



"Duh"sville

Sunday, October 21, 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 21, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "Meet the Press."

Salit: It's ten weeks until voting begins in the presidential primaries. Despite the departure of some candidates, like Republican Sam Brownback, and the arrival of some candidates, like comedian Steven Colbert, the two focal points of today's discussion were the contest between Obama and Hillary on the Democratic side and the contest between Giuliani and more traditional conservative Republicans on the other. Obama is turning his message to driving at the distinctions between himself and the other top tier candidates, Hillary in particular, of course. 'My opponents,' he says, 'gave their votes to the president to authorize the war. And you have to remember that without that vote there would be no war.' The Clinton strategy and the Democratic Party overall strategy is selling the Democratic Party as the anti-war party, regardless of who the nominee is. Obama is now going up against that by underscoring the differentiation. Can he make that work?

Newman: The only way you're going to find out the answer to your question is when people start to vote. However, I think what Obama and his people believe is that Hillary has had enormous success – obviously, that goes without saying – but, in doing so, she's sucked all the oxygen out of the center. So, his "ending game" strategy is to go left, because he has no place else to go. He can't go to the center. She's taken over the center. He has to go left and see if he can re-energize the anti-war sentiment, given that the war goes on. That's what he's counting on to effect the bump that he needs. He's established his credibility as a moderate. Now, the thinking goes, he needs to go left. Does that work? I have no idea.

Salit: I think your description of Hillary having sucked out all the oxygen at the center is very accurate. Is there a contradiction, do you think, between Obama's going left and his political identity as someone who can bring people together across various kinds of divides? Do those things live comfortably together, do you think?

Newman: I think he's looking to create sort of a multi-layered identity, within which he says: *You know that I can bring people together. I'm a conciliator. But now is a moment when I have to show you who I really am, because this is the moment to make the point that I'm really the progressive. I'm really the left candidate. Hillary Clinton is not the left candidate.*

Salit: Giuliani is also honing his message at the "ten weeks away" mark. 'You might have disagreements with me' – he says to the Republican base – 'you might not agree with me on various things. But you have nothing to fear from me. I'm not going to use

the presidency to pursue or enact any kind of liberal agenda that you would find objectionable.' So, not unlike Obama, though with a different political orientation, he's adding on to the message that he's been presenting. His message has been 'I'm the one that can beat Hillary.' He's been selling that with some success. But now he's trying to customize his message to elements of the social conservative movement.

Newman: Translation. What Rudy's really saying, which coming from him is remarkably believable, is: *I'm much more interested in winning than in any principles that I've ever held.* Well, how does that play to the conservative mind? I don't know. It might play well. But it's got a downside. It's a dangerous position to take.

Salit: The downside being?

Newman: The downside is that, supposedly, a core value of conservatism is to not compromise, to be prepared to stand up for what you believe in. That's the idealized conservative. So he's taking a risk in the turn that he's making. But I think the Republicans feel they have to run some risks this year because they're not the favored party.

Salit: Exactly. He hopes what he's putting forth is a deal closer among elements of the social conservative right who might be prepared to support him because he can beat Hillary, but who still have misgivings. He needs to seal the deal with them, even with just some of them, particularly if the social conservatives aren't unified behind a single alternative.

Newman: Right. Conservatives are bright, they are a bright constituency. And if they peel the onion very far, they might decide that there's no telling what Giuliani might do, because there's no telling what the circumstances might be in the next situation. That could work for him, but it could also work against him.

Salit: On to Hillary, the main subject of the women's panel on "Meet the Press," or as one of the gals described themselves, "the skirts." Part of what you're looking at here is that there's a new book out, by Sally Bedell Smith about a Clinton presidency. She says the country hasn't completely woken up to the fact that if you elect Hillary, you're sending two presidents to the White House. Somebody who just got elected president and somebody who was already president.

Newman: Now that's an insight.

Salit: Yes. It was "Duh"sville, pretty much the whole way.

Newman: I'll say.

Salit: Everyone seemed to like the narrative about the "match" of their skill set. He's a natural, she's a wonk. They're a great team. They work well together. Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt. Was there anything that would possibly qualify as an insight here? You did write a play based on the lives of the Clintons.

Newman: I didn't find it at all interesting, either. The only thing interesting about it to me is that we're probably never going to be able to tell whether Hillary's women's vote comes from a feminist impulse or from the fact that they're madly in love with Bill.

Salit: That's a good and dicey point.

Newman: Unless the exit polls ask that directly. Which I don't think they will.

Salit: I'll put my own two cents in here. I thought the whole discussion was insulting to women.

Newman: I agree, it was insulting to women, but moreover it's insulting to the American citizenry. The premise was that the panelists really know something and the American people don't. And it's assumed that they're experts on the question of women in politics. But from whence comes that expertise? What's their credential? That they're women?

Salit: Forget about women in politics. I don't think their credentials as experts on women in life are particularly strong either. They make it sound like Hillary's the only woman on the planet who's figured out how to stay focused on things that she cares about in the midst of dealing with issues that come up in a relationship with her husband. That's ridiculous. That's what women do in their relationships.

Newman: Not to mention that it's what men do.

Salit: Before we wrap, let me get your take on Steven Colbert and his entry into the presidential race by planning to run in South Carolina. Funny? Satirical? Entertaining?

Newman: South Carolinian?

Salit: South Carolinian, yes. He comes on TV and tells a few jokes. I'm all for it. He's entertaining and he relieves the tension. After all, there wasn't very much discussion on the talk shows about our worsening relationship with Turkey or the terrorist attacks in Pakistan, because Colbert was on.

Newman: If he does run, he extends the succession of independents who don't do anything of significance. Some of them were honest and righteous, even if they didn't go anywhere. I don't know if we can construe this as an honest and righteous campaign. But who knows? He has a new book, too, doesn't he? "I am America" or something like that?

Salit: Yes, he has a book. He's got a show. He's got an agent. He's got a career. We wish him well. Thanks.

Newman: Yo.