



THE ALMOST WINNERS

Sunday, May 11, 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, May 11, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: Today's topics included the continuing dynamics in the Democratic primary while acknowledging that the outcome is pretty clear. Barack Obama will be the nominee but there are questions about how Hillary stage manages her end game. The discussion is also starting to turn, however slowly, towards issues raised by a general election contest between Obama, presumably, and John McCain. In that vein, George Stephanopoulos had Carly Fiorina on as a guest. She's a former CEO of Hewlett Packard, a major figure in the business community and a McCain supporter. Her talking points are to go up against the idea that a McCain presidency is a third term of George Bush. Now, that's a difficult thing to navigate. Certainly Bush and McCain have had their differences over the conduct of the Iraq war. But McCain is also a strong supporter of the war and the American military presence in Iraq. And presumably that's how the American people define whether he's close to Bush or not. So, Fiorina says things like 'Don't think that John McCain is going to be the third term of George Bush. That's not the story at all.' And she focuses on McCain's dislike of Rumsfeld. She explains, 'You know, John McCain spent four years saying that Donald Rumsfeld was the worst Secretary of Defense that the United States of America has ever had.' So, McCain wants to be for the war but not for Bush's war. Can he do that? Do you think that's a plausible case?

Newman: Well, it seems to have a certain plausibility to the American people who have had a positive response to the short term success of the surge, so-called. That, after all, was Bush's effort to redefine Bush's war. There's some evidence that it worked. So, can McCain try that? Yes. And he probably has a better chance of succeeding with it than Bush did, who was the least likely to succeed. That said, I think the American people are still antiwar and are opposed to us having gone into Iraq in the first place.

Salit: Yes, all the polls show that.

Newman: And perhaps Americans are opposed, in general, to going to war in that area of the world. But, the American people still want to win.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They don't want to suffer a defeat in Iraq.

Salit: True. So, can McCain appeal to that?

Newman: McCain is not a bad person to play off of that. He's a war hero. And so when he says, 'It's clear now we can win it,' that has appeal.

Salit: And when people say how long will it take?

Newman: He says, *That's not the issue. We can win it. I'm a war hero. I know what it is to sacrifice for our country.* I don't know if he can win the presidency with that. But he'll get votes with it.

Salit: On *The Chris Matthews Show* the talk was about Hillary. Matthews asked his panel what Hillary's biggest mistake was. Then he answered it himself. He said her biggest mistake was that she voted for the Iraq war and that she never was able to separate herself or never was willing to separate herself from that position and that simply was not where the Democratic base was at. Would you go with Matthews on that?

Newman: Obviously, that's been a problem for her. But I would be slightly more reckless in my answer.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I'd say that her biggest mistake is Bill.

Salit: Bill.

Newman: I think she should have left him out of the campaign. I think he's much more of a liability than an asset. Everybody knows that she is married to Bill Clinton so whatever upside she derives from that is already there. He could have played a quiet role writing notes to old contacts. But, I don't think he should have been running it publicly as he did. I think it was a mistake. I think it hurt Hillary.

Salit: That's interesting. What's the message that got conveyed by him being out there?

Newman: That it's a co-presidency. And, I don't think that helped her. I know he's very popular among Democrats. But that would carry over without him playing so public a role.

Salit: Katty Kay said Clinton's biggest mistake was that she ran a general election campaign before she had won the primary which is another way of saying she ran to the center. This is not unconnected to her position on the war. What would your comment be on Kay's observation?

Newman: It's certainly a plausible observation. But given that she's run primarily against Obama, even in the primary campaign she had little choice but to run close to the center, since he grabbed the left. The center was the spot she had to run her campaign from.

Salit: Since you brought up Bill's negative role in Hillary's campaign, can I ask you to imagine what they are saying to each other in private these days? If you were writing a vignette for a new theatre piece this week and the scene is that they are sitting in the living room together in Chappaqua, what are they saying to each other?

Newman: They're probably saying something like *How are we going to exit the primary while maximizing our chances for the future?*

Salit: And, maximize our chances for the future means what? A 2012 presidency if McCain wins and they get a second shot in four years? Some other career tracks that were being tossed about today, like Senate Majority leader?

Newman: It means maintaining their level of influence in the party as the Almost Winners. You could make a case that their assessment is *Well, we didn't win and we have to recognize this fact. But, at best, Obama can claim something resembling co-control of the party. He can't claim total control. So, that's a very significant role we have. We're the co-leaders of the Democratic Party.*

Salit: The party in power, presumably. No small thing.

Newman: So, where do they go from here? Instead of being total leaders of the party, they're co-leaders and they're planning the future from that vantage point.

Salit: Here's something I was struck by in watching the panel on Stephanopoulos. You have this whole election season that's gone on where it's all about the unexpected, all about great political passion, all about millions of Americans participating in new ways, all about the Obama/Clinton contest, the first African American, the first woman, and McCain, the maverick. All this unusual stuff. But the discussion that these folks were having today was mundane politics as usual. They're chatting about who should be the vice presidential candidate for both tickets in the most ho-hum way... 'Well, this one brings Pennsylvania, this one brings Hispanics, this one does this.' It was as if none of these upheavals had happened, none of this great passion had happened. And now these are the kinds of practical things that you have to address as the world is coming to its senses.

Newman: Well, at the risk of sounding like a flag-waving American, no one cast a single vote for any of those four people.

Salit: On the panel?

Newman: On the panel. They have zero votes. All of them have a total of zero.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, they're busy re-establishing their bonafides as observers. But they didn't put anything on the line.

Salit: No.

Newman: Who put things on the line are Hillary and Barack and McCain and the other candidates who have since exited the race. They put something on the line.

Salit: They did.

Newman: The pundits can continue to be dispassionate because they're always dispassionate. And perhaps that's the best way for them to be. You can make a case for that. But their lack of recognition for what the candidates and the voters have just gone through, who have had huge and passionate involvement in this election cycle, is pretty distasteful. I think what you're picking up on is that. They're trying to re-establish their own prominence. It was odd that Bill Richardson's name didn't come up until the very end of the discussion about VPs, kind of as an afterthought.

Salit: I was struck by that too. We started to hear discussion today about the competition for independents and for Latinos in the general election. Here are some things that struck me in what was said. Going back to the discussion on Chris Matthews when he asked 'What was Hillary's biggest mistake,' and Katty Kay made the point about Hillary running a general election campaign before the primary was over, she buttressed this point by saying Hillary was going for all those independents before it was time – as in general election time – to do that. Number one, that skips over the fact that so many independents did participate in the primary and that they participated largely by choosing to vote in the Democratic primary and within that, by choosing to vote for Obama. So one could argue that it was Hillary's failure to attract independents in the primary that cost her the nomination, not her reaching out to them. Second, the premise that Kay was operating off of is that there is a static and homogenous profile for independents, and they're at the center, perhaps even center-right. That's interesting because Kay has a set of assumptions about who independents are, what their political sentiments are. We know, for example, that independents have changed their position over the last four or five years on the Iraq war, on the Bush administration's handling of the war. They started out very strongly in support of the war and moved in a relatively short period of time to oppose the war.

Another aspect of this was the discussion about how Obama and McCain are going to compete for independents. Obama's going to look to chip away at McCain's persona as a maverick because that does appeal to independents. Then of course, there was the political reform issue. This wasn't mentioned explicitly on the talk shows today, but some of the reporting now – notably Adam Nagourney in *The New York Times* – identifies independents as being very concerned with the need for political reform and the negative effects of partisanship. Both McCain and Obama will try to present themselves as having the bonafides on this front.

Newman: It's going to be an interesting election for independents, if as it now looks, it's Obama and McCain. Because, as you say, they both have significant independent appeal. So, with independents identifiable as a swing vote with a more defined agenda – political reform – they're going to be addressed very strongly by both candidates. And

the independents will be watching and listening. Those of us who are independents have to look at the results and try to refine our understanding of the independent movement and the independent voter. We'll have to look carefully at what independents say in various states and various parts of the country and develop strategies and responses accordingly. These next months will be very informative. I look forward to it.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.