



OBAMA'S ENTANGLEMENTS OR SO WHAT IF HE IS A SOCIALIST?

Sunday, September 6, 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, September 6, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews," and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: I already have a working title for this week's Talk/Talk.

Newman: Which is?

Salit: "Obama's Entanglements." No doubt it's something of a redundancy, because being President of the United States is all about entanglements. But the two in particular that we'll talk about today are Afghanistan and the fight over health care.

Newman: I have an alternative title.

Salit: What is it?

Newman: My title is "So What if He is a Socialist?"

Salit: Well, that might be on point right now. We'll start with what's going on in Afghanistan, where we're looking at escalating U.S. involvement. We've got 68,000 troops there and the talk is about deploying more. And, we just watched *New York Times* reporter Dexter Filkins live from Kabul and the situation looks very bad, very unstable. It's a country at war, that situation doesn't seem to be improving and any sense of popular political confidence in the central government, Karzai's government, is eroding.

Newman: And it wasn't much to start with.

Salit: No, it wasn't much to start with. Some people think we can make a difference there. Obviously, I'm not a military expert or an expert on Afghanistan, by any stretch of the imagination. But given the political instability and the failure of the central government, including the massive election fraud that is surfacing, I just don't see how you stabilize the situation militarily and hold it without an ongoing American presence there. I just don't see it.

Newman: It does look like one of those situations where the reaction to what's going on is to dislike the Americans. And that's not a good situation for us. That's lose/lose.

Salit: If you're an Afghani who is at all sympathetic to the Taliban you oppose the U.S. for fighting them. If your family or village was part of the collateral damage from U.S. airstrikes, you hate the U.S. If you want some kind of more secular government, you might have supported Karzai, but the Karzai government – backed by the U.S. – is being exposed as thoroughly inept and corrupt. That doesn't exactly make you like the Americans either.

Newman: I think I'm saying the same thing you're saying and I agree with you. But, I don't think the question really turns on the Taliban.

Salit: OK.

Newman: The problem is there's no responsible force to relate to. There's nobody else there that has any organic strength that we can relate to. In the absence of that, what is it that we're trying to do? I understand the long-term purpose of deterring the terrorists. But, I don't know how this accomplishes that.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I know that this is the good war as opposed to the bad war in Iraq. I don't doubt that Obama was opposed to the war in Iraq. He said so and he acted on that before he was president and since being elected president. But, in many respects, I don't see how the Afghan situation differs all that dramatically from Iraq, in terms of the potential upside for the U.S. In Iraq, there was Saddam Hussein, who we could take some degree of credit for getting rid of. But I don't know there is any such figure in Afghanistan.

Salit: Well, there is a whole social order and infrastructure in Iraq. Partly as a function of Hussein, authoritarian though he was, and partly as a function of the history of Iraqi/Persian culture. When American troops leave Iraq, there's something resembling a nation there. As Dexter Filkins said in the piece we watched, Afghanistan is a country that is living in the 4th Century.

Newman: Well, I don't want to knock the 4th Century, so we better be cautious about that line of criticism. I mean, relative to the 21st, it might have a lot going for it.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I don't want to glorify the 4th Century, either. But, whatever century it is, the power dynamic doesn't support this strategy. It's sad. I'm not a military expert, so maybe you can put in so many troops that you can simply overwhelm the situation. But I don't know what happens next. To whom do you turn to take over? I think it's a mistake, frankly, on Obama's part, a carryover mistake. He carried over some of Bush's key military advisors and he carried over some of the mistaken premises that come with them. My guess is that the military is playing a much too influential role in all of this.

They're looking to pull something of a victory out of the whole Iraq/Afghanistan situation, but I don't think there's a victory to be pulled out of it, frankly. It's sad and insofar as I'm entitled to have an opinion as an American citizen, that's what it is. I think we shouldn't be there.

Salit: The health care debate.

Newman: It seems to bear a certain resemblance to the Afghan situation.

Salit: It does. Certainly, in terms of the domestic politics surrounding the policymaking, they seem very similar. But here's the thing. Chris Matthews has this story. The Democratic Party left is up in arms about the idea that the "public option" component of the health care package might be sacrificed and they're putting a lot of heat on Obama about this. And by the way, in this scenario, Matthews defines the left as David Corn from *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* crowd, the "Netroots," and so on, but he also includes Nancy Pelosi, who is taking this position.

Newman: Well, that's where the problem lies.

Salit: Say more.

Newman: I'm not a super big fan of David Corn, but I'm more inclined towards his understanding of what the left is, than Nancy Pelosi's.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, if that combination is what Obama is holding on to, he's automatically in trouble because that's an unstable combination.

Salit: A hardcore Democratic Party leader...

Newman: ...and operative...

Salit: ...like Pelosi, combined with a non-governmental leftist like Corn?

Newman: Yes, Pelosi and Corn, who I'd call a relatively independent leftist. That's an unstable coalition, it seems to me. So, what does Obama have to hold on to there? Not a whole lot. And that's been his problem from the get-go. He's trying to pass what I take to be genuinely progressive, well-intentioned health care reform legislation. But his organizational support comes from the Democratic Party, which cares more for its own political interests than for progressive health care reform.

Salit: Meaning, it's not just about "getting this done." It's about whether hardcore Democratic Party insiders can share power with the left.

Newman: That is the shaky foundation of his political situation. And if he's done in, that's what will have done him in. That contradiction.

Salit: How?

Newman: Because in the process of trying to bring Nancy Pelosi and the more independent left together, he is creating openings for the Republicans to come back. And they are.

Salit: Here are some things that I find confusing. You have *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, progressives in the Democratic Party, Nancy Pelosi and the hardcore labor types – other than Hoffa – all saying there's got to be a public option. And they're hammering Obama on this. So Bill Clinton gives this talk and says, essentially, 'Don't forget that the criteria for what we do here has to be what's good for health care, what's good for the economy AND (here he points his finger), what's good for the Democratic Party.' Essentially, he's saying to the left, 'Don't blow this deal. We're on our way to a deal. Obama's on his way to a deal. Don't blow it.' And, that's how this thing is being framed. Matthews says Bill Clinton is God. Literally. And God's question is, 'Is the left going to blow the deal for Obama?'

Newman: Yes, that's how Chris Matthews and Bill Clinton are framing it. But, as Corn commented to Matthews on the air, 'I remember the days when you didn't think Clinton was God.'

Salit: A notable comment. So, from Obama's point of view, he wants to bring the left along. He doesn't want to lose the left on this and he also wants to get a bill passed.

Newman: Obama must have been counting on the left maintaining its sway.

Salit: Over itself? To keep itself united?

Newman: No. Over the independent movement. And, that's what hasn't held. And the reason it hasn't held is that the left hasn't really been a long-term partner in the process of taking the independent movement to the left.

Salit: That's an understatement.

Newman: This doesn't grow out of nowhere. The left has not played that role and has not been able to secure that.

Salit: We've played that role. CUIP has played that role.

Newman: And played it well enough to get Obama elected. We have enough strength, given the fractious quality of the American left – particularly relative to the tactic of

securing the independent movement – to have played that role. But holding that relationship? That's another story.

Salit: I wrote a letter to David Brooks after the *New York Times* published his column "The Obama Slide" in which I criticized the automatic equation he makes between independents and the political center. He said Obama's appeal to the left for support for health care reform has cost him support with independents. I wrote him that he was misinterpreting the polls. That when they look at the health care debate, one of the things that independents see is partisan politics as usual. They see Obama bogged down in that. And that's a big part of what they're responding to. Independents are conflicted about the role of government, that we know. But they don't like the partisanship coming from all sides. And they're afraid that the product to come out of such a process will be too partisan, too driven by special interests.

Newman: But the deeper issue is that independents are not led. Yes, everybody has conflicts about government. But the independent movement is not yet securely led by either the left of center or by the right.

Salit: Correct.

Newman: That's part of what it means to be independent. And also to be so early in the process of emerging as a new political force. They're susceptible to being all over the place.

Salit: And we're not strong enough to do that.

Newman: Yes. And the left has not appreciated the significance of a coordinated and coherent struggle to influence the independent movement. And so, independents are vulnerable. To whom? Well, to the right. Why has the right been getting so much attention in this debate? Because if nothing else, they're politically unified. And, they've had decades of being unified. They've always believed in cultivating their influence in the independent movement. Look at Pat Buchanan, who tried a full scale social conservative takeover of the independent movement. He failed – independents rejected him. But that doesn't mean the GOP doesn't work to control the independents. And as soon as they got their next chance, they grabbed it.

Salit: That's one reason the indies' support for Obama was so extraordinary. It took 20 years to get there. But the left never supported us in doing that.

Newman: Well, we've been the whipping boys of the left on this very issue. And that has justified its not taking a more serious and coherent role relative to independents. They abstained on the grounds that we were there. So we know something about this relational situation.

Salit: That's accurate.

Newman: What will Obama do about all of this? Who knows? Obviously, his strongest pull is to try to follow Bill Clinton and make the Democratic Party play.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That's what Matthews and others are saying is the way to go. And, it might well be. Under the circumstances I'm describing, there might not be any other play.

Salit: No.

Newman: If it comes down to choosing us vs. the Democratic Party, who do you think he's going to choose?

Salit: The Democratic Party.

Newman: But, as I suggested in my headline, what if he is a socialist? That could be his biggest problem.

Salit: Meaning?

Newman: One way he could play this is to be the person who unifies the left. But what does that do to his relationship to the Democratic Party? He might unify the left and wind up coming in last in the next presidential election. I'd say that's a dilemma.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: You imply this in your letter to David Brooks. But you might want to send a follow up.

Salit: OK.

Newman: You have to tell Brooks that he doesn't understand the dynamics of the independent movement. It's the story you tell in your documentary, "How the Independent Movement Went Left by Going Right." You are the voice of the progressive elements of the independent movement, which is an important voice, and you have to speak the truth of what's going on in the independent movement, relative to these other dynamics, so that independents and others can have a deeper appreciation of what's really going on.

Salit: The independent movement went left, under the influence of progressive independents, but now the right is trying to take it back. And the broader left is too preoccupied with its position within the Democratic Party to join with us in influencing the independents.

Newman: Yes. Look, the big issue which underlies this whole health care polarization is where do you stand on socialism, American-style. Obama seems surprised that this issue has emerged once again. But, he shouldn't be. I think Obama made a mistake in thinking that his eloquence, which is substantial, and his popularity, which is substantial, was enough to get this through without that becoming an issue.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, it had to become the issue. It's always been the issue in the political history of health reform in this country. Health care reform stands for, insofar as anything does, a shift towards socialism, because it is. I have no objections to that. Lots of Americans do.

Salit: There is a new book out about the history of health care reform which chronicles how Franklin Roosevelt, who arguably had the most solid reform coalition behind him to enact sweeping changes in the structure and design of the American government, didn't undertake health care reform because the right was so virulent in its message that this was nothing short of socialism. In 1930s America, FDR couldn't make that work for the New Deal coalition.

Newman: Well, he had a world war on his hands and he needed the Soviet Union as one of his allies. So, it was a trade off. He had to be very cool in terms of how much socialism he could bring to America.

Salit: Yes. Thanks, Fred.