



## OBAMA'S STRATEGY PAYS OFF

Sunday, December 16, 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, December 16, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "Meet the Press."*

**Salit:** The Chris Matthews crew discussed – what else – Iowa. They talked about how Hillary appears to be losing momentum while Obama is surging. What's happened? Hillary's been on the defensive since the Philadelphia debate. There are various anecdotes about her top level people stumbling. And then Andrew Sullivan says: 'Here's the deal. Obama has all the arguments. There's no rationale for the Clinton candidacy. Their policy positions on issues are, roughly speaking, the same, albeit with slight differences on their healthcare plans. So, it's not about that. It's about that the argument for Obama is he's addressing how to move the country forward, how to heal the divisions, how to "turn the page," and Hillary doesn't have an argument.'

**Newman:** Obama's answer is "I'm how."

**Salit:** I'm how?

**Newman:** His argument is "I'm how you change the country."

**Salit:** Yes, I'm how you change the country. And Hillary doesn't have a sufficient response to that. And that's why she's losing traction.

**Newman:** When she uses an identical argument and says "I'm how to change the country," people can justifiably say to her, "Well, didn't you spend eight years in the White House? Did you change the country in these ways?" And the answer is no. So, that's what's meant by saying that Obama has the edge in that argument.

**Salit:** However, she's been trying to make the case, and so has her husband, that they did bring change during those years, and that was positive for the country. So, why doesn't that argument stick with the voters?

**Newman:** Well, those were different changes that she and Bill are talking about. She didn't effect the changes that the Democratic Party is talking about this year. Obama's saying 'I'm a fresh face. I'm a new face and I've always stood for a new politic and I will affect that. You've already had your shot.' That's a compelling argument.

**Salit:** So, when you said Obama's message is "I'm the way to change the country" he means "I have the vision and the moral authority and the personal history."

**Newman:** And “I’m not one of the insiders who created what you all created.”

**Salit:** “I come from a different generation.”

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** “I come from a different political orientation and a different racial background.”

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** Okay. Then Andrew Sullivan said that he, Sullivan, was wrong on the following point. He spent months urging Obama to go more directly at the Clintons, but Obama didn’t do it. Sullivan kept hammering Obama to do it but Obama didn’t. And now, Sullivan says, Obama was right not to do it because what he was able to do – instead of going negative on Clinton and on Clintonism in the way that Sullivan and others advocated – was to stay positive, to stay with his “moving past the divisions” message. And it worked. That was the right way to play it.

**Newman:** I think that paints a picture of Obama as a little more high-minded than he probably was in making that decision. While he might have believed those kinds of things, an underlying motive of some importance was, I think, that he figured that if he waited long enough, Edwards would make those attacks and he’d be the beneficiary.

**Salit:** Smart.

**Newman:** That’s what eventually happened. Edwards was obliged to make those direct attacks and Obama benefited from them. He added his own spin, as it were. But, it worked out better to have Edwards do the attacking.

**Salit:** Dan Rather thinks that Edwards is going to win Iowa.

**Newman:** I wouldn’t be surprised. Nobody should be surprised at all if Edwards wins Iowa.

**Salit:** Well, here we are and the three Democratic frontrunners are an African American progressive, a woman and a white populist. I guess there’s a little bit of a “wow” there.

**Newman:** Yes. Neither a woman nor an African American has come this close to being the candidate of a major party. And Edwards has moved substantially to the left over the last four years. But, that’s what the Democratic Party is running on. It’s running against a regime of eight years that’s been far right. Not exactly a surprise, but it’s new. It hasn’t happened before.

**Salit:** Chris Matthews put up polling numbers at the top of the show, showing where the candidates were at in 2004 with a similar number of days out from Iowa. Howard Dean and Dick Gephardt were tied for first place at 25% and Kerry was at 15%. So Matthews puts this up on the screen, and basically the message here is anything can happen between now and Election Day, that at this point in the process the numbers don't tell you what's going to happen.

**Newman:** That goes without saying.

**Salit:** Yes, that goes without saying. But you could also talk about what's entirely disanalogous between the 2004 and 2008 contests. In 2004, Dean, the mainstream antiwar candidate was ahead going into Iowa, ahead in all the national polls, but the party was enormously conflicted – not the base of the party, nor ultimately the delegates at the convention – but the party was conflicted over how explicitly antiwar their candidate should be in order to beat George Bush. Kerry was able to take advantage of that, and that's how he was able to surge at the end. In 2008 that conflict has been resolved. So it's a very different set of circumstances.

**Newman:** Yes, and if you really look at the leading Democratic candidates, not only at their personalities, but at who they are, there's an African American candidate, a woman candidate and a strong left populist candidate. Of course, the numbers can always change. But that's a profoundly different statement – it's a statement that the Democratic Party wants to do something new. And I think that Obama is more of a spokesperson for that than Clinton's been. Not enormously, but by enough of a margin to make a difference. That's what he's going for. So, when she goes for experience, it has some validity and people are moved by it, but it also can hurt her, because experience sounds like *We're not that invested in transformational change*. And that's what Obama is betting the people want. But, you're right. Iowa 2008 is a very different looking campaign than Iowa 2004.

**Salit:** We watched Republican Mitt Romney on "Meet the Press." Here's my take away from seeing it. Clearly, he's taking more right wing or socially conservative positions than he's taken during his prior career. That's obvious. And, he does that because – and this isn't rocket science – that's the nature of the base of the organization whose nomination he's seeking. I know that some people find that offensive. You're supposed to find that offensive. I actually didn't particularly find that offensive. I don't agree with those positions, but that's roughly what he's doing. To me, what seems to be missing is his positive statement. Where does he want to take the Republican Party? Where does he want to take the country at this time of crisis, as he describes it? I just don't see that in his message.

**Newman:** I don't see that in the Republican message across the board. As I said before, I think this is a party vs. party election. And I think the Republicans are

holding on to their view that America has to be strong, that it has to be able to fight the war on terrorism, and their argument is that's the only thing that really matters.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** The Democrats are putting forth another position.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** As you say, Romney's a bright guy. And he's looking to project himself as the candidate of reason, as a candidate who's thought about the issues, even thought about them sufficiently to recognize that he wanted to change his position. But, after all, that's what a reasonable person does. If you look at something and after carefully examining it you realize that your prior position is not exactly the way you do think about it, then you move on to a different position. I think he's trying to do that, and we'll see how successful he is. How do the American people respond to that? We don't know. Some people are moved by that. I think other people say, 'Well, he's just a flip-flopper.' The people who say 'He's just a flip-flopper' won't vote for him.

**Salit:** True enough. Do you see the scenario that some people see? Huckabee wins Iowa, and basically the Iowa vote is essentially a message to the Republican Party, kind of a 'Hey, we don't like any of the big shots you've given us, so we're going to vote for him to deliver that message.' And then you get to New Hampshire and John McCain comes on strong.

**Newman:** But Huckabee will get some votes there if he wins Iowa, I assure you.

**Salit:** That's true, he will. But, on this scenario, in New Hampshire there is some kind of McCain surge, maybe he's not able to win New Hampshire, but he comes in a strong second.

**Newman:** Not unlikely. In fact, I think it's likely. Which will leave the Republicans at that point without a popular candidate who also has money. So, then it's more wide open than ever.

**Salit:** Yes, and you go to South Carolina and maybe Giuliani does a little bit better there.

**Newman:** Could be. And it also could be a very close race either for first and second or second and third between McCain and Huckabee. So that doesn't exactly clarify things.

**Salit:** No, it doesn't. And that's really the point. You have a whole set of events that don't clarify anything. And then you get to February 5<sup>th</sup> with 25 states all in one day.

**Newman:** And Huckabee and McCain have no money.

**Salit:** Yes, these guys have no money and Giuliani has a jillion dollars.

**Newman:** Exactly. And there's a particular reason why having money makes such a critical difference. It always does, but in this case, it's crucial because having money means you can buy media. And buying media is crucial, not simply because it enables you to get your message out, but the nature of the media environment is such that you can no longer easily distinguish between what's paid media and what's news. The lines between them aren't bright lines, and people have become so saturated with messaging that you can no longer tell what something is. Is it a paid message from the candidate or is Keith Olbermann on MSNBC doing an interview? It's confusing. And that means that candidates who can spend a lot of money on media and further blur those lines can give themselves a kind of legitimacy because it can appear that the so-called objective coverage is positive for them.

**Salit:** That's the saturated self as it looks in politics circa 2008.

**Newman:** Or the Saturated Republican.

**Salit:** Yes, of course. Thanks, Fred.