



STOP TALKING

Sunday, November 11, 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, November 11, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: Barack Obama has had a good couple of weeks. At the Democratic Party debate in Philadelphia, Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner, came under fire from Obama and John Edwards, as well as Joe Biden and Chris Dodd. Edwards was the strongest "prosecutor" in the debate, but it looks increasingly like Obama is the beneficiary. The latest Marist Poll from New Hampshire shows that the gap between Clinton and Obama is closing. Whereas she had a 20 point lead over him, she now has a 10 or 11 point lead over him. Today he was on "Meet the Press" and his objective on the show was to demonstrate that he's ready for primetime, that he's ready to be president, that he has the intellect and the leadership capacity to make up for whatever he might lack in experience.

Newman: That's all true. But from this point on it's all about what happens on the ground. As you get closer and closer to Election Day, it gets harder and harder, i.e. sillier and sillier to assess dynamics, or even talk about polls, because the real polls will soon be open.

Salit: And people will vote.

Newman: Right. It looks like a very close race in Iowa.

Salit: Yes, it's very competitive.

Newman: We've come to know who Obama is and what he stands for. Do you want to trust that what he's saying converts to a serious development-oriented approach or to use a more standard term, change-oriented approach? Hard to say. But I think the most important point that Obama made today, which I've heard him make before but not quite as clearly as in today's Russert interview, was that he represents the best candidate for bringing in a whole new Democratic regime.

Salit: As opposed to Hillary, who if she wins, does so by a very narrow margin.

Newman: I think Obama is saying, I've maintained a course which makes it possible for me to win bigger than Hillary, and that could mean everything in the final analysis, because that's what's going to be needed to effect the things that I'm talking about. Hillary is experienced. But she's also divisive. No matter how you cut it, she's going to be divisive. I think that was his central point today. I think that's a rather powerful statement. I don't know if Bill's going to respond to it or if Hillary's going to respond to it,

but I think it's a rather strong statement. It resonates. Can she win in November? Yes. Can she win the presidential in such a way as to assure that the country will move in a more progressive direction? That's highly questionable.

Salit: That's very interesting and I was very struck by that too. Towards the end of the interview Russert asked Obama 'Can Hillary win?' And he said 'Well, yes, Hillary can definitely win in November, but it's not about just about winning. We need to create a new working majority that can take this country forward, a new more broad-based, electoral coalition that will allow us to address the various problems and issues that we face.' Let's talk about how he defines those issues. He says he wants to move the policy conversation forward. 'We have to put the old arguments behind us.' So Russert says: 'Well, what do you mean by that? What are you talking about when you say that?' So then Obama goes on to talk about foreign policy and says, 'These issues often get framed as hawk vs. dove. Either you're for an aggressive military strategy which completely sidelines diplomatic measures or you're for the reverse, and you never want to use the military. Obama says, we have to be willing to go down both roads. That's a completely non-controversial statement and I don't know if that counts as "moving the conversation forward." Do you hear him putting old arguments behind us and bringing in a new approach to the table politically?

Newman: He's not going to say any more than he's already saying. The question is whether a sufficient number of Americans – mainly Democrats for now – think that what he's saying would lead to him being a different kind of president.

Salit: Okay.

Newman: There's a question of whether voters make that leap of faith and therefore go out and vote for Obama. He's not going to give you any more than what he's currently giving. In my opinion, what you see is what you get. The same is true with Hillary. You have a fair idea of what you're getting. It's Triangulation. The Clintons have been in the game for quite a while. So, which do you favor? Now, if you're saying, *It would be nice if that were clearer.* Maybe. But it's not going to get any clearer.

Salit: I'm trying to keep in mind your introductory caveat here about how the closer it gets to the election, the more ridiculous it becomes to analyze the dynamics.

Newman: Unless you're part of a 12-person panel of experts who have a contract to keep talking. To use a baseball analogy, the sports pages are never more filled with nonsense than the week before a World Series opens, or a playoff starts. Because at that point, everybody's saying 'Stop already. Everything's going to be transformed by how the first game goes.'

Salit: We're there.

Newman: Yes, we're there. Everything's going to be transformed by how the first caucus goes. And how that's going to play with the first primary. And how that plays with

Nevada and South Carolina. That's why I'm saying I think a sensible position would be to say nothing's really going to happen between now and then. Everyone's waiting for Game One.

Salit: Were you surprised that Russert didn't ask Obama any questions about his relationship to other black leaders?

Newman: Well, he did, in effect. He put up a negative quote from Charlie Rangel.

Salit: That is true.

Newman: So, that was his question about relationships between black leaders. He was implying by that question *You're not uniformly loved by African American leadership in this country*. And Obama chose not to address it at all.

Salit: And that's what he'll continue to do, I'm sure. Jumping over to "The McLaughlin Group's" discussion about the political situation in Pakistan.

Newman: Your best bet would be to think that ultimately there's going to be some power-sharing arrangement between Musharraf and Bhutto. If it's a relatively fair election, Bhutto will win. I imagine that's probably going to get cut into the deal.

Salit: Right.

Newman: And Musharraf will have some major position, and there will be a "peaceful transition" from something resembling quasi-tyrannical rule to quasi-tyrannical rule with a liberal face. And everything going on underground will continue. There will continue to be a radical – call it extremist if you like – movement, and that will go on. We'll see how that plays.

Salit: And the martial law, the house arrests, the arrests of hundreds of lawyers?

Newman: I don't want to minimize their significance. On the other hand, I don't want to turn it into something that's so different from what's been going on, or something that's so monumental. I don't want to participate in the politics of fear which so characterizes things these days. It's not that the situation isn't of concern. But that doesn't mean you have to do fear politics.

Salit: James Warren argued that if the U.S. could get it together to pull back on some of that money we give Pakistan, it would decrease Musharraf's capacity to feed the military patronage mill and that would unglue his support within the officer corps and go a long way to help the military shift allegiances to Bhutto.

Newman: The bottom line is that the United States wants to find ways to continue to support a moderate government with a powerful army.

Salit: Somebody, I don't remember who, on "The McLaughlin Group" said that if we export democracy and democracy produces results we like, we should be all for democracy. And if it doesn't, then basically screw democracy.

Newman: You're asking who said that on "The McLaughlin Group?"

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I think it was George Washington.

Salit: Okay. Your point is that philosophy has been around for a while. Thanks, Fred.