



SURPRISES AND CLUTCH PLAYING

Sunday, June 14, 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, June 14, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "The Chris Matthews Show," and several Charlie Rose interviews.

Salit: Today we're going to touch on health care, foreign policy, and capitalism. A few minor subjects! Let's start with health care. The Obama administration is starting to roll out its health care plan and, by that, I don't just mean the contents of a proposal, but a political map of how the process might go. Here is a brief description. There will be a bill in the House that will be what some are calling "the most progressive" – meaning that it will have the elements of a government-sponsored health care option. The Senate is going to come up with another package that will be less "progressive." The White House has gotten more involved in the process of drafting the plan. And, President Obama has given a green light to grassroots organizing around health care reform by the organization he created off of his campaign, Organizing for America. As we've mentioned before, it is housed in the Democratic National Committee building in Washington, but its organizers contend that it is an independent organization. This is the first time that Obama has mobilized this base in conjunction with a national policy issue, and it just held thousands of meetings around the country where people came together to talk about health care and the kinds of things they'd like to see reformed. Let me start with a basic question. Is this something different from other reform attempts?

Newman: I don't see anything different.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Do you see something different?

Salit: I'm not sure. I'm not sure whether this organized grassroots participation through Organizing for America changes the environment or the chemistry.

Newman: I don't think so. I think it was Thomas Mann, of the Brookings Institution, a right-wing think tank, who said that the grassroots campaign will not impact. I think his view is essentially correct.

Salit: So, it's just another round on a long term issue that the country's been dealing with, not dealing with, trying to deal with, failing to deal with, whatever.

Newman: Right, in the midst of a crisis which is, at least a depression, and probably worse.

Salit: That's important because the negative impact of not solving this problem, or not moving things forward, is more acute than it's been in the past.

Newman: Obama's general plan – this is true for health care as well as everything else that he's doing – is to stimulate the economy by spending a lot of money. And the health plan debate comes down, in my opinion, to the same thing. If more spending is what's needed to jump start the economy, then these expanded programs will be good things. If he's wrong, they probably won't be. They'll just contribute to a larger and larger debt. That's what the Republicans, not altogether unreasonably, are trying to turn the health care debate into. Obama has made his perspective plain. He's going to keep throwing more and more money at the problem and hope that it does the job. I guess what I'm saying is that it's not really a health care debate at all. They call it a health care debate, but these discussions keep reducing – almost immediately – to a debate about American capitalism. Do you solve the problems of capitalism by having the government become the financial backer of last resort or do you let the markets take their course? Whatever path is chosen, it's a risky business.

Salit: What would a real health care debate look like? It's been so long since we've had one that I don't even know if I would recognize it.

Newman: It would involve looking at the whole health care system from the vantage point of trying to make people healthier. That's what a health care debate would look like.

Salit: I imagine that some of the more committed health care advocates would say that they agree with what you are saying, but that the issue of how you pay for everything is so overriding that you can't really have that debate in a meaningful way.

Newman: I wouldn't disagree with that. But "overriding" doesn't mean the same thing it meant in 1993. "Overriding" now has to be located in the context of national and, indeed, international economic crisis.

Salit: Since we're talking about the failures of capitalism, I'd like to ask your thoughts about Charlie Rose's interview with Richard Posner, who wrote the newly published book "The Failure of Capitalism."

Newman: I think the title is misleading to the public. Because Posner made plain in the first several minutes of the interview that it's not about the failure of capitalism at all. According to Posner, capitalism can't fail because all the alternatives have already failed. So, the story is not about the failure of capitalism. It's about the efforts of capitalism to rehabilitate itself in this current situation. And, I would add, it's one of the few author interviews that I've seen Charlie Rose do that made me want to skip reading the book entirely.

Salit: I'm definitely in that camp. Two things struck me in the interview, which I found confusing and alarming. Posner identifies two failures. The first is the failure to

anticipate the depression, and he calls it a “depression.” He says, “I know that the politicians don’t want to call it a depression, but it is a depression. I’m going to call it a depression.”

Newman: I think it’s worse than a depression. But since you raise his anticipation critique, I have to say that his comment that we should have been better at anticipating these surprises is somewhat ridiculous. That’s what a surprise is. You don’t anticipate them.

Salit: Mine is a slightly different point. Posner argued that we have a history of not seeing warning signs, for example, as with Pearl Harbor, which he called a surprise attack. I found this to be bizarre because, in the case of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese decided to attack us. Now, we either did or didn’t see warning signs on that. But that’s one world power, Japan, deciding to attack another world power, the United States, and we were surprised. The economic crisis is not somebody or some bodies sitting in a room deciding to attack the United States. It seemed such a bizarre comparison.

Newman: In a way, I agree with your underlying point, although I actually would tend to argue that the other way.

Salit: Meaning?

Newman: There were consistent and ongoing signs that Japan was angry and antagonistic towards us and one of the things that happens when nations are angry is that they start wars. That’s what they did. The surprise was the target and the ferocity with which they went to war against us, but it wasn’t as if it came out of nowhere. It wasn’t as if we were best friends with Japan. They were fighting for hegemony in the Pacific. We were the primary opposition. If there was any element of surprise it’s how well prepared they were and how ill-prepared the United States was.

But in this economic disaster that we’re in right now, endless high level people in finance and in government have been saying “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble.” Well, one of the things that every child knows about bubbles is that they burst. Was that a surprise? No. Maybe in the levels of how much they were able to steal, though I’m never surprised by any amount of money that capitalists are able to steal.

Salit: Posner says that the other failure is the failure of the economics profession to realize the limits of their own knowledge. Would you care to comment?

Newman: One could discuss that as a failure of human beings.

Salit: Yes. It did seem funny to ascribe it to the economics profession. OK, moving on. Chris Matthews has an endless fascination, one might call it an obsession, with the nature of the Clinton/Obama relationship.

Newman: Actually, it’s an obsession which we independents share to some degree, because the relationship between Obama and Clinton is about more than the

relationship between two people. It's also about Obama's relationship to the Democratic Party. Given that, you'd think Matthews and others would go deeper into it. For example, let's just take the most superficial level, to keep this very simple and clear. If you put your so-called independent operation in the building that houses the Democratic National Committee, people are going to be suspicious.

Salit: As to how independent it is.

Newman: Yes, this is a man – namely President Obama – who raises money the same way that most people sneeze. But he can't raise enough money to have a separate place for that operation in Washington? What can I tell you? I consider myself a supporter of Obama and will give him as much rope as he needs. The reality of how independent of the Democratic Party he truly is, is not going to be determined in this phase. He needs to be close to everybody right now to get all this stuff passed. The test will be the next time some major elections come up, major primaries for example. What should he do now? Not align with the Democratic Party to pass this huge package that he's trying to pass? Of course he has to keep those things together for this moment in the process of governing. Chris' obsession, as you correctly call it, stops short. There's no probing here. There's just the obsession. So he shows a lot of video of Hillary saying what she's supposed to say and he says, 'I would have thought there was going to be a public fight.' Why would you have thought that? And why would we even believe that you actually thought that? That's preposterous.

Salit: On to our Talk/Talk sports question of the week.

Newman: Let's get down to serious business.

Salit: Again, from Mary Fridley. She says: 'I was watching a sports talk show recently and they were talking about clutch players.'

Newman: Clutch players.

Salit: For example, Mary says, 'Derek Jeter is viewed as a clutch player while Alex Rodriguez is not. What do you think it takes for a player to be "clutch" and why are some clutch and others aren't?'

Newman: To say the obvious, clutch playing means performing well in a situation where that moment makes a difference in the game that they happen to be playing. Now, the commonplace statistics in baseball, the ones that you know best: home runs, batting average, rbi, etc. don't, in any way, indicate that. And that's what baseball puts forward as what you should look at. So, you have to at least wonder, if clutch playing is so important, you'd think it would become a standard measure. But I don't think "clutch" is all that important to the game and to the people who play the game. It's definitely important to the people who write about the game. That's who really likes clutch.

Salit: The writers, yes.

Newman: That said, do some players, psychologically speaking, handle situations of certain kinds – namely tough ones, difficult situations, games on the line – better than some other players? I think so, but I don't know that it's measurable. It has to do more with expectations, which are very difficult to measure, relative to performing in the way that the people who made up the expectations would like you to. For example, I think Rodriguez gets nervous sometimes, and, as often as not, that nervousness translates into his not performing at his peak. His overall peak is, in many ways, higher than Derek Jeter's. Jeter doesn't have 560-odd home runs in career. He has about 215. Now, I can see people saying that Rodriguez gets more nervous, and underperforms, compared to Jeter. But there are higher expectations for Rodriguez than for Jeter, certainly as a hitter.

Salit: As a hitter, exactly.

Newman: As a fielder, oy, both of them are a little shaky.

Salit: I suppose you could, and I'm sure somebody has, do some kind of statistical analysis of a big home run hitter like Alex, for example, where you analyze the number of home runs that he hit from the 1st to the 7th inning...

Newman: They have those statistics. They're just not the major statistics that they focus on. That's got to mean something, too.

Salit: Yes, as in, they don't focus on how many home runs you hit when it was the bottom of the 9th and the bases were loaded and you were down by 3.

Newman: They have those stats. They just don't make that much of it. What they mainly look at is how many home runs you hit in a season, how many you hit in a career, what's your batting average, how many rbi's. Those are the major things. That's the triple crown.

Salit: Mary has another question here: She says the talk show hosts were also discussing Kobe Bryant and Lebron James and who was the better team player. Lebron generally comes out ahead in this regard. Mary says 'Though I'd love to hear your views on Kobe vs. Lebron, my general question is: do great players necessarily need to be team players?'

Newman: If you want to get the recognition as a great player, you'd be better off playing on a great team, a team which wins championships. Kobe is a bright guy. So is Lebron. But Kobe is in a position to say, *Lebron has great acclaim. I have four championship rings.*

Salit: You do the math. Thanks, Fred.