terms of some other variable. In this case, the variable is the political success or actions of the Iraqis, the Iraqi parliament. On that measurement, it hasn’t been much of a success. If you send 10,000 more troops into Baghdad, are the criminals going to know to get out? Of course, they are. Permanently? Well, if you keep that level of troop presence, it’s probably permanent. Does that meet any kind of real standard for success? I don’t think so.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.