



Sunday, August 2, 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, August 2, 2009 after watching selections from "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and several Charlie Rose interviews.

Salit: The health care debate and the beer summit grabbed a lot of the headlines this week.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: We spent some time following the war story, the drawdown of American combat forces in Iraq while playing more of a support role to the Iraqi national army, combined with a build up in Afghanistan, building up troop levels and building up the strategic emphasis on U.S. policy in Afghanistan. I thought we might talk about that. We watched a Charlie Rose interview with Andrew Exum, a former military guy with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, who now is based at a D.C. think tank. Charlie Rose asked him what the president's policy is in Afghanistan. Exum had a straightforward answer. Our policy in Afghanistan is to prevent it from being used as a base for transnational terrorist networks to plan and stage attacks against the United States and to do the same relative to it being a base for destabilizing operations against Pakistan. Obviously, both goals are indisputable, so I'm not asking you to make a judgment about their value. At the same time, one thing that Andrew Exum drew out is the extent to which achieving those objectives has become entirely meshed with our efforts to build up Afghanistan as a nation. And, he's saying that one of the hard choices we're going to have to make over the next year is the possibility of de-coupling those two objectives because it might not be viable to tie them together. How do you see that?

Newman: There are so many definitional questions to be asked here, that it makes approaching the question very, very difficult. What you said is correct. The objective is to make it less of a terrorist base from which to target both the region and the world. But the cultural assumptions embedded in the approach can get you into trouble. Those assumptions might not bear any relationship to how the Taliban, or Al Qaeda, or ordinary Afghans look at this situation. Take the notion of "nation building." Well, the insurgents probably say: *We already have a nation. This is our kind of nation. What you mean by a nation is having democratic elections, the outcome of which favor Washington, DC. That's not our definition of a nation.* Arguably, this is them being realistic. It's them saying: *This is what we have. Force has always played a major role in who controls the land. And land is the primary source of wealth and power.* Throw in the religious traditions and the long history of resisting any kind of centralized rule, and the bottom line is that you can't relate to this situation as if it were Painesville, Ohio.

This is not Painesville, Ohio. This is so far from being Painesville, Ohio that even the talk about nation building comes off sounding comic.

Salit: I imagine our military leaders feel the same way.

Newman: Not to be unduly cynical, and I do have a great respect for Obama, but I've become quite convinced that spending time in Washington distorts your world view. That said, it inclines me to say something that sounds very cynical. Namely, we've spent six years in Iraq because the neo-cons said an Iraqi invasion was critical for U.S. interests because of the connections between Iraq and Al Qaeda, even though there weren't any in the first place. Once we invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein, and then proceeded to fight a war in Iraq, Al Qaeda showed up. So we ended up fighting them, or at least some of them. But that blunder, one could argue, has been (in some manner, shape, or form) corrected by virtue of a strategic shift to Afghanistan, which gets us a little closer to where Al Qaeda is actually based. However, where Al Qaeda has its most significant support network, everybody knows, is in Pakistan. And Pakistan is a nation, moreover, one that is ostensibly a U.S. ally. So a reasonable person might say, *Why did we get into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place? In one place we had to overthrow the dictator and deal with the consequences of that. In the other case, we've got to build a whole new state, meaning Afghanistan. When, all the while, the United States has real political connections to an actual nation, namely Pakistan. Why wouldn't that be where we were focusing from the outset?* So, if you want to argue that we're now closer to the real source of things, because Afghanistan and Pakistan are contiguous and the border is porous, you can. But that's so abstracted from the realities of what's happening on the ground. Good grief. The United States government has told us for years that the former Soviet Union was the most totalitarian, imposing nation builder in the history of the contemporary world. But the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan. So what chance does the United States, with its complicated, bureaucratic democracy have in accomplishing that in Afghanistan? It seems prima facie absurd.

Salit: The team of "outsiders" that General Petraeus sent in to analyze the Afghan theater came up with a similar conclusion. Anthony Cordesman, formerly the director of intelligence assessment for the Defense Secretary, offered up a very bleak assessment.

Newman: So, why is Obama pursuing this? Well, I don't know. This could be total and complete ignorance on my part, but it almost seems as if we have to have some war over there in order to justify getting out of Iraq. Of course, that too is somewhat bizarre – maybe this is just my old-guard leftism coming out – but how did it turn out that the key to the Middle East is Iraq and Afghanistan? At the risk of sounding like an ugly American, I'm tempted to say, who the hell are Iraq and Afghanistan? Of course, we know that September 11th changed everything. I know it can be very touchy in this country when you talk about September 11th. It was a tragedy, an American tragedy, there's no question about that. But I'm one of those who thinks it shouldn't have

dictated a change of focus for us, in terms of our policy towards the entire region. We needed – and still need – to find bin Laden and disable his entire operation. But instead we went to war. The error, which can't be overcome now because we're too far into it, was in how we decided to define the attacks of September 11th. Had they been defined as a criminal matter, which would require focusing everything on finding bin Laden, we'd not be embroiled in the consequences of changing our entire Middle East policy.

Salit: And, I suppose the irony is that we made a terrorist group on the radical fringe the center of U.S. policy in the region.

Newman: Yes. They certainly had to be dealt with. But the political and military mileage that they've gotten out of our response to 9/11 is hard to fathom. They got the U.S. involved in a way which favors them, in my opinion. Look, I'm a firm believer that in the long haul, by which I mean potentially thousands of years, the Afghan people will get to a stable and developed society. But not by virtue of our military presence and its endless costs, including loss of life. That's not the route by which they're going to get there.

Salit: In light of the magnitude of the mistake that you're describing here, to talk about pitfalls of the current policy seems ludicrous. I would say that there are some strategists, and maybe Obama is one of them, who would be sympathetic to what you're saying. Sympathetic in the sense that they wouldn't deny what you're saying. Then the position becomes – and Exum alluded to this – *OK fine, we're abandoning any notion of nation building, for all the reasons that you're saying. Number one, it can't be done. It's never been done. It is a completely different culture. It's a completely different economic reality. It's a completely different religious framework. It's non-negotiable terrain. So we can't do that and we're done with that.* Moreover, being attached to that constrains us in certain ways. For example, if we're trying to help Afghanistan emerge as a nation with democratic norms, the fact that we're dropping bombs on an Al Qaeda compound and killing civilians in that process derails the nation building goal because it means the advocates of a democratic society are violating basic human rights. But if you take nation building out of the picture, then all you're trying to do is destroy these terrorist networks. That's basically what you do, and then the chips fall where they fall. This is the Catch-22 of the Afghan situation because you could pursue that as your strategy and say that nation building, humanitarian, development and democratic concerns, are off the table because they have no applicability here. We're just out to destroy the terrorist networks.

Newman: Blow 'em up.

Salit: And, if you succeed in blowing them all up, you can't really care about the civilian casualties you caused because your strategic objectives no longer require that you care about that. You've protected the national security interests of the United States.

Newman: Except what's happened as a consequence of doing that.

Salit: Yes, exactly. I was going to say two things about that. One is that this kind of modus operandi on the part of the U.S. will grow the insurgency. That's the Taliban's calling card to the Afghan population. So, we're in a situation where the policies that we're pursuing are stimulating the growth of the enemy.

Newman: I don't quite agree with that because that may or not be true. I don't know. It's an empirical question whether it does or doesn't stimulate the growth of the enemy. But the more important issue is that it deters, in my opinion, further development in those areas of the world. And, if that part of the world doesn't develop, it's hard to imagine that there won't continue to be attacks of varying kinds on the United States and our interests around the globe. We can't be the richest nation in the world – our economic problems notwithstanding – with this region consigned to extreme poverty and lawlessness and not expect extremism and violence to continue.

Salit: One worries that we've put ourselves, as a nation, in a kind of lose/lose situation. One of the big pollsters, Charlie Cook, says that Obama is losing the confidence of the American people. He ties this to the health care debate and economic stimulus package and its lack of impact on joblessness. You're not a pollster, obviously. I'm not asking you to analyze the polls that Charlie does. How would you characterize Obama's relationship to the American public? What's going on in that relationship?

Newman: What I was struck by in all the discussion of the health care bill and the potential resurgence of the Republican Party, was that there was not one mention of race. The basic Republican strategy is "let's get the white working class behind us on the appeal of saying that we don't want this country, which has always favored the white working class, to go completely broke by spending excessive dollars, disproportionately, on black America and others." That's the Republican appeal. You don't have to be a genius to see that. Will that work? That remains to be seen. If it works, the Republicans will gain 20 seats or more in Congress in 2010 and who knows what else after that. If it doesn't work, they won't. Now is the moment for independent Americans, progressive-minded independent white Americans, to stand up and defend this president because it's a more critical time. Voting for him was one thing. Certainly the country was desperate after Bush. So that's one kind of statement. Now the real question is: Is there going to be an acceptable redistribution of wealth in this country, which really helps the poor? The rich are going to keep making money. But will the white working class support continued help for the poor, who are increasingly of color? They have not done it before. Will they do it this time? Obama's about to find out.

Salit: I guess so.

Newman: We're only at the barest beginning of this. The fight is yet to be had. Obama's got some things going for him. He's got some talents. But he also has a

situation, a relatively good situation for making everybody, including the most backward elements of white America, line up against the multi-billionaires and trillionaires...

Salit: Against Wall Street.

Newman: But I don't know how long that lasts because when push comes to shove, they might ultimately line up with the multi-trillionaire because he's white. That's what the Republicans are trying to craft right now. In these terms, I assure you, in these terms. In their inner circles where they feel secure that nobody is listening, they're using this language.

Salit: Maybe what you're saying is putting what Charlie Cook said in another way. Charlie says the "old polarization is coming back."

Newman: Yes.

Salit: Now, the sports question.

Newman: The sports question.

Salit: Jim Brown, one of the greatest running backs in football and an African American activist, recently criticized Tiger Woods for not being more of a role model for the black community. How would you respond to Brown and, more generally, what do you think about the need our society has for role models, which athletes are often expected to be?

Newman: You always have role models. The most primitive cultures had role models. Someone does something well that succeeds in the broader culture. I don't care if it's a caveman father or Jim Brown or Tiger Woods or Fred Newman. A lot of people are going to say, *That's what I want to do. That's how I want to be.* Brown was a great athlete. Tiger's a great athlete. So they're both role models. And Brown's been a role model who projects one black politic and Tiger is a role model who projects another black politic. There are multiple black politics, after all. And black America is going through a major transition. Brown's comment is simply a sensible political observation from his point of view, within the overall struggle or fight, whatever you want to call it, in the black community. I don't think there's much more to say about it.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.

Newman: You're welcome.