



## WINNING, VOTING and TIES

Sunday, October 28, 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 28, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."*

**Salit:** The big question on Chris Matthews was: can Obama catch up? The Clinton campaign's strategy from the start was to project inevitability, to bolster Hillary's position and to scare other people out of the race. Obama was not intimidated by that.

**Newman:** Well, nobody was intimidated.

**Salit:** Right, nobody left the race. But here we are, 60 days out from the Iowa Caucus, and the pundits and the analysts are largely saying, 'Well, maybe she's inevitable.'

**Newman:** But nobody has voted yet.

**Salit:** Nobody has voted yet, exactly. And Chris Matthews wrapped up with a comment by David Ignatius who said 'Iowa, Iowa, Iowa, Iowa – Obama's closing the gap in Iowa, and that can turn the whole race around.'

**Newman:** I don't know if that can turn the whole race around, but when people actually do some voting, that changes the dynamics. That said, I think the Clintons have run a brilliant campaign.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** The Democrats own the anti-war issue. And even though she's the right wing of the field, she has it as well. It's part of her triangulation.

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** But the voting still has to take place. And, we don't know exactly how the voting's going to go. There are a lot of candidates out there – Republican and Democrat.

**Salit:** Chris Matthews, obviously a very bright guy with a lot of political experience, is looking at all the polls and looking at the dynamics in the race and he says 'Do the Clintons always win? Do the Clintons always get what they want?' This was the capper to a discussion about the ways in which Hillary, having been hurt by Bill's infidelity, has used that to inspire a certain connectedness to working class women, a constituency that used to distrust her. Matthews says 'What's the story here? Do they just have the personality, positioning and the goods so they always come out ahead?'

**Newman:** Chris is a bright guy. I like Chris. But, it's a little funny to say that about a president who has been through an impeachment.

**Salit:** True, but Matthews would describe that as another case of the Clintons turning a lemon into lemonade.

**Newman:** They're skillful, no doubt about that. Are they the best spokespersons for the diminishing American center? Yes. Does the center have the capacity to win in ways that forces on the right and the left don't? Yes. Are they cleverer than most people? Yes. But I don't know if I want to say they always win. They could be the most miserable married couple in the history of the world. And then there's the question of what you mean by winning. In some ways, Matthews' question is a foolish one. They win what they win, they lose what they lose, like everybody else. They both put their shoes on one at a time.

**Salit:** Obama's campaign begins by challenging the old way of doing things. He says, 'It's time to turn the page. The country's lost its vitality and its capacity to be a force for progress, both for ourselves and for the world.' How well did he connect with that message?

**Newman:** We can't know until people start voting. One could make the case that his having hung in there, in the face of what's been going on, is pretty extraordinary.

**Salit:** Another way of looking at that is to ask what's happened to the anti-war movement? Where's that sentiment?

**Newman:** Answer: the so-called left element of the base has diminished, it always diminishes.

**Salit:** Why?

**Newman:** It tends to diminish because it's not organizationally represented on its own terms.

**Salit:** It's always mediated through the Democratic Party.

**Newman:** So, you can argue on the one hand, it's dramatically diminished. On the other hand, you can say an entire national party, a multi-billion dollar national party, with all kinds of power and position in Washington, has taken it on as their official view. Is that a defeat?

**Salit:** Or is that a victory?

**Newman:** Exactly. Mark Shields and David Brooks were talking on "The Newshour" the other night and David Brooks said this unbelievable thing. He said 'The Democratic

Party has not offered an alternative, in terms of U.S. policy in the Middle East. All they're talking about is anti-Bush, anti-Bush, anti-Bush.' Well, it seems to me that if you're having a debate over which direction to pursue, whether to negotiate with the Iranian leadership and negotiate with Hamas as opposed to refusing to negotiate, that's the closest you can get to a discernible difference of policy.

**Salit:** That's a huge difference.

**Newman:** David Brooks is a bright guy. But that was not a smart thing to say. There are differences, but they get obscured by the whole socio-political process that is the American electoral system, where nothing gets defined except in the broadest terms. Still in some respects, this is a defining presidential election. And it might wind up with Hillary vs. Giuliani.

**Salit:** There's a difference for you.

**Newman:** Some ultra-leftists will say there's not much differentiation there, and in some ways, that's true. In other ways, that's potentially the most polarizing presidential election in my lifetime.

**Salit:** "Meet the Press" featured the interview with Thomas DeFrank and Bill Safire about the Nixon-Ford years. The discussion was built on the revelation in Thomas DeFrank's new book, "Write It When I'm Gone: Remarkable Off-the-Record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford." In the book he reveals a story that he withheld for almost 35 years, where Ford told him that Nixon was not going to make it to the end of his term. Of course, a lot of people in the country realized that at that point. But, he was the only one who was vice president.

**Newman:** I take it what you're saying is that he was the only one who would become president if that happened.

**Salit:** Exactly. So, DeFrank tells this story about how Ford apparently let this drop in a conversation that they were having, and realized right away that it would be a disaster to tell this on-the-record to a reporter. And so Ford convinced, and maybe muscled DeFrank into agreeing to withhold any reporting of the story until after Ford was dead.

**Newman:** The whole interview, interestingly enough, turned on exactly what is meant by the phrase "grabbed my tie."

**Salit:** Yes. DeFrank gave a somewhat vivid description of how Ford grabbed his tie when he asked him not to report the remark.

**Newman:** There are all sorts of meanings to "grabbed my tie." In his description of the scene, DeFrank said Ford gently held the bottom of his tie. But the first impression he gave was that Ford grabbed him around the neck.

**Salit** And almost strangled him into agreeing.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** There was another semantical thing, when Safire brought up that the title of the book is "Write It When I'm Gone: Remarkable Off-the-Record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford." But the quote apparently was "Write it when I'm dead" which is reported in the book. Safire seemed to be needling DeFrank about how the publisher must have insisted that they use the word "gone" instead of "dead" in the title because "dead" doesn't sell books.

**Newman:** I have no publisher so I can write a play called "Mr. Hirsch Died Yesterday."

**Salit:** That's right.

**Newman:** From the beginning, I chose that title because you're not supposed to say things like that. That was intentionally and consciously part of the choice. I come from a family where there was a great deal of death when I was a small child. But you didn't use the word. Still, that's what kids said on the street. "Oh, Hirsch died." But grownups try to sugar coat it, and I was always struck by that. It's part of why the title is so straightforward. In the play, it's Ira, one of the kids in the story who says: 'You know Hirsch died yesterday?'

**Salit:** But, you're not supposed to say that.

**Newman:** When an adult hears a kid saying that, they say 'Shhhh!'

**Salit:** I liked the story that Safire told about an incident that occurred after he left his position at the White House where he was a senior speechwriter for Nixon and went to *The New York Times*. After he'd been at *The Times* for a couple of months he wrote a memo to Nixon telling Nixon what he needed to do to straighten out his personal situation relative to Watergate so he wouldn't wind up having to resign and Safire sent him the memo. Then he told his boss, Abe Rosenthal, what he had done. Rosenthal said to him 'Next time you give advice to the White House, you do it in the pages of *The New York Times*. You don't send a private memo.'

**Newman:** *Yeah, You work for us. You don't work for Richard Nixon anymore.*

**Salit:** Tim Russert asked Safire about the office pool.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** Safire used to do a pre-election office pool at *The Times* and he would publish the results. He's retired now, so he does his office pool on his own. He creates the questions and comes up with his own answers to them. One of the questions was 'What's the greatest fear that the Democratic Party has going into the 2008 election?'

There were four or five choices listed. Safire's choice was 'a split in the party between the Pelosi wing and the Clinton wing' – between the so-called left wing and the center. Russert was surprised by this. And Safire, who is a Republican, was most intrigued by the idea that the left and the center would not be able to hold their coalition together for the rest of the election, obviously an appealing proposition if you'd like the Democrats to lose.

**Newman:** The Democrats have a lot to gain by holding that coalition together. It's called the presidency.

**Salit:** Yes, exactly.

**Newman:** I think the coalition will hold fast. That's how it reads to me. Is he correct in pointing out that if the coalition unravels everything would be torn asunder? Yes, of course, that's true. And it's also true that if Mike Bloomberg decided to run for the presidency as an independent, everything would be torn apart, too. But at this point in time I don't think that's going to happen.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** History proceeds by way of outpourings, destabilization, new ideas and so on and then things consolidate back before going forward again. My intuition is that the social motion will consolidate back before it moves ahead again.

**Salit:** Does that mean it dissipates?

**Newman:** No, in the sense that it doesn't mean that everything's gone. It's all still there. It just looks different and has a different dynamic. That is the complexity of history.

**Salit:** On "McLaughlin Group," there was an extended discussion about Pakistan. The group reviewed all the dynamics in the situation between Musharraf and Bhutto, between the Islamists and the military, between the government and the people. You mentioned to me as we were watching that you thought there was one possible ray of sunshine in the picture. What is that?

**Newman:** Sunshine might be too strong a word. But, in terms of the threat from radical Islam, in the region of South Asia you have two major powers which are historically and distinctly not Muslim, namely China and India. So, unlike the Middle East, you're not looking at region-wide sympathy for Islamic movements. I don't want to make a big deal out of that point. But, if you're petrified of some of the possibilities that exist that could be ever so slightly relieving.

**Salit:** And then McLaughlin raised a question he likes to raise with some frequency which is – "Is the era of America as the world's sole superpower coming to an end?"

**Newman:** And the answer is No. It has come to an end, in my opinion. And by “coming to an end,” in some ways agreeing with Pat Buchanan, I don’t mean that America is not still a gigantic force in the world. As the article in *The National Interest* called “A World Without the West” talked about, there are new international trends and relationships emerging outside of the political and economic universe dominated by Washington, D.C. But, Washington is an extraordinary superpower – economically, militarily, in all kinds of ways. But, Washington is no longer the center of the world. No matter how powerful it might be, it’s not the center of the world.

**Salit:** That’s a change that everybody has to deal with, including Washington. Thanks, Fred.

**Newman:** My pleasure.