



BEYOND BOOMERS

Sunday, March 30, 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 30, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: Let's jump in on the discussion among the Stephanopoulos panelists about the state of the Democratic primary, whether there is a rationale for the party to pressure Hillary to end her campaign. In the mix of the chatter, Stephanopoulos commented that there isn't "a real center of gravity" within the Democratic Party. There's no center of gravity that has the power to speak for the party, manage a process and get the party all the way through to the nomination. The party has rules, of course. But without that power center what you have are different camps within the party competing with each other. The party's clearly going through a political transition. So the concern some have is that without a center of gravity, with the disparate elements in a fierce competition, and it being a period of transition, that the party won't be able to come together. Do you think of that as a real concern?

Newman: No. The Democratic Party is in the midst of a generational fight. That's a vastly better situation than in the Republican Party – where there is no generational fight by and large, because the generation which forms their base is somewhere in the 19th century. The Democrats' situation, I think, reflects more closely what's going on in this country as a whole. In recent times, I don't mean in years, but in decades, indeed half-centuries, that's been generally true. Are the Democrats going to be able to pull that generational divide together into one unified campaign in November? I suspect so. Parents and kids often don't like each other very much. But they still get together for Thanksgiving.

Salit: On the Stephanopoulos panel Donna Brazile says 'Look, here's what happened here. The Clintons expected that they were going to have the nomination locked up on February 5th. And they were wrong. They misjudged the extent of the Obama surge. They misjudged the extent to which the Obama strategy going for delegates in the "red states," in the caucus states was going to succeed. So after February 5th, they found themselves in the position of having to play catch-up. They were out of money. Their organizational strategy hadn't worked and they weren't prepared for that moment. So, they've basically been playing catch-up ever since. And you can argue that they've done OK with that. They won Texas. They won Ohio. But there is no issue of whether she's being treated fairly or not. She's not being driven out of the primary by the party or by anybody else. The extent to which she's having to muscle her way through is a function of what her campaign did, not what the party did.' And so Brazile's point is we should get over the notion, as the Clinton campaign seems to be suggesting, that somehow it's the party and the process that the party's using that's responsible for Clinton being in this position. No, it's a function of what the Clintons did and what the

voters did. Brazile says that's where we are and we should keep going. Do you buy in on Brazile's non-hysterical, in some ways almost "non-politicized" description of where things are at?

Newman: Yes. And, I would add to the list of things that the Clinton people thought wouldn't happen was that she could win as much as she has won and not have her "favorable" ratings go up at all. Her unpopularity was deep going in and it still is.

Salit: So, back to this being a generational contest, a New Generation vs. the Old Guard in the Democratic Party. On *The Chris Matthews Show* there was a discussion about the two coalitions that the candidates represent. Matthews says what we're seeing in American politics today is a "new alliance" that's fueling the Obama candidacy which is basically black voters and educated white voters meaning, college graduates. And, he says, the Clinton coalition is blue collar working class, women and to some extent, Latino voters. Then he commented that the Obama coalition is an anomaly, because the Democratic Party has traditionally been the party of the working class, and the implication here is that if the Obama candidacy succeeds and if he becomes the party's nominee, that represents a change because the working class base of the party supported Hillary.

Newman: The real deal, it seems to me, is that the working class has changed dramatically, post World-War II. These are broad generalizations and obviously subject to adjustment, but by and large, some significant portion of the working class, following World War II, sent their kids to college.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: This is not only true of the white working class, it's also true of the black working class. They sent their kids to college. If you examine the context in which some of these things are said about the class divide, they talk about the "college graduates" as if these are all kids who went to Harvard. They didn't go to Harvard. They went to state universities and state colleges by the millions. That was where some portion of the working class sent their kids. And their kids, in turn, tend to go on to college too, even to better colleges. And they got even more educated.

Salit: So, your point is that the college-educated voter didn't land on the planet from Mars. They have a history, they came from somewhere, and largely from the working class.

Newman: Yes. Now, it's also true that some portion of the working class went a different route. They decided to trust in Ford, Chrysler, and so forth – to trust in the unions, to trust in the Democratic Party, that they could keep increasing their living standards. This was not a bad idea, but it just didn't work out that way over the long haul. It stopped happening. The Democratic Party stopped fighting as hard. The automobile companies stopped doing as well. They moved production out of the U.S.

and the unions therefore didn't do as well. That portion of the working class, what you might call the "old" working class, is going with Hillary.

Salit: They've been left behind.

Newman: Yes. They've been left behind. She appeals to them with a lot of her very solid rhetoric. I'm very sympathetic to it because I'm an old guardist in some ways, too. So there's a split in the working class, a critical split. And that's a major part of the generational split. But you can't speak as if the working class is one monolithic class, nor can you speak of the "college graduates" as one monolithic group. They didn't all go up to Cambridge together, that's preposterous. There's a huge shift as to what the working class is in this country, where they've gone and what they do.

Salit: So, related to that, is a question that Matthews framed. The backdrop is that there are three candidates in the presidential race right now. Obviously, there will be a Democratic nominee at some point. But right now there's John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The Obama candidacy represents the emergence of a new generation, a new American political voice. Its concern – and Obama articulates this very explicitly – is *It's time to get past the old battles of the 60s, to get past the political categories and allegiances defined by the baby boomer generation*. So, says Matthews, if that's what the American people want, can Hillary Clinton, a boomer, or McCain a pre-boomer...

Newman: Perhaps he's sort of a "bummer"...

Salit: ...can they take the country beyond those divisions, given who they are and what they represent?

Newman: No, would be my answer.

Salit: And why not? Is it just because of their age?

Newman: They think of politics in terms of constituencies – not that McCain and Hillary have the same opinion about identity politics and the categories that breeds – but they think in terms of that model of politics. It's interest group politics and that's not working any longer. The American people, indeed virtually all of the American people, are saying that kind of politic which has dominated Washington DC for a very long time is simply producing stalemate.

Salit: And everyone agrees, stalemate is the problem.

Newman: Now, McCain and Clinton are saying, we can undo the stalemate because we'll go across the aisle. But everyone says we can reduce stalemate by going across the aisle.

Salit: Yes, that's exactly what they're saying.

Newman: Obama is saying that we have to have a new spirit, a new consensus, a new attitude toward what we're trying to accomplish. I don't know exactly what he means by that, people vary on what they think it is and indeed, I have my own opinion. If you carefully examine what Obama is saying, the direction he points to is to independent and radical political reform. The only way you get those people to join together across the aisle is if you get rid of the aisle. That's the real deal. Interestingly, McCain and Clinton – in different ways – have brought people across the aisle by the force of their personality. That's the irony. In some ways, they're the people who are doing personality politics. Obama isn't. Even though he has the much stronger personality.

Salit: What you're saying makes me think of the exchange between Stephanopoulos and Senator Joe Lieberman, a former Democrat who's now in the Senate as an independent, who has endorsed McCain. His main argument for McCain, beside the position that they share on the war in Iraq, is that McCain is someone who puts the national interest above partisan interest. OK. I'll buy that. I mean, I'll buy that as an ideal or as a paradigm of what it is that America needs, what it is that we're searching for. But that still leaves open the question of how you define what the national interest is and how the American people are involved in defining it. From Lieberman's point of view, that's not open for debate. But, it seems to me that that's the very issue that Obama is raising and that Obama supporters are raising, namely how do we define the national interest.

Newman: Yes and the vote will be a step in deciding that. But, let me add that McCain is not as squeaky clean as Lieberman makes out. He swings back and forth on being for the national interest or being just a party player.

Salit: Alright, another debate is the issue of how to conduct the end game of the Democratic primary. Here, I'm talking about the Ed Rendell-John Kerry conversation. So Kerry says, 'It's OK for Hillary to stay in the race, no reason she shouldn't stay in the race. We've got ten more primaries coming up, that's fine, but the target has to be McCain, not each other, and that's how the campaign has to be conducted.'

Newman: I fell asleep when he was saying that.

Salit: OK, Fred. I guess that answers my first question. Then Rendell says 'Let's not get into all of that stuff, whether it's Rev. Wright or Bosnia. Let's stick to the real issues.'

Newman: What's the real issue? There's the war, there's the economy, there's healthcare. But, how much more can they say about those things?

Salit: OK. Next up is a debate on the proper approach to the economic crisis. Robert Reich, Paul Krugman and George Will batted this around. I gather Krugman is a Hillary supporter, Reich is an Obama supporter and Will is, by default, a McCain supporter. What is there to say about this?

Newman: About that debate?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Other than that it goes back to 1776?

Salit: OK. So, George Will, representing the conservative point of view in this discussion, calls the JPMorgan/Bear Stearns/Federal Reserve bailout “Wall Street Socialism.” And he’s concerned about it, number one, because it’s socialistic, but number two, because it could set a precedent for this kind of thing occurring more frequently.

Newman: Basically, there are two sides in this debate. One position is “free market capitalism will take care of it.” The other position is “what do you do when it doesn’t.”

Salit: I guess that’s what they’re trying to figure out.

Newman: That’s the endless American debate.

Salit: Yes. The 40th anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination is this week. Matthews showed film of King’s speech in Memphis the night before he was killed.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: What were your thoughts and emotions watching the film?

Newman: Dr. King was a great man. One of the great tragedies, obviously, was losing him and I think the country is now trying to forge its way forward beyond the limitations of what that era was about. I don’t think Obama is the answer, but I think he’s leading things in the right direction at this stage of our process.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.