



PIRATES, POLICY AND A POOCH

Sunday, April 19, 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, April 19, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "The Chris Matthews Show," a Charlie Rose interview and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Newman: What do I know? To me, the pirates are in Pittsburgh. That's all I know about pirates. I don't know about pirates on the Horn of Africa.

Salit: The main thing is that what we did in the Somalia situation was an operation, not a policy. It was a successful operation because it stopped the pirates and got the captain back home to Vermont.

Newman: And the bad guys got shot.

Salit: Yes. The Navy Seal guys did the job. The larger question in the discussion on *Charlie Rose* was about the proliferation of failed states in that part of the world, on the Indian Ocean and in Africa. Obviously, everybody's making the connection between piracy and failed states. Piracy is organized crime at sea. It's not ideological. It's business. An illegal business, but it's a business. The analysts point to the potential for these failed states being platforms for transnational terrorists, which is certainly a threat. But how the world and how America is going to deal with the extreme poverty and destabilization in many parts of Africa is one of the harder problems that Obama has to tackle.

Newman: To me – and I've been talking about this since 9/11 – the underlying issue is whether these events are criminal acts or acts of war. This was a criminal act, part of a criminal enterprise.

Salit: More broadly on the international front, Obama is in Trinidad and Tobago for the Organization of American States summit. A number of things are happening there. He's putting forward a different statement and a new vision for U.S. relations with Latin America. He's reaching out to countries that we have had very bad relations with, like Venezuela, for example. He shook hands with Hugo Chavez.

Newman: And said, "How's the oil business?"

Salit: Right. "Can you spare a few billion barrels for us?" And then, there is the issue of Cuba and the potential for normalizing relations.

Newman: They will do it.

Salit: How does Obama look at that, do you think? What does the U.S. get out of doing it at this point? Is it as simple as that the old policy was preposterous?

Newman: That's a big factor. But it's also about enhancing U.S. economic strength in the region.

Salit: But Cuba is a small country with a small population. It's not like doing business with China, which has a billion consumers. It's about more than just opening up the market, isn't it?

Newman: Yes. It's about changing the image of the U.S. in the entire region. That has broad economic ramifications for us. Look, the history of U.S. intervention and imperialism in Latin America is still there. It's been a big part of the Latin American experience, from the Monroe Doctrine on. Japan is still the country that bombed Pearl Harbor in the eyes of Americans, even though we are now the closest of allies with Japan. Germany is still the birthplace of the Nazis. Latin America has had a particular view of Washington, DC. And with good reason.

Salit: Yes. And, there is a lot of excitement about Obama and the change he represents.

Newman: When you look at the picture on the front page of the *Times* where Chavez and Obama are shaking hands, it seems to me that the first thing you see is that two people of color are shaking hands.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And that overwhelms any of the substantive issues that they may or may not discuss in Trinidad. It's a very big change for them. And for us. That's a big cultural, human, psychological factor.

Salit: I had a similar thought when I looked at the photograph.

Newman: One's a communist. One's part socialist, part capitalist. But they're both people of color. One has enough oil. One has too little oil. But that's not the issue.

Salit: You say it is a big change in human terms, in psychological terms. Does that translate, in the short term, into new policies?

Newman: Well, it already has. These are new policies. Can they immediately go to ending the blockade? No, for a variety of complex reasons. But they will. The standoff with Cuba is over.

Salit: Is there a winner?

Newman: Not really. Except that the Cubans outlasted America's 45-year plan to overthrow or destabilize their government. They'll get back into the Organization of American States. Latin America is on a course towards having a growing number of socialist-style states. This has not played out as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara envisioned it. But it is playing out nonetheless. Does that threaten Washington? No. I don't think it ever did. And it doesn't now.

Salit: We talked a number of months back, before Obama was elected, about the changing international economic and political environment. The "World Without the West" paradigm, where developing economies, including in Latin America, together with China and India, relate to each other without the West as the intermediary.

Newman: And it could be added, in cultural terms, without the white West as the intermediary.

Salit: So there are a new set of terms with a world that is becoming more independent of America.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: That's a big change.

Newman: Cultural changes are so much bigger than other kinds of changes, but that's not always easy to see.

Salit: As we listened to the discussion on *Charlie Rose* about Somalia and about the failed states in Africa, it reminded me of the many decades during which the whole international paradigm was organized by the superpower conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Newman: That's how the superpowers organized it.

Salit: There was so much destruction that occurred in the underdeveloped world as a result of that.

Newman: I don't think that's an altogether useful way of talking about it. I don't think it ever was. The millions of people starving to death in central and southern Africa, living in squalor...do you think it was really a major part of their consciousness as to whether or not they were in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union or the United States?

Salit: No.

Newman: Do you think it made any difference in their lives?

Salit: No, not at all.

Newman: Those are political terms that the Western world has imposed. I don't know how much value they had, even then, and I'm even less sure they have any value now. But, what you're saying is accurate, given that language. But, at the level of human life, of psychology, of culture, of the things that make a difference in the daily lives of poor people and not-so-poor people the world over, it didn't make a difference.

Salit: When you say cultural changes are so much bigger than other kinds of changes...

Newman: In terms of the impact on the daily lives of real human beings.

Salit: They're harder to see? They're harder to characterize? They're harder to...what?

Newman: It's not that they're harder. It's that these other categories, like "the conflict of superpowers" which I think are abstract and imposed, are easier to speak of. Because they're made to be spoken of. They're not made to be lived; they're made to be spoken of. You come to use that language and think that it has a kind of august meaning. Actual life is not like that. It's not fundamentally descriptive. It's fundamentally lived. It's fundamentally used. It's kind of nice to see that changing.

Something else I was struck by today in looking at the coverage of the Latin American summit. It's a cultural phenomenon, a minor cultural phenomenon, that I would call "the silliness of white people."

Salit: Yes?

Newman: On PBS, we saw the experts, in some ways the most sensitive white people, reduced to giggles when reviewing all of what Obama did this week. It's unbearable, really. They're talking about how many things are on the table for Obama. Well, yes. There are many things that are on the table for Obama. There's a reason for that. Because you've had eight years of George Bush, who was an indecent, outrageous, insensitive disaster. And all that's got to be changed. But given the bureaucracy, you can't just have an up or down vote on the ex-president and his administration. It would be nice if you could, and all those things would just go away. But you can't do it that way. The white people giggle over all these things, "my God – so much to deal with – ha, ha." And "Obama is the president, ha, ha." It's an embarrassment to be white sometimes, a cultural phenomenon of some interest.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: The Obama election was not silly. That's the nicest thing about it. It was real. The experience on Election Day, when he won, was the country, for a brief moment, not being silly. This is serious business. We took it seriously and we went out and we voted in huge numbers for him. And now we have a smart, progressive, black president of the United States of America. Wow. And I think the rest of the world immediately started taking us more seriously. And that's good. I don't know if it will all work out. History is history, after all. It doesn't follow a script.

Salit: Did you see the new Obama dog?

Newman: Yes, I have seen the new Obama dog. What kind of a dog is it?

Salit: A Portuguese water dog.

Newman: A Portuguese water dog.

Salit: Yes. Named Bo.

Newman: Named Bo.

Salit: Bo Obama.

Newman: And Bo's writing an exposé for the *Washington Post*, I've heard.

Salit: Really?

Newman: That's what I've heard. It's the first "tell all" story coming out of the new White House. Bo is going to spill the beans on what it's like to be the official dog.

Salit: We'll have to follow that. Thanks, Fred.