



NO DRAMA OBAMA

Sunday, November 9, 2008

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, November 9, 2008 after watching "The McLaughlin Group," "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: George Stephanopoulos asks his panel: 'What were the American people saying in electing Barack Obama?' George Will says the American people were saying, *We don't like the competency level of the Bush administration. We want competent government in place that can deal with the issues that the country is facing.* David Gergen says, 'Let's not forget that this was a cultural election and the election of Barack Obama was as much cultural as it was political. What the American people were signaling was an embrace of change, both politically, but also culturally.' Let me start by asking you the same question that Stephanopoulos put to his panel: What were the American people saying in electing Barack Obama?

Newman: If I'm going to try to take that question seriously, I'd have to say that the American people weren't "saying" anything.

Salit: They weren't saying anything. What were they doing?

Newman: They were voting for Barack Obama, very passionately, and in such a way that translated into an electoral college victory. That's what the American people do in any presidential election. That will have to be enough.

Salit: Maybe this is putting the same question another way. Why did they want Barack Obama to be president?

Newman: I don't know that there is a simple answer to that question. The American people were making use of a decision-making mechanism that is available to them. This is a fairly well-established American tradition, influenced in all kinds of complex ways, but in ways that are well known. The character of presidential elections varies from candidate to candidate, from cycle to cycle. But the American people know how to elect someone president and so they do that. So, is there an absolute generalization or universal law about why someone gets elected? No. They wanted this guy to win. Now, do the 63 million individuals who voted for him constitute a group, all of whom decided together that they wanted the guy to win? I think there is some question about that.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Obama certainly was an attractive candidate. Enough Americans felt good about him to constitute a majority.

Salit: And elect him president.

Newman: Yes. Why question it further? What is the point of looking for the subterranean cause of this sort of thing?

Salit: OK. No drama. But while there may not be a “subterranean” motivation for that decision, it has consequences. Barack Obama is now the president-elect and he’ll become the president on January 20. So, there was discussion about what his mandate is. Now, you could say a mandate is simply an interpretation of what the vote means by different quarters, different individuals, different institutions, including Obama himself. On *The McLaughlin Group*, John McLaughlin said, ‘Obama has a personal mandate, not an agenda mandate. He wasn’t elected in order to do X, Y, and Z. And when you have a personal mandate that gives the widest latitude to do different kinds of things, based on what you think is the right thing to do.’ How would you describe the mandate, if you accept that premise?

Newman: Again, I’m not trying to be evasive, but I think the language is overblown. By the institutionalized techniques that we use in this country, he will become president. Now, in a very oversimplified sense, he’s a little bit like the president of Class 3-B in junior high school. He’s the most popular person in America, just as the president of Class 3-B is the most popular person in Class 3-B. Obama’s a good guy. And he’s the most popular guy. Does that make it possible for him to do things that he couldn’t otherwise do? Yes. Is it the case that his popularity could turn in a second? I don’t think it will turn so fast, mainly because it’s backed up by the Democratic Party having become the most popular party in America.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: He’s not only president of 3-B. His slate of three board eraser monitors won too, enough to get into a pretty good spot to maintain his popularity.

Salit: There was a lot of discussion of his choice of Rahm Emanuel as chief of staff.

Newman: Right.

Salit: People say, *He’s a tough guy. He’s a knee-capper. He comes out of the Clinton administration*, but the basic argument is: *This is a guy who has experience, both from the White House side and the congressional side and he will be of help to Obama in reining in a Democratic Congress.* That seems to be

fairly straight-forward and why he was chosen for that job. He seems like a good choice, given that that's the job.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: I want to ask you a couple of questions about Stephanopoulos' interview with Emanuel. The most engaged part of the interview was Stephanopoulos questioning Emanuel about what Obama's tax policy is going to be. And Emanuel says that we're going to proceed with tax relief to the middle class, 95% of Americans are going to get a tax cut of roughly \$1,000 apiece. Then Stephanopoulos says, 'What about the tax increases on the wealthy?' Emanuel says, 'Our focus is going to be on the middle class.' And Stephanopoulos asks him again, 'Are you going to back-burner tax increases on the wealthy?' Emanuel says, 'We're going to focus on the middle class.'

Newman: Stephanopoulos was rather persistent.

Salit: Yes. And here's why. The question that underlies this "dance" is the question of how much is Obama going to be about "re-distributing the wealth." Emanuel wants to postpone that discussion for now.

Newman: As I understand the way these people characterize Rahm Emanuel, he's going to bring some things to Congress which are, for various reasons, not everybody's cup of tea. And he's going to have to go to members for whom it's not their cup of tea, and he's going to have to say – in the ways he apparently knows how to do very well – *I know this is not your cup of tea. I know that is your cup of tea. But if you give us this one, I'll guarantee that I'll put in a word for that one. And if you don't give us this one, I'll break your knee.* That's what people do in Washington. Presumably Obama, who openly identified himself as a pragmatist, has a talent for and a desire for making use of that technique – not all the time, but some of the time. He wants an economic stimulus package passed. He thinks that Emanuel will help him do it. Some people are saying that political horse trading is antithetical to what Obama stands for. Nobody thinks for a moment that he stands for political horse trading. But the fact that he gave Emanuel the job, shows he does intend to play hardball. He'll also do other things.

Salit: Obviously Obama has to deal with the economy and he's already working on it. David Gergen, who's kind of a wise man (he's worked for both Republican and Democratic White Houses) says, 'You've got to get rid of the concept of the first 100 days. It's really got to be more of the first 200 or 300 days. He has to make some initial moves out of the gate that largely have to do with economic stimulus. But then he has to slow the process down.'

Newman: Well, the American people voted for change. Obama wants to put in some people who are good at getting things better as quickly as possible. The

standard list. He has to come up with a stimulus plan which shows results within the space of a year, a year and a half, two years. Not all of the desired results, but some. He needs to alter America's foreign policy on the two wars that we're involved in and that includes taking action to get out of Iraq. He needs to get a series of bills passed which make it more plain than ever that he really supports the middle class. All within the space of the first term, which is a short time. He has to move fast, and will, in my opinion. Not everyone will agree with his moves. But he will have more than enough bipartisan support to do things on the short list.

I suppose you're asking me these questions in this way because you think I'm a theoretician and, therefore, will give answers to why he would do this or why he would do that. But I think about politics much more in pragmatic terms. He made a set of promises and as president he now has the capacity to enact them. He'll get some passed. I don't think he'll get everything passed. He is an intellectual, but I think he'll get some things passed which aren't the best ideas in the world. Still, he wants to show that he can get those things passed. Again, not even getting into a discussion of the mechanics of Washington.

Salit: Well, Obama is a hard-nosed politician. So is Emanuel. You've got to be a hard-nosed politician to win the presidency with his percentage of the vote after being around on the scene for such a short time. It was interesting to me that twice during the interview Emanuel remarked about independents. He talks about bipartisanship and he also mentions independents.

Newman: What do you find interesting about that?

Salit: I hate to be cynical, but I thought he was mainly referring to Joe Lieberman.

Newman: That's what he was doing.

Salit: Yes. It was not a nod to one very important part of Obama's coalition on Election Day, which was that almost a third of the voters were independents and they broke for Obama. And McLaughlin, of course, got it wrong when he said that independents split between McCain and Obama. He's wrong. White independents split between McCain and Obama, but independents overall broke for Obama by eight points. That obviously reflects McLaughlin's bias about who independents are and what the independent movement is made up of.

Newman: Which, in turn, reflects his bias as to who people are.

Salit: Good point. I wanted to ask you about another point that Gergen made when there was discussion about the potential choices for Secretary of State. Bill Richardson's name came up. And there was some commentary that goes to the issue of re-alignment. There was discussion about the size of the Latino vote that

went for Obama (67%) and how much of a shift that represented from the last election. So, the pundits are talking about Richardson and then Gergen says, 'Something that the Obama administration should be careful of is not playing identity politics. The Clinton White House did that and they got into a lot of trouble off of that. If there's one thing that this election shows it's that people reject that modality.' That wasn't an argument against Richardson per se, but it was an argument against choosing Richardson because he has to reward the Latino vote for that.

Newman: One way of looking at what happened with the Latino vote is that the Democratic Party challenged them and said, *Go vote for John McCain and the Republican Party and you'll end up between a rock and a hard place for years.* And Latinos responded to the challenge with 67% of the vote.

Salit: Do you agree with Cynthia Tucker that there was a "reverse Bradley effect" on Election Day? That white people who had told pollsters they were voting for McCain, actually voted for Obama.

Newman: Yes, I sort of agree. I'm not so sure what it means or why it's important, but I sort of agree.

Salit: And what about this idea kicked around on *The Chris Matthews Show* that Obama was elected "by the middle. He'll run the government at the middle. That this is a mandate from the middle." This is David Brooks' argument.

Newman: David Brooks invariably interprets everything as coming from the middle. What he's really saying is that if Obama's smart, he won't do anything from the left.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I don't know if that's right. I certainly think that the new White House will be putting their head in the sand if they think they can get away without encouraging the left. I don't know what it ultimately amounts to, if it's a mandate for the left or whatever. But the left is going to have much more of a voice.

Salit: Yes. Thanks.