



TO OUR READERS: Talk/Talk will take a summer break for the month of July. Back in August. Happy Independence Day and have a great month!

LONG SHOTS

Sunday, June 28, 2009

Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, June 28, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "The Chris Matthews Show," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and several Charlie Rose interviews.

Salit: We watched a series of shows as events continued to unfold in Iran. There are two topics being discussed. One is what is it that's going on in Iran? And the other is how is Obama relating to those events? Some analysts on *The Charlie Rose Show* described the authoritarian regime, the Ahmadinejad/Khamenei regime, as fragile. They see the huge popular outpouring against it, against the vote counting, and against the repressiveness of the regime, and they see fragility. Meanwhile, David Sanger of the *New York Times*, said on *The Charlie Rose Show* that one of the ironies of this situation is that the Obama administration's philosophy is that the Bush team went off the rails when it got into regime change, while they aren't interested in regime change. But now they're in the middle of a situation where there is a potential for regime change.

Newman: I don't see the irony of that. What's ironic about that?

Salit: I presume Sanger would say the very thing that the Obama people wanted to get the U.S. out of the business of...

Newman: Right...

Salit: ...is what they're now, at least potentially, in the business of.

Newman: I don't get that conclusion. That's exactly what Obama is denying. There's no inconsistency or irony. Obama's position has been and continues to be, that he's not in the business of regime change.

Salit: Right.

Newman: And, that if there's any change going on in Iranian politics, it's the Iranian people who are calling for it. In fact, Obama's position is the exact opposite of the Bush position. So, I don't understand the logic of the thinking which produces the conclusion of irony.

Salit: Maybe what they're really saying, those that are seeing irony, is that no one expected there to be a serious domestic challenge to the current regime. But now there may be one.

Newman: Right. That's how the world works.

Salit: Things happen that you didn't expect.

Newman: Exactly.

Salit: So this thing in Iran, we're not quite sure what it is, has happened or is happening. Let's talk some about how Obama is responding to it. There was a narrative this week, coming from corners on the Left and the Right and the media: 'Obama's not speaking up strongly enough in response to what's going on. He needs to be out there, more in front, supporting the protesters, vocally criticizing Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. He was slow to move on this.' Chris Matthews interviewed Obama advisor David Axelrod about this who said 'Basically, we didn't want to get ahead of events. We don't know how this is going to play out and we have strategic concerns which are our responsibility to be attentive to and to take care of.' And, Obama told Chuck Todd of NBC News that it wasn't his job to feed the 24-hour news cycle. It was his job to do what is in the best interests of the country, that he's not going to play that game, and that he's not going to have America be set up as the instigator of this whole thing. I guess the question is – does the critique of Obama's timing go anywhere?

Newman: Well, I know we have to give a Talk/Talk, but my answer is no.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So far as I can tell from his public presentation, Obama is doing exactly what I would do. My position is obviously a lot smaller than Obama's, but I have handled crises of one kind or another and I think that premature responses to something, when you don't know what the something is – and part of why you don't know what the something is, is because the something doesn't know what the something is – is a prescription for making huge mistakes. And, to his credit, he's not caving into the pressure to jump the gun.

Salit: Which is the opposite of Bush.

Newman: Yes, and I applaud him for it. I think it's exactly the way to go, although I don't know where it's going. Nor does he.

Salit: And how do you feel about the characterizations that some people are giving that the Iranian regime is fragile?

Newman: Regimes have been called fragile and then lasted for centuries. I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I don't know if it's fragile or not.

Salit: Meaning that the fact there are hundreds of thousands of people in the streets doesn't necessarily equal fragility.

Newman: In a more democratic society, having that many people out in the street protesting, would be an indicator of fragility. But Iran is not that kind of democratic society.

Salit: Millions protested the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson was forced to withdraw from a re-election bid and the Democratic Party lost the White House in 1968.

Newman: Yes, but Iran is not the United States of America and we shouldn't try to fit it into our way of looking at the world. Although, I must confess, when one of Charlie Rose's analysts said that Obama should make some statement about how seeing hundreds of thousands of people on the street in Tehran was "inspiring"...

Salit: David Brooks said that.

Newman: Yes, I realized that I didn't hear anybody talking about how a million Americans out in the streets in Washington to protest the U.S. government policy in Vietnam was also inspiring. What's more, we don't even know what these people stand for. I certainly support their right to protest in Tehran. But who are they? I have a limited knowledge of the opposition candidate...

Salit: Moussavi...

Newman: ...but his politics don't sound very far from those of the current regime. It's easy for the press, looking for a story by deadline, to talk about the American people being outraged by what's gone on in Iran. But, the American people are characteristically un-outraged by election fraud.

Salit: That's why both sides had to bus in protestors to Florida in 2000.

Newman: We've been working in the area of election fraud, election unfairness, for a long time. The commentators make it sound as if, if you did something like this in America, millions of people would storm the Board of Elections. But, millions of people don't storm the Board of Elections.

Salit: No.

Newman: Obviously, Iran is different than the United States, and obviously this is not just about an election fraud.

Salit: Right.

Newman: There's something else going on. But, I don't know what it is. Nor do I know where it's going to go. Now, if you were into regime change, I could see how you would think this situation in Iran is a golden opportunity. But given that Obama's position has been that he isn't into regime change, I don't comprehend the analysis that says he should get on the "overthrow the regime" bandwagon.

Salit: I suppose some of them are trying to beat up on him.

Newman: So, they're beating up on Obama. It goes with the territory. I'm a political person and I've been beaten up on in my life. It's modest, certainly, relative to Obama, but I relate to it as serious. I try to listen to it, I try to hear it. But what you try to do, it seems to me, is you call everybody together and you say, *Am I the leader around here or not?*

Salit: Yes. And Obama has the support of tens of millions of people who elected him.

Newman: And, if that's not the case, then we should move to a regime change. That's the democratic way to react to it. And I think that's what Obama's doing.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But at the moment he doesn't know what the 200,000 or 300,000 people in the streets in Iran are going to do. I don't think anybody knows. So, what's he supposed to do? Send troops to Iran? That would be preposterous.

Salit: How did you react to the comparisons to Tiananmen Square? There were mixed views on this. Some said that calling the military into Tiananmen Square was successful in "putting the genie back in the bottle," the democracy genie, that is. This argument is that the democracy movement was basically derailed by this show of force by the Chinese government. And then others said 'Well, in China the regime did change off of Tiananmen Square.'

Newman: Yes. Dramatically so. What's more, Tiananmen Square was not an election protest, because there were no elections.

Salit: So, what are you saying about that difference?

Newman: The regime in Iran thought it was in its interests to have elections because there's a democratic tradition of some kind in Iran. This is very different than the situation in China. It's hard to make the comparison. There are probably some people right now inside the Iranian regime who are sitting in endless meetings about this, who are saying *I told you so. I told you we shouldn't have elections. That was a big mistake.* And other people are saying *Well, it's a tactic that will help us hold power over the long run and so it's a good thing. Maybe you were right on this occasion....and we'll get it back under control.*

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I don't know the exact numbers of injuries and casualties, but I think the reaction of the regime in Iran has been much more tempered than the reaction of the Chinese Communists in Tiananmen Square. The circumstances are fairly different. You know, comparisons like this can give you that nice pleasant feeling you have when you think you have an understanding of something. But, I don't think that feeling counts for very much, historically speaking.

Salit: I felt that way about Brooks' summary: 'The 1979 Iranian Revolution was historic because it set in motion the regionwide movement for Islamic extremism, and this situation is likewise historic because this could turn out to be the thing that reverses that tide and begins the counterrevolution across the region.' Maybe. But, it was just a little bit too tied up in a bow.

Newman: I quite agree. I don't even know the color of the bow.

Salit: One other question on Iran. Bryan Puertas, who is a Talk/Talk reader, sent a note asking if you would comment on the impact of technology on the protests in Iran. Bryan says that it's traditional for media coverage to frame the story that gets out to the world about social unrest and upheavals. But in this situation, the official media was very heavily restricted. Instead, it was individuals' use of Twitter and the Internet and their cell phone cameras that got the story out.

Newman: I'm all for applying advanced technology to mass organizing. I think it's a good thing and I've spoken about that on many occasions. But, one thing to point out is that both sides have access to technology and they use it in different ways. Probably, the real power in this kind of situation will turn on who has the most access to guns.

Salit: Not Twitter.

Newman: And that's not to deny the significance of technology. But there are other factors in the world which play a role. I think the more technology is used to invigorate the democratic process, the better. My last comment, however, is this. For all the technology which everyone now has access to, I haven't heard of a million messages coming to President Obama from Iranians asking him to have the United States intervene in Iran.

Salit: True enough. OK, to Mary Fridley's sports question of the week. She says 'Even though Tiger Woods didn't win the recent U.S. Open, he is one of a very few athletes who've completely transformed the sport in which they play. Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan are also on that list. Although there are many very good athletes out there, this kind of special athlete doesn't come along very often. How do you think they get to be who and where they are? Do you think that certain sports are more open to transformation? Or is the athlete so great that he or she will impact no matter what?'

Newman: Depends on the situation, really. Here's what I think about Tiger, and it's not from any personal or direct knowledge of him. It's based on what I read in papers and magazines and so on and, of course, watching him play. I remember Tiger being on television when he was a little boy and his father, who was his primary influence and teacher, told him from the outset to swing as hard as he could. And, his Dad said, if you missed the last swing, don't ease up on the next one.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Swing all out. This is Tiger's credo. And it has had a huge influence on the game of golf over the last 15 years.

Salit: How's that?

Newman: Golf used to be a much more strategic game, but there's a new mentality about this. It's the big hitters' game now. There are some exceptions to that. But, it's mainly a big hitters' game and there's a logic to hitting the ball as hard as you can, as far as you can, and then figuring out what to do with the lie that you get off of that. Golf used to be a very conservative game, in the sense that players tried to stay on the fairway at all costs. Which is a useful tactic in some situations but it's not the general strategy of the game any longer. It's a bigger game than that. It's "go for the distance." Yes, you'll make mistakes, but in the long haul it's how the game should be played. And Tiger proved that. Hit the ball as far as you can and then figure out some brilliant thing to do when you're deep in the woods. That's a transformation of the game. The mental aspect of the game used to be to never get yourself into a bad position. Don't swing all out. That's what I mean by the change of the game. Ironically, of course, Tiger doesn't know that he's swinging that hard. He's never swung any other way.

Salit: He should be me for a day. He would know what it is to not swing hard.

Newman: There you go. But you're not so unique among people who are learning the game.

Salit: That's comforting. Sort of.

Newman: It's a different game now. There are more and more people playing like Tiger, or at least trying to. Obviously, in the long run, someone will surpass him. He's not going to be the king forever. But he's got some years left. Having lost one U.S. Open does not end your career. Plus, it was a very unique U.S. Open. I don't think Tiger would talk about it publicly, but he caught a lot of bad breaks. And, he had an opportunity on the 15th hole, to put a second shot right up near the pin, which he missed.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: All sportscasters go on record about this stuff, so I'll take advantage of Mary's question, since this is the only sports reporting I'll ever do. Had he hit that shot, instead of winding up in the rough – he hit too hard, he didn't play it conservatively – I think he had a real shot at making a run at the very end. But he didn't. Nonetheless, Tiger's here. He's still the king.

Salit: We're not talking about regime change in golf.

Newman: Not by a long shot, so to speak.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.