



## TEAM OF OBAMAISTS

Sunday, November 23, 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 23, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."*

**Salit:** The talk is about whether Obama's announced appointments signal that he's allowing Washington to change him rather than his being the one to change Washington. That's coupled with the idea that the team Obama is putting together is a sign that he is going to govern from the Center-Right. Tell me your thoughts about that conclusion.

**Newman:** What signs are these Washington pundits looking for? That Obama's going to come in and transform everything, including who is cleaning the streets? No, I don't know that he's going to clean house in that way. We do know that he's not afraid to bring on board some people with whom he's disagreed. The bottom line, though, is that he's president and he's telling them what to do. I don't think the argument that the presence of those types in top government jobs indicates how things are going to play out, has any validity at all. Appointing Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State isn't to be interpreted as his bending to her will. That's ridiculous. It's just straight out ridiculous.

**Salit:** He's the one who was elected president.

**Newman:** Yes. And who did the American people elect? Some guy who was just doing anything to get to be president without having an agenda? Not at all. This is a Change President, until proven otherwise. I don't know that he's going to change the world or Washington the way I would. But there's no reason to see him as less than a "Change President."

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Psychologically speaking, if you want to change everything, you'd like the people who have messed up to be a part of making that change.

**Salit:** Presumably, that would be a part of changing everything.

**Newman:** Nine months ago a lot of people said that Obama was never going to talk about race in the campaign. Well, you can hardly say that he didn't talk about race in the campaign. Observers should be cautious about their predictions. Obama's temperament is not so much moderate as it is determined.

I think he's being honest when he says he thinks he can accomplish most of the things he wants done without offending everybody in Washington. And, obviously he has a plan for doing that. Namely, he's going to hire everybody in Washington.

**Salit:** Seems that way.

**Newman:** Obama needs that kind of experience, not to direct him, but in some ways to have them become enthusiasts for his kind of thinking, his way of doing things. He's not going left. Nor is he going center or right. He won't go extreme because the American people didn't call for extreme. Did they call for "change"? Yes. Is that change more progressive than anything we've seen in Washington in a long time? Yes. So, I think that knee-jerk analysis about him going center-right is ludicrous. Didn't the analysts stay awake on election night?

**Salit:** David Axelrod, in his typically soft-spoken way, says 'Obama's running the show. Make no mistake about it. He's setting the policy and these people are going to come on his team to implement his policy.' The pundits seem to be misreading Obama. I'm not convinced that the players are misreading him. They may be testing him, but I don't know they're misreading him.

**Newman:** You see, the Beltway commentators don't really conceive of change in the way Obama's talking about. I don't think they speak the same language.

**Salit:** OK, but what does that mean? Obviously, they've heard of a stimulus package before. As well as different approaches to health care. So, is it a cultural disconnect? What is it?

**Newman:** They don't think that Obama understands the "ways" of Washington. They take him to be naïve. So, they're saying to him 'Wait and see what happens when the heavy hands of Washington start doing the things that they do.'

**Salit:** I guess that's one reason to put some heavy hands on his team. So when the heavy hands come down...

**Newman:** Obama's plan is to make the insiders do the "dirty work" of changing this whole thing. And then when the Beltway says: *Oh, that's not realistic. That's not going to happen*, his team will have to figure out what to say in response.

**Salit:** So, he derives his power to do that from a number of things, one of which is the kind of person that he is, and the other is the American people who put him in office.

**Newman:** Right. And he can turn to the authority figures he's put in top government posts and say *You figure out how to do what I want. If you can do that, that's great. And if not, I'll accept your resignation.*

**Salit:** What do you think of his choice of Hillary for Secretary of State?

**Newman:** Obviously, I don't know what their conversations were like. I would hope that they were fairly candid. And I would hope that one thing they talked about, not to oversimplify the nomenclature, was that she is substantially to the left of her husband. In my imagined conversation, Obama says to Hillary *Is there a way in which we can form a coalition around that – a new coalition – that's where I'm looking to go. Then we have a basis for working together.*

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Personally, I don't like her politics. Obama doesn't share her politics, either. Could their conversation have included him saying, *Hillary, if you had gone a little bit more left than you went, you might have won the presidency.*

**Salit:** Well, that would be a frank conversation.

**Newman:** And Obama adds, *Now you get to repair that. You'll be the Obama Secretary of State and you'll run around the world and make friends with everybody. Are you down for doing that?*

**Salit:** I think it was Stephanopoulos who asked at one point whether the choices that Obama's making, including Hillary for Secretary of State, create friction with that element of his coalition that was against the war. Of course, ending the war has little to do with the Secretary of State. As a practical matter, it has to do with the military leadership. So Hillary doesn't really figure in that decision.

**Newman:** No. And Hillary can correctly say *The American people want the war to be over.*

**Salit:** Yes, and that's the policy that this government is going to pursue.

**Newman:** And they elected Barack Obama to do it.

**Salit:** Another framing of these dynamics is the question of pragmatism vs. ideology. The *New York Times* says 'Obama's picks are a sign that he's going to govern as a pragmatist rather than an ideologue.'

**Newman:** That's a little confusing if you believe, as I do, that American ideology is pragmatic.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** So, what exactly does that mean?

**Salit:** I find that confusing, too. I'm not sure what being an ideologue means here. The Republicans tried to defeat Obama with that argument, certainly.

**Newman:** Yes, that's what they were hoping for. That was the basis on which McCain ran his campaign. "He's really a socialist." That doesn't make it reality. The voters voted and said no, it's not that.

**Salit:** It's not about ideology.

**Newman:** Right. They said that the trouble with the Iraq war is that it's not working, they're not invoking an ideological principle. They're saying it's stupid and it's not working. As pragmatists, the American people are intolerant of that. America's supposed to work better than everybody else, not worse than everybody else.

**Salit:** We're not supposed to be the laughing stock of the world.

**Newman:** George Bush is not a pragmatist. He's an ideologue. Actually, George Bush is an ideologue in disgrace.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** I don't think Obama's going to fall into that trap. He's looking to do things that the American people think are working. He's considering some different kinds of things, and that's fine, because he just got elected president.

**Salit:** As you said, George Bush and the neo-cons were highly ideological. They developed policy approaches that reflected an ideology, not a pragmatic framework for dealing with the situation in the Middle East, responding to terrorism, etc. So, the American people say *Well, we reject ideology in favor of pragmatism. We think Obama can deliver that. And, we'd like to see pragmatism delivered by somebody with a progressive world view.*

**Newman:** Well, I don't know if I agree with that formulation. I don't know that the American people are making that kind of inference.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** I think they're saying something closer to wanting the American Idea to be more palatable. They'd rather we're not just the place where all the troops come from. We'd be better off having other ways to assert our leadership internationally.

**Salit:** Yes, and that's connected to changing America's role in the world and the current economic situation.

**Newman:** Yes. The issue on the policymakers' agenda is not socialism or capitalism. It's the U.S. relationship to China, to India, to Brazil, etc.

**Salit:** So our government is trying to come up with a stimulus package that's going to address that. And, the debate that they're having, at least one debate that they're having which we saw this morning is, how do you stimulate the U. S. economy? As David Brooks framed it, we have to make a choice between "roads and relationships," between an approach that focuses on infrastructure and traditional public works or something more "new economy" and human services oriented.

**Newman:** Whose roads and whose relationships are they talking about? China wants to know why their roads don't come first. The old paradigm, the Bretton Woods paradigm, is over. The U.S is not the center of the universe and it doesn't set the terms in the ways that it once did. That's what changes the shape of the domestic argument.

**Salit:** Well, we didn't hear any of that in the discussion today.

**Newman:** No.

**Salit:** Towards the end of the roundtable discussion the Stephanopoulos panel touched on the political fights that will ensue and in particular, fights within the Left, broadly speaking. The argument at the moment is there's not going to be any fights because there's going to be a 750 billion dollar economic stimulus package of some kind and so, as somebody said, *Everybody is going to get everything*. The typical interest-group fights that go on relative to how much is going to go to Labor, how much is going to go to Housing, how much is going to child care – are not going to happen for the next couple of years because there's going to be so much money streaming out of Washington that there's not going to be a great deal of friction between different "Left" interest groups. But, what they're really talking about is where's the Left, politically, in the wake of the Obama victory. The traditional left program is largely social and economic, and so one argument here is that's all going to be addressed by Obama's stimulus package and so there's not going to be the same kinds of rivalries. What's your political sense of that?

**Newman:** My point is that the Left – broadly speaking – is going to have to engage the fact that it's no longer just a domestic issue of how we divvy up the money. It's a different picture. You're sitting at a different table. It's a different time. Choices are going to have to be made about relinquishing U.S. dominance and creating greater international equity.

**Salit:** I thought the political point that the commentators were making was that Obama, in effect, doesn't have to worry about his Left, politically speaking, because everybody's going to "get taken care of."

**Newman:** You might be right about that. But I think what Obama's team is saying is that we're going to have to pull together because it might be us against the world. And so it might be that in some ways, no one's going to be taken care of. Because we don't have the capacity internationally to make that happen. It's one thing to divide up when the pot is quite full. That's not what the pot is now. The rest of the world is not going to allow things to "get built back up" off of this economic collapse to where they were before, in terms of restoring U.S. dominance. How's the Left going to handle that? See, the American Left could stand up and say, *Let's have more jobs for American workers. Build more roads by American workers. We want infrastructural work in America, for Americans, by American workers.* Or are they going to say, *Let's start equalizing the distribution of wealth internationally so that China gets more and India gets more, so that money goes to Calcutta, not to Chicago.* Where's the American Left going to land on this basic question of nationalism vs. internationalism? Well, I'm not sure they know.

**Salit:** Thanks, Fred.