



SUBLIMINAL MESSAGING

Sunday, October 7, 2007

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, October 7, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "Meet the Press."

Salit: I wanted to begin with John Edwards and his current campaign strategy. Tim Russert just interviewed him on "Meet the Press." Basically, he's been taking consistent shots at Hillary, hammering away at trying to demonstrate to the Democratic Party base that there are clear lines of demarcation between himself and Senator Clinton. His message to the Democratic base is *If you're a Democrat and if you have come to believe that the Democratic Party is the party that's against the war, the party that is for health care, and so forth, I'm asking you to think again. Because within the field there are serious differences on these issues. Hillary has a more conservative, more compromised, less genuine, more political, less visionary version of these issues. So, if what you really want is an end to the war, if what you really want is...and he ticks down the list, etc. then you've got to focus on the distinction between Hillary and me...and I'm the better choice.* To what extent, do you think, is the Democratic Party base responsive to those distinctions?

Newman: I don't know. This is a tricky business. I certainly agree with you that that's his obvious message. But, I don't think it's his ever-so-slightly subliminal message. I think his subliminal message is very different than that.

Salit: What is his subliminal message?

Newman: His subliminal message is: *In the final analysis, says Mr. Edwards, Hillary Clinton is not electable. I'm a white man. And I am electable.* So, yes, there are these subtle differences. But, that's not going to get him votes because the electorate's not subtle. The underlying message, what I'm calling the vaguely subliminal message, is *Don't give the Republicans someone who they can beat the living daylights out of and maybe even defeat. Give them me. I'm a white man. I've won in a red state. I'm a Southerner. Take a look at all the past presidents of the United States. They're all white men. And so am I. In that sense, I'm presidential.* I think that's the message he's really delivering behind the cover of 'There are these differences between us Democrats.' Do you think he's going to win a primary by saying I want to put the troops on this side of an imaginary line and Hillary wants to put the troops on the other side...and they're three feet apart? Do you think that's going to be grounds for people voting for him? I don't think so. I don't think he thinks so. I think he's saying something else.

He's saying: *Obama? Let's not even mention him. He can't possibly win, he's black. Hillary, we have to talk about. She's in the lead. She's got big money. But, take a look at what's happening,* Edwards is subtly arguing. And he has things to point to. Look at what Rudy Giuliani is doing, even now. He's running against Hillary. And he's doing quite well with it. That's the campaign that's winning in the Republican Party. When the field narrows, it's going to firm up even more. Edwards is saying, *Hillary is beatable in the general election in a way that I'm not.* That's Edwards' actual message. You're accurately characterizing the surface of it but...come on.

Salit: So, what he is selling, then, is 'I stand for all the Democratic Party values that you'd like me to stand for...'

Newman: 'My father was a mill worker.'

Salit: 'My father was a mill worker' and all of that. 'And I'm from the class of people that get elected president.'

Newman: Not necessarily from the class of. I'm from the group of people.

Salit: That's what I mean, that kind of class, a variety. 'I'm from the group of people that get elected president.' There is, of course, another open question. As you say, he doesn't mention Barack Obama, but everybody else is looking at Obama and, as Chris Matthews said, 'Will somebody tell the guys in Chicago that it's time to pull the trigger?'

Newman: To state the obvious, there are three Democratic candidates – maybe you can count Richardson as a “subprime” – but basically there are three. Each is doing their campaign, it's not a matter of pulling any triggers. They're going to continue to do their campaign. And they each think that they're close enough, at least in Iowa, to have a shot. They're right. The polls suggest that. Do the polls mean anything? I don't know. What's the alternative? Guessing? If I had to predict, I'd have to say the most obvious and banal thing, that it's going to be a close race in Iowa. It could well be a three-way split, and then we'll see what the Democrats, in general, and these three candidates, in particular, do with that. It could be so divided that it won't make a difference, which is Hillary's hope. Hillary's plan is that Iowa will be a wash, and she moves on and scores in New Hampshire and beyond.

Salit: Then she wraps it up on February 5th.

Newman: I guess Edwards' thing would be that he didn't have as much money, that he was the underdog, but he tied them.

Salit: Then his subliminal message kicks in.

Newman: He says, *I'm the candidate for the long haul because once it's narrowed down to three and we're going to move quickly into the New Hampshire primary and beyond, you've got to start looking at the key issue here, which is electability. That's the key issue.* Up until now, everyone has been assuming that a Democrat has to be elected. But a Democrat doesn't have to be elected. That's not the case. And if Edwards hangs in there with them, as I think he probably will, or even wins Iowa by a narrow margin, he's going to play that up big. If he wins by one percentage point he's going to say, *You see, even though I didn't have the money, even though I wasn't a famous and popular candidate, this is what the people of Iowa chose – and they're ordinary people. Think about that when you think about the electability of a presidential candidate.* They're going to play that, if he happens to get a 1% victory, which is not out of the question. The results in Iowa will probably turn on something like what the weather is in Des Moines.

Salit: The night of the caucus.

Newman: The night of the caucus. And who knows what the weather in Des Moines is going to be.

Salit: As you say, the general presumption is that the Democrats are going to take the White House no matter what. If they run Donald Duck, they win the presidency. But for the fact that Rudy Giuliani is doing so well on the Republican side and does have the potential to win the Republican nomination. He would be a formidable challenger to any Democrat, but especially to Hillary. To what extent do you think his popularity is driven on the Republican side by the electability factor?

Newman: I don't think it's driven by that quite yet.

Salit: Okay. Is he so strong simply because of the weakness of the rest of the field?

Newman: All of the major contenders in the Republican field, including Giuliani, have rather substantial downsides. He's the most popular of the "downside" candidates. And I think that's why he's where he is. Essentially what he's saying, also somewhat subliminally since you can't say anything other than subliminally in politics, is, *It might be that we're all downside candidates. But the Democrats have one gigantic downside candidate and she's the likely winner of the Democratic primary. I can take her on because I know something about downside and I can beat her because I'm a tough guy. And I'm not afraid to stand up to her. I know her. I'm from New York State. I'm a prosecutor and I'll say to her straight out "We know what you stand for, sister." Nobody else will.* I don't think that Giuliani is popular because he's seen as the candidate who could beat any Democrat. I don't think that's the case. I think he's putting all his chips on *I'm the candidate who can beat Hillary Clinton.* I think that's his whole campaign. He

can't do that to John Edwards or Barack Obama. He can't run that same campaign against them. If he goes up against Edwards, Edwards paints him as just a loud-mouthed New Yorker and says *He doesn't know how things work. He didn't do New York so well, frankly*. Edwards can take that posture. Obama can say, *This guy's just shootin' from the hip*. And Obama can handle him intellectually. Giuliani's been looking to gun down Hillary for a long time. Cancer stood in the way the last time. But he believes he can beat Hillary. I don't know if it's true, but it's not completely unconvincing. And there are so many rank and file Republicans out there who relish the idea of beating Hillary. That makes Giuliani popular. If you pushed them and said, *Well, do you like this guy Giuliani? You like what he stands for?* They'd say, *No. Frankly, I'd never invite him to my house. But I'll vote for him to beat Hillary*.

Salit: That's a powerful motivator.

Newman: Sadly, in American politics, that's a very powerful motivator.

Salit: Tim Russert put up a quote from Elizabeth Edwards and that's what she was pointing to. That's what you're calling the subliminal argument for Edwards. She says that Hillary has a lot of enemies out there and Hillary's a very polarizing figure. The Republican base won't be motivated by their candidate because they don't have a strong candidate and they won't be motivated by Bush. But, they will be motivated by coming out to get Hillary. If you put Hillary up there, you're mobilizing the Republican base.

Newman: Exactly.

Salit: To look at the picture from a slightly different angle, Chris Matthews opened his show by counterposing two frameworks that are being offered in the presidential race. The framework of "optimism," the country can go forward. As an example of this, he runs a clip from Obama giving a Kennedy-esque, 2007 version of "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." Obama says that working together we can change this country and win this election and make a difference and so forth. It's the optimistic view versus the "dangerous world" view, which is, as Matthews says, what the Giuliani message is about. 'This is a dangerous world. Everyone in the world hates us. We need a real tough guy who has studied this issue, who knows this issue inside and out.' He runs a clip of Giuliani talking about that.

Newman: Of course that leaves out that Giuliani's the kind of person he's talking about, the kind of person that everybody in the world hates.

Salit: Yes. Though that might be a little too self-reflexive for the Republicans. One might say that the country is concerned with both of those things.

Newman: I guess.

Salit: Maybe Matthews is suggesting that if the tipping point goes in favor of optimism, then we'll get a Democrat elected. And if it goes in favor of fear and the "dangerous world" thesis, we'll get a Republican.

Newman: It's hard to say. Again – maybe I'm into sumbliminality today, but there are important differences between John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama, in spite of their sharing a kind of optimism. The real difference is that, right below the surface, Americans don't exactly like black people. And, just below the surface, the American people love rich people. No matter how much the words might sound alike, in the final analysis, people vote for who the words are coming from, not what the words are.

Salit: In the context of the battle of the titans, subliminal and liminal, as it is, where are the independents now? I recognize, of course, that we're still in the primary season. There have been conversations that you and I and others have been a part of with some important Democrats relative to the kind of statement that they could and need to be making to independents at this point. What's the status of the independents?

Newman: I think it's interesting. My response is narrow because, in some ways, it's our – mine, yours, others of us in our particular wing of the independent movement – it's our narrow experience. And, it's hard to extrapolate from it, but it's all we have to extrapolate from. My experience of what's going on now is that there's great responsiveness, on the part of Democrats at the local level, at the local organizational level, to our message about the importance of uniting with independents. Strangely enough, despite the fact that the party is probably on the brink of taking back the White House, many Democratic-allied organizations on the ground aren't doing all that well. So there's responsiveness to us. But I don't think that responsiveness feeds into what's happening at the top. I'm not surprised by that because the pace of an election campaign is very fast. But for organizations on the ground, things don't move so fast. There's more of a sense of what's happening for the long term. For some of these organizations, their bases are dwindling, they're not bringing in as much money as they used to. Their issues are a little antique, a little stale. At the presidential campaign level, it's still the case that not all that many people are watching. The debates go by very quickly. And that fast pace makes it very narrow in some ways. It's hard to have a long term view in that kind of scene. I think Barack Obama is discovering that now.

So, what do independents do? Different independents will do different things. I think – and this has always been my message strategically to independents – stay on the ground. I hate to sound like George Bush, but stay that course. Stay on the ground. Don't get too caught up in this whole presidential thing because it's not our arena. And it's surely not our arena this year, in my opinion. So, don't get caught up in that. You're wasting a lot of energy if you do that. Obviously,

people can do what they choose to do, but that's my own point of view. Stay where we're making headway. I think that approach is serving us well in the small wing of the independent movement that we influence, and it's going out from there to the broader independent movement.

Salit: I have to ask you about Kinky Friedman's new book. He ran for governor of Texas as an independent last year and, as expected, he didn't win, but he got a book published off of it.

Newman: I'm sure it's a funny book. I read a review. But if you look at it more from a distance and historically, his campaign for governor of Texas as an independent meant little or nothing. And it still means little or nothing.

Salit: Books aren't getting written now about the independent organizing that does mean something.

Newman: I think our work is best carried out unknown and is being carried out unknown. But it's nevertheless making a difference.

Salit: The 2008 presidential, in many respects, is not our game.

Newman: The guys and gals on the top tier of this election campaign are talking about throwing 30, 50, 100 million dollars, 200 million dollars around. We're not in that game. We've talked with different people. We've talked with Dennis Kucinich. He's seems like a decent and caring person. The people who have been introducing him to the independent movement, Jim Mangia in particular, have done a wonderful job in relating to him. But to me the really important thing is where he goes, where we go, where independent/Democratic alliances potentially go, where inside/outside, black/independent alliances go, over the long term. The future of those alliances has little or nothing to do with the presidential campaign. It's hard for the public to follow them because Tim Russert isn't covering the things that I'm talking about on "Meet the Press." They're covering the presidential campaign. And what else are they covering? Well, the presidential campaign. According to the pundits, that's all that's going on in the world. It's even the case that the fact that the United States of America might be on the brink of bombing Iran barely gets a mention anymore. Such is political life.

Salit: Thank you.