



The '60s Happened Sunday, May 4, 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, May 4, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," and "Meet the Press."

Salit: Barack Obama was Tim Russert's guest for the full hour on *Meet the Press*. They discussed the Rev. Wright controversy and the process that Obama went through in handling the events of the last week. Russert asked Obama to account for why he hadn't more fully distanced himself from Rev. Wright until this week. Obama said that in his Philadelphia speech he'd denounced "the words," not "the man." But this week he felt that Rev. Wright "doubled down" on his previous remarks and that made it necessary for him to distance himself more definitively than he had. And Russert said to him: 'Could you have done this better. In retrospect, given how things played out, what have you learned from this? Could you have done this better?' Obama replied 'Well, in politics they say it's good to pull the Band Aid off quickly.' I guess he was saying, *Maybe I didn't do that in this situation, but now I've learned*. Let me ask you that same question. Could Obama have handled this better?

Newman: I think he could have handled it much better. And I think the way to do that was not to talk pop psychology and try to have that do the work for you. Pop psychology is nonsense. He needs to talk history. And he hasn't talked history. And I think that's very disappointing. By talking history, he could have said: *You know there was something called the 1960s. It was a very important time. It was the beginning of a very significant and divisive period in American history which continues to this day. Things were said by all kinds of people – on the left and on the right. Some were of value. Some were ridiculous and absurd. But all that actually happened. That's part of American history. And people who want to paint away that period of American history are simply blinding themselves to the progress we've made and to the fact that we have to continue with that progress. Rev. Wright is a relic of that period. He's a 60-year-old man whose views were deeply shaped by the events of that era. And there are a lot of people who still hold to those views because people don't give up their views very easily. I am not a product of that period. I have a whole different set of views. And so do millions upon millions of Americans. But that history is our history. And we have to accept it and grow from it and heal with it, not turn it into something which can add to the divisiveness which persists in the country.* He could have discussed the history of the last 40 years in a sensible kind of way. But he chose not to. And I'm disappointed in that, yes.

Salit: Obama's narrative has been we have to move beyond those divisions. 'I have moved beyond that,' he says. 'America is moving beyond that.' He would agree with the description of Rev. Wright as a relic of the 60s.

Newman: You just took “relic of the 60s” out of context of what I said. You can’t go beyond where you were unless you engage where you were. You can’t do things that way. You have to accept where you’ve been, the conflictedness of where you’ve been, the bitterness of that period, and how that still continues on today and will into the future. History doesn’t stop running because you’re running for president. The world doesn’t stop turning because Barack Obama’s on the scene. I think he’s a wonderful candidate. But I think he has to accept that there was this very volatile part of American history. He doesn’t have to accept the views of that period, but he has to accept the history of that period...because that’s American history. I think he’s worked overtime to disassociate himself from the 60s, which is a critical period in the very debate which he’s talking about resolving.

Salit: That’s accurate.

Newman: Give me a break. You can’t do that. You have to include that period and it’s only if you include that period as part of a balanced and serious consideration of this whole period that you can really make any kind of sense of, or help people to make sense of, Rev. Wright. Because that’s who he is. To try to handle it psychologically is a potentially disastrous mistake for Obama.

Salit: When you say “handle it psychologically,” what are you referring to?

Newman: ‘Well, we disagree this much, but not quite this much. Before I did this with the words. Now I’m doing it to the man.’ What sense can be made of that? What depth sense can be made of that? It’s just not an analysis with any weight. An analysis with weight has to say: *The last 40 years of history in this country took place. It actually happened. Do you want me to discuss my relationship to black radicalism, to the Black Panther Party for example, by asking me to take a position on their view on this or their view on that? I can’t do that. Number one, I wasn’t there. And, number two, that’s not the issue. People don’t know what they would have done “if.” They know there was a piece of history which produced all kinds of things, including the Black Panther Party, including the Far Right, including Martin Luther King, including Stokely Carmichael, including the Moral Majority – all that history.* He has to give some evidence that he knows the history, which he hardly ever does because he wants to make it sound as if everything is beginning again with Barack Obama.

Salit: But it isn’t.

Newman: No. And people won’t believe that, ultimately. And they shouldn’t believe that because it’s obviously nonsense. He has to say: *This movement for change that’s taking place now, it didn’t start with me. There were things going on before I was born and before you were born and before most Americans were born. That history is an important part of where we are now. In fact, it’s because of that history that I am where I am now. That doesn’t mean that I agree with all that history. It’s not a question of agreement or disagreement. History is history whether someone agrees or not.* It’s not been well presented, in my opinion. It’s not been well considered. I think the Obama people were so pre-occupied with “the world begins with Barack Obama-ism” that they

didn't want to discuss this history. But this history is a very important part of where we are and what's happening in this country. So, Obama leaves the door open for Rev. Wright to be the historian. Well, I don't want Rev. Wright doing my history. I think Obama has a responsibility to give a more serious and accurate history.

Salit: What you're talking about here goes right to the heart of the major thematics of the Obama campaign. What I'm referring to is the idea that this is the campaign, this is the candidacy, this is the moment in American history when we're going to stop fighting the fights of the 60s. This is a narrative or a framing that has been very central to Obama's persona. His message is those fights, those identity politics battles and the battle between left and right that defined the culture wars, has put America in a place where it can't move forward politically. And so Obama says, 'I'm the right man for this moment in American history because I'm not over-determined by those fights and those positions.' What I hear you saying is that the fact that he's not over-determined by those fights means that he could and should be able to explicate that history in a way that sheds some light on where we are and various things that are going on, including the controversy over Rev. Wright.

Newman: Obama and his people have to make up their mind. Is the problem of America those fights? Or is America's problem the corruption in Washington, DC?

Salit: OK.

Newman: You can't equivocate on that. Those fights couldn't be "the problem" in America because those fights produced Barack Obama. So if he's the solution, it's those fights that produced him. What he has to go up against now is the corruption in Washington. So, there's confusion in his presentation that he has to take responsibility for. Wright comes on the scene and says, 'Do you think you're going to forget the 60s? Ha, ha. I'm going to remind you of the 60s.' And Obama's vulnerable to that because he wants to sweep the 60s and everything that followed from that under the rug. He projects himself, and from the beginning projected himself, as "I'm the solution to all of that." But that's equivocal. Why? Because that's not been the problem. He's already a product of that whole period and presumably he thinks that's a plus. The problem that he needs to take on is the corruption in Washington. And Hillary Clinton is a part of that corruption. That's got to be his focus. His failure to actually say: *The 60s, the 70s, all those battles – that's been a good thing. It's produced things which took us to the point of my being a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Were stupid things said and done during that period? Yes. Were extremist things said and done during that period? Yes. Would I have associated with those? I hope not, but maybe in some ways, I even have. But that's not the point. The point is that all that happened. That's part of history. However, that is not the issue in this campaign. The issue is the corruption in Washington and Hillary Clinton is a part of that corruption and we all know that.* That's the speech.

Salit: You're saying that the Obama campaign hasn't made up its mind on that issue. But, they are going after the corruption issue. That's the theme of the commercials that he's got running now in North Carolina and Indiana.

Newman: He may be running commercials, but he's been taken off course by having to engage the Wright controversy. And the reason that he finds himself in the position where he has to engage these other issues is because he and his people were trying to whitewash the history of the last 40 years. Why do that? Why whitewash that? Why not say: *I'm proud of that. I'm proud of the American people who engaged in that. I'm proud of that people's movement that did something about that war in Vietnam – it was a dreadful war – just as I'm proud of that people's movement which is saying something about the war in Iraq. I'm proud of all that. I would think that Hillary would be, too. She was a part of the 60s, too. Now, were there extreme statements that were made on all sides, ridiculous statements? Are some of those still in the hearts and minds of some people, like Rev. Wright? Yes, they are. Do they have an appeal to a lot of people all over the place, but surely in the black community? Yes, they do. I can't deny them and don't wish to deny them...because, in some respects, I'm a product of them. And because the world doesn't start with Barack Obama.*

Salit: Some people would say, not exactly in the terms that you're talking about, that the speech he gave in Philadelphia had some elements of that in it, but he was forced to move off of that position. I don't know whether you would agree.

Newman: What's the "that" of that position?

Salit: Wherein he identified Rev. Wright's voice and Rev. Wright's views as views that come out of a particular experience and a particular way of seeing the world in the black community. But he certainly didn't talk about the 60s.

Newman: I know he didn't. That's the very point I'm making. That's exactly what he painted over in his speech on race. He talked about the black community and the black experience. But there were other people involved in the 60s besides the black community. There was a war that had to be stopped and protested. And Americans from many different walks of life came together to do that.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I think that if an objective history is to be written about why he lost this campaign, if he loses, it's going to be because of his blindness to the 1960s. It was not a black phenomenon. It was an American phenomenon.

Salit: Thank you, Fred.