



The "Good, Good, Good," the "Bad, Bad, Bad" and Jimmy Carter

Sunday, April 13, 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, April 13, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: Let's jump in on the discussion about Obama's "elitism." The Clinton campaign has been coming after him for remarks he made at a fundraiser in San Francisco in which he talked about ways white working class Americans are bitter about having been left behind politically and economically by a series of administrations, Republican and Democrat, and then take refuge in religion, in guns, and anti-immigrant attitudes. Do you think that's an elitist remark?

Newman: The issue is not whether it's an elitist remark, it's whether it can be construed as an elitist remark. The answer to that is yes. Now, is it an elitist remark? It depends how you look at it. It could be on par with a working class mother saying to her kid, *Oh, when you don't like what I tell you, you run to your father.* That's similar to the logic of it. One way of looking at Obama's remarks is that he's saying that when people don't get what they want from government, they turn to higher powers. Two of the higher powers in this world are God and guns. I don't think it's just a working class thing. I think that people in general do things like that. So, I think it has a degree of accuracy. Can it be heard, in the political context in which it's uttered, as elitist? Yes.

Salit: OK. Among the Stephanopoulos panelists one attitude was, 'OK, here comes this thing again. We know what this thing is. This thing is East Coast, West Coast liberal elitism and that's been the Achilles' heel of the Democratic Party.'

Newman: But the East Coast, West Coast, liberal states like New York and California went to Clinton, not to Obama.

Salit: True.

Newman: So there are some mixes in those attitudes that are somewhat difficult to analyze.

Salit: Did you have any reaction to Mark Halperin's remark that the reason this is dangerous for Obama, as opposed to just an error, is that Hillary Clinton really believes this one? He said whereas her campaign has given her things to go up against Obama with that didn't work, the reason they didn't really take is that she didn't really buy in on them. But this one she really buys in on.

Newman: Why would anyone believe that?

Salit: That's what I was going to say. What I would say about it is not that she "really believes it," but that she's been on the receiving end of this experience herself, so she knows something about how to work it. In the 1992 presidential campaign she said 'I'm not just some little woman who stays home baking cookies' and she was skewered for being a liberal elitist. And so she learned something about how to play "the base card" – meaning, of course, appealing to the Democrats' "blue collar" base.

Newman: I don't want to slide into psychoanalyzing this. Hillary comes from her background. Obama comes from his background. People come from their various backgrounds. I'm not completely convinced that you will get a uniform reaction to these remarks from church-going, white working class people who go hunting. I can see lots of those Americans saying, *You're damn right we're bitter. And we're going to go out gunning. And the women will go to church while we're doing that.* I don't really know how the remark plays to the people who Hillary has now appointed herself the defender of. So, she wants to get some mileage out of it. This gives her the freedom to get into personalistic accusations about Obama and his past. And that's what's so sick about politics. It's a very dangerous business to put yourself out as a spokesperson for millions of Americans who hold very complex and varied views on values, on religion and on guns. There's not much to say about Obama's remarks, but that the opposition wants to use it for Hillary's campaign, of course. That's what they're doing. Fine, that's what they'll do. It seems to me that the danger, as some people were suggesting on the talk shows, is that you can't get any mileage because the attacks are empty. They have no content. So we'll see what happens.

Salit: Jimmy Carter was on George Stephanopoulos.

Newman: I like Jimmy.

Salit: I like Jimmy, too. He's a better private citizen than he was a president. But that probably says something more about the presidency than about him. He's currently an election monitor for the elections in Nepal. Then he's going to the Middle East. The big controversy about his trip to the Middle East is that he's planning meetings with leaders of Hamas. George Stephanopoulos, being a "good tough reporter" says 'How could you consider meeting with Hamas, given who they are?' Then Carter, completely non-hysterical, says 'Well, actually, I've been meeting with Hamas for years.'

Newman: And so have a lot of other people.

Salit: Exactly. So, Carter says 'I've been meeting with Hamas for ten years. I was there when the PLO elections happened. And I was there in 2006, when they won the election in Gaza.' So much for the "we're drawing a line in the sand" argument. Carter says, very matter of factly, 'This is a force that's been in the mix for a long time. We've been talking to them. We've been meeting with them. And I'm going to that part of the world and I'm going to talk to them again.' Next Stephanopoulos says 'Well, isn't it reasonable to require that Hamas renounce violence and recognize Israel as a precondition for doing the meeting?' And Carter says, 'You can't always get prerequisites from people before

you meet with them. That's what the meeting is about. So if you're saying, shouldn't you get them to agree with this, well, that's why I'd be meeting with them.'

Newman: If this outfit over here doesn't recognize this other outfit, and if the other outfit essentially doesn't recognize the former outfit, and what you're trying to do is get them to agree on something, you're going to have to meet with both of them, despite the fact that they don't recognize each other. Again, it's kind of like the Obama/Clinton thing. The positioning is empty because it's all played out on the level of rhetoric. You can talk about how you can't meet with this one or that one. But, on the ground, you have to meet. Why? Because they're both there. Because they both exist. Because they are on the ground. Because Hamas is there and they won an election. Are they bad guys? They're very bad guys. Let's concede, for the sake of argument, they're bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, guys. And let's concede that the Israelis are good, good, good, good, good, good, good guys. But if what we're trying to do is work out some kind of truce for the two of them to go forward, you have to meet with both of them.

Salit: The way the U.S. tries to get around that is by bringing in the third party, namely Abbas and Fatah. They say, 'Well, Abbas is the president. We'll meet with him. He should negotiate with the Israelis and they should come up with a plan and...'

Newman: But you're looking for an agreement between Hamas and the Israelis. How is an Abbas/Israeli meeting going to accomplish that?

Salit: It doesn't unless Hamas has agreed to accept Abbas as its representative in the negotiations. Which, presumably, is one of the things Carter is going to speak with them about.

Newman: The U.S. position is 'We'll work it out with Abbas and Fatah and we'll let them take care of Hamas.' But they can't take care of Hamas, that's the point. They lost to Hamas. So, it's a fantasy.

Salit: Were you at all surprised by the polling statistic that Carter cited that 64% of Israelis feel there should be direct negotiations with Hamas?

Newman: I don't think that much of polls. But I'm not surprised by it. I think the Israeli people are more attuned to what exists on the ground than the political game that's played up here in the stratosphere. George Will says of Carter, 'The vanity of thinking that his voice could persuade Hamas to change.' Does George Will even consider the vanity of his own pronouncements? And, what if Carter comes back with a signed note from the Hamas leadership which says *All right, we spoke to Jimmy. He changed our mind.* And he gives it to the president and Condoleezza Rice. Do they tear it up and say *We don't want to have it done that way.* Things happen in different kinds of ways. Different people influence different people and so on.

Salit: Stephanopoulos asked Carter what the U.S. position should be on the Olympics in Beijing. Stephanopoulos says, 'When you were president, you had the U.S. boycott the Olympics in Moscow in 1980 in protest of Soviet aggression against Afghanistan.'

What's your position about what we should do relative to China?' Carter says, 'We should go to the Olympics in China. These are two completely different situations. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. They had killed thousands and thousands of people. They were trying to expand their influence in that part of the world. There were sovereignty violations and human rights violations. The Chinese situation is very different.'

Newman: The human rights issues are important because they affect human beings. But making an issue over who attends the Olympics is silly. One way or the other, it's silly. The U.S. should continue to negotiate on the hard issues of human rights abuses. You can't have the relationship that the U.S. currently has with China, you can't have that intimate a relationship and then say, *Well, if there are human rights abuses, we'll take it out on the International and U.S. Olympic committees.* If we want to up the ante for China, the U.S. should sacrifice something. Obviously, there are contradictions in this situation, or whatever we want to call them here, and they'll just have to work those out. Are the human rights conditions bad in China? Yes. Could you make out that, in some ways, they're improving at a very slow rate? People do. What's the answer? These things have got to be resolved and looked at case by case. In general, however, I don't think the Olympics should be played with in that way.

Salit: Finally, to *The Chris Matthews Show* where Matthews asked the Matthews Meter how independents will break in the November election. In an Obama-McCain match up, the panel, by a vote of 10 to 2, says independents will break for Obama. In a McCain-Hillary match up, the panel voted 11 to 1 that independents will break for McCain.

Newman: I guess the conclusion is that independents don't trust or like or care for Hillary.

Salit: That's it. As somebody pointed out, she's the biggest party person of the three of them. She's certainly perceived that way by the independents.

Newman: Surely, that's true.

Salit: Thank you, Fred.