



COLIN POWELL, BRONX GUY

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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 19, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press," "The McLaughlin Group" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: I want to start with a characterization of where things might land after the election by Joe Scarborough on *Meet the Press*. Scarborough says this is not a 60/40 country, meaning not a 60% center-left vs. 40% center-right country, it's a 51/49 country, likely to break for the Democrats two weeks down the road. Here's his tableau: 'What you're looking at is a situation where we could have a center-left president, a center-left House of Representatives' – meaning Democrat – 'a 60-seat majority in the U.S. Senate for the Democrats, all governing a country that, in spite of the election results, is still,' he argues, 'center-right in its world view, in its sensibility.' He is asking *Can that kind of government successfully govern a country it is philosophically at odds with*, an odd point given that it would be a government that the American people just elected. Let me start by asking you what you think of Scarborough's description.

Newman: What the description exposes is Scarborough's elitism. He would take his own view as definitional, as opposed to the democratic republic of the American people. That's what it reveals...and nothing else.

Salit: OK. Let's even agree to those terms – center-left/center-right – for the moment. So, the American people elect a center-left government, but on Scarborough's argument, we are still a center-right country. Isn't that a ridiculous thing to say?

Newman: I can hardly think of anything that's more ridiculous. There's no way you can take that position and call yourself an American.

Salit: OK.

Newman: A lot of these pundits put themselves forward as if their view is neutral. That view is not neutral. It's antagonistic to the American people. The American people aren't voting for a center-left government. They're voting for the various people that they're voting for. This is a representative democracy, so the people elected have a mandate. The mandate comes from the only place it can come from, if you believe in what America stands for, namely the vote of the people. So what is he saying? *I have a more subtle understanding of where the American people are really at.* Hello!

Salit: I'm not sure the American people put that much stock in *The World According to Joe Scarborough*.

Newman: We're conditioned to listening to that kind of absurdity. I happen to agree that it's closer to a 51/49 split than a 60/40 split. That was reflected in the last election and I think it will probably be reflected in the coming government in different ways. As to what to call the nature of the split? It's simply the mandate of the American people. You don't need to call it anything other than that.

Salit: There was talk about the state of the Republican Party today. Here were some of the things that were featured: (1) John McCain's "I'm not George Bush" line in the 3rd debate. (2) Colin Powell's endorsement of Barack Obama, which came complete with a pointed critique of the Republican Party's pull to the right, the choice of Sarah Palin for vice president as a bad judgment call by McCain, and Powell's objections to the hard core, even reactionary, conservatism in the McCain message. (I assume the conservative Republicans will say that this doesn't really mean anything coming from Powell because he was "against us all along.") (3) The seeming shift of some states that have been in the red state column, to the blue state column. Some people say we're living through the end of the conservative era, that the era set in motion by Barry Goldwater and realized by Ronald Reagan is coming to a close and this election is the closing act in a 40-year drama. How do you think about what's happening to and in the Republican Party?

Newman: There's one "factoid" in this whole thing that is rarely commented on, namely that the conservative right, which has been the hard core base of the Republican Party for these many years, does not like John McCain. It does not like him. That's the biggest factor of all in this election. So, it's not whether John McCain is or isn't George Bush. The right wing in this country – and it is a substantial right wing – liked George Bush. And they don't like it when McCain says, "I'm not George Bush." So, is there a deepening, if you will, polarization in America? In some ways, yes. Relationally, is there a more open debate in the country now than at other times? Also, yes. There is. And that's good. That's a result of the country being 50/50. It's not despite the fact that the country's 50/50.

Salit: Agreed.

Newman: I think that's good. Let the debate carry on. If Barack Obama is seen as "socialist leaning," whatever is meant by that, and the American people elect him, then presumably that means something. At the moment, it seems that at least 50% of the country is favoring a "left wing president," if what the conservative commentators are saying is true. That's not unremarkable. That's what the American people are in the process of democratically deciding. This is a democracy. Is it enough of a democracy? I don't personally believe so. But it is what it is and we're having an election.

Salit: On your point that conservatives don't like John McCain, what McCain tried to do with Palin, and with the negative attacks on Obama, was to overcome that. But, in doing so, and this is the current crucible of American politics, he lost support from other constituencies, from other bases, including from independents.

Newman: More important still, he's completely lost his integrity. John McCain made the decisions he made, and became so politically corrupt because it's plain that he's not thinking of the American people, but of winning an election. In my opinion, his legacy, his integrity, whatever you want to call it, is shot. That's now a part of who he is. He went after a particular outcome based entirely on expediency. There he stands with Sarah Palin and many Americans are saying is this who we really want to have as vice president? They're saying, in effect, McCain made that choice?

Salit: It has something of the flavor of a tragic opera. This is the story of someone, namely John McCain, who had a deserved reputation as independent-minded, as a maverick, who had a certain kind of political integrity in the Washington scene (a difficult place to do that), but who caves in at what is presumably the pinnacle of his career and a very important moment in American history. He is swallowed up by the corrupt system and by its culture and so it makes the point that until we change that system and that culture, no one, not even John McCain, is immune.

Newman: Right.

Salit: In some respects, Powell's endorsement of Obama today on *Meet the Press* had a related quality, I thought. Colin Powell, who was also swallowed up by that system – by the neo-cons and the rush to war – comes before the American people to make himself whole by rejecting right-wing Republicanism and endorsing Obama.

Newman: I thought it was powerful. I like Powell. He's a Bronx guy.

Salit: Yes, he's a Bronx guy.

Newman: It was thoughtful, well considered and well presented. It will have some impact. There are a lot of liberal moderate Republicans who have felt very left out during these last eight years, who share Powell's sentiments. If they weren't already going to go with Obama, this will certainly influence them. I thought it was well put and thoughtful. And I thought that Brokaw's response to it was truly biased.

Salit: Indeed.

Newman: I don't think Brokaw followed even the limited rules that exist for television moderators. All of his questions were based on 'some people are not going to like this.' There was not a positive question on the list. I didn't think very much of that.

Salit: I felt that way about the questions, too, but even more than that, Brokaw didn't take a breath after Powell made his statement. It was a very personal statement that I'm sure wasn't the easiest thing in the world for Powell to do, given his history and his relationship to McCain.

Newman: The response on Brokaw's part was terribly insensitive. I'm not a big fan of Brokaw's.

Salit: The media is so obsessed with proving that it doesn't have a liberal bias, that it leads them to poor performances like this one. How do you not acknowledge what Powell just finished saying and respond, *It seems like you went through a very personal process here. We appreciate your choosing this show to make your views known.* Just something on a human level. To hit him with a question about Bill Ayers was ridiculous.

Newman: Very cheap.

Salit: On *The Chris Matthews Show* Andrew Sullivan brought up the "ground game." He makes the point that in 2004 the Republican Party, the Republican machine, brought out a certain segment of voters that hadn't shown up in the polls, that didn't register on people's radar screens, that were part of the Rove door-to-door ground operation that pulled it out for Bush, particularly in Ohio, which ended up being the deciding state. Sullivan says the story this year is going to be the Obama ground game. We've seen a lot of evidence of the strength of the Obama ground game during the primaries, in terms of their fundraising, in terms of the size of their crowds and so forth.

Newman: Look, elections are about getting people to come out and vote. And, sometimes they talk about this as if it's cheating because of the size of Obama's ground game or the amount of money he's raised. Well, where did it come from? It came from the American people. It came from people who make choices about who they want to support. That's what an election is. Too much talk about a "ground game" means you think the decision is out of the hands of the voters. But, getting the people to come to the polls and vote, I thought that was what an election is. They make up these terms and then they think that because they made these terms up, something exists which corresponds to that. "The Ground Game."

Salit: One question that Chris Matthews posed to his panel, I wanted to ask you, too. It's about Obama's performance in the debates with McCain. Generally, he did well in the debates with McCain, contrasted with, as Matthews said, "his difficulty with Hillary Clinton."

Newman: It's difficult to be a black man who no one had ever heard of and beat the most famous woman in the history of the United States of America in a Democratic primary. That's how badly he did in the debates with Hillary.

Salit: Enough said. Do you buy the analysis of the effectiveness of the cool Obama image in the debates? This is the story: Obama found a winning formula for the debates, which was to stay within himself, talk about issues but stay very, very cool as a way of contrasting with McCain's kind of hyper-personality and hyper-style.

Newman: I think the evidence is overwhelming that that's who McCain is and that's who Obama is. And that's why that's what came out.

Salit: In spite of the fact that 40% of the country are independents, there remains the basic idea that the universe of politics is Democrat and Republican and if the Democrats win, by whatever they win by, it will mean that the majority of the American public is

Democratic, or leans to the Democrats in a way that erases the fact that so many Americans consider themselves independents. As somebody who talks to independents in a lot of different places in the country, I see that the majority of independents are going for Obama in November. Many in our networks were deeply involved in supporting Obama during the primary season. But I don't see any of that adding up to a big shift of allegiance to the Democratic Party. I don't see that happening. I don't think the vote for the Democrats is equivalent to that at all.

Newman: I think that depends on what you mean by a "shift." If you're talking primarily about a quantitative shift, then I think I sort of agree with you. But looked at from the Democratic Party side, it is in the midst of as much a re-thinking and a philosophical transformation as the Republican Party.

Salit: And how would you describe that? What are the issues that are being re-thought?

Newman: For the Democrats?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They're moving left.

Salit: OK. And moving left, specific to 2008, means what?

Newman: It's a qualitative shift. It's not that there are new issues, per se. Over the last batch of years, there's been a growing recognition that, if they're going to move at all, the Democrats have to counter the traditional or strategic move to the center with an overall philosophical move to the left. I think that certainly goes back at least to Howard Dean, who didn't get the nomination, and probably even before that, and certainly it's there with Obama. I see a big difference between four years ago and now within the Democratic Party. It's generational, it's attitudinal. And I think the Democratic Party is coming to the recognition that you can't beat a very right-wing Republican Party by going to the right. That's not a wise decision. I'm not saying they've become socialist. They're not socialist. But that doesn't mean you don't move somewhat to the left.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.