



Where's the Latrine?...

Sunday, June 1, 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, June 1, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: The big news story today was the rules committee meeting that dealt with Florida and Michigan. The committee came up with a solution where the delegations from each are going to be seated, but each delegate will have half a vote instead of a full vote. The Clinton campaign raised questions about the fairness of the solution. Howard Dean, DNC Chairman explained that the compromise was put forward by the Michigan State Party and the Florida State Party. All of that to say there's some expectation that Obama will cross the finish line this week and between earned delegates and superdelegates will become the party's nominee. Donna Brazile and a few other commentators seemed to think that the Clinton strategy at the DNC meeting was that they wanted to lose because it allows them to continue to nurse their grievances, project themselves as having been treated unfairly, which could enable them to pick up the biggest possible popular votes in the remaining contests. If there is an idea that she has been mistreated by the Party, it creates a foundation for her staying in, and as Harold Ickes said, reserving the right to challenge the rules decision. Do you see it in those terms?

Newman: Well, I don't have a lot of thoughts about it and I'll tell you why. It's their party and they make up the rules and change the rules and alter the rules as they please, because it's their job to select a candidate. And they're going through a process. Different camps and different people have different interests and theories about the process, obviously. But I don't know that I am in a position, morally or epistemologically, to comment on their process. I don't like their processes for almost everything, but I'm least critical of this one. Unlike other situations where the Democrats and the Republicans take advantage of certain legal and political situations to effect a process which is unfair, in this case, I think it's fair because it's up to them to decide who their candidate's going to be. So I don't have a lot of commentary on that.

Salit: Howard Dean said it's the media's job to search for the conflict in this. He added 'From where I sit, yesterday's rules committee meeting was the beginning of the Democratic Party coming together.'

Newman: Right. Actually, from where I sit and most Americans sit, we don't really give a damn.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I think most Americans think, *You have your way of deciding this*. At this stage, most Americans want to know who is your candidate? You've been through endless hours, endless days, endless news coverage. You've got two choices, so who's your candidate? Who you got? At the end of the day, the American people don't care about the rightness of an argument in a baseball game. They care who wins the baseball game. So, I'm just a simple minded old guy who has reached that point in the process. I want to know who are they going to run.

Salit: Meanwhile the Republicans are assuming that McCain is running against Obama. So, this week the Republicans tried to thread the needle on the following story: Obama hasn't been to Iraq for 871 days. Consequently, they argue, it shows that he's disconnected from American foreign policy, that he doesn't know what's going on "on the ground," that he hasn't been there to support the troops. Then, McCain makes a set of statements about the success that our policy is having in Iraq, including he says we've reduced our troop levels to pre-surge numbers. Obama jumped on that and said it was inaccurate, that he was mistaken, and the fact that McCain didn't admit that it was a mistake is a sign that McCain's going to be like George Bush, because this was an administration that made mistakes and couldn't admit that they had. To me McCain's posture is risky because it means that the Republicans have to sell the American people on the fact that the war was the right move.

Newman: I think the American people are sold on the fact that it wasn't. But once again, I think the American people are ready for this campaign and they want to see what the candidates actually have to say when they meet each other, talk to each other, and how they formulate their vision for the country. That's what the American people are ready for. It's a little bit like if you went to a fight at Madison Square Garden, and when the preliminaries are done, the ring announcer stands up and says 'Let's have some dialogue about those prelims. Weren't they great?' He'd be booted out of the ring in ten seconds because the people are ready for the main event. They might have been great prelims, but it doesn't make a difference. The American people participated rather fully in the primaries. And they're ready to have a race now. That's what the American people want to participate in right now.

Salit: Well, unfortunately what we're going to do now is go through three months of build-up to the conventions and then two and a half months of campaigning between those two candidates.

Newman: Well, that's alright, because that's all part of...

Salit: ...the main bout.

Newman: Exactly. The main bout. Everyone in politics says that they want to get to the issues.

Salit: Right.

Newman: Well, you can't get to the issues until they finish up this stuff. And it's just a little bit more prolonged this year.

Salit: Maybe this is prolonging our discussion about the war but I did want to mention the story that Todd Purdum told on the Stephanopoulos show. This is connected to Obama going to Iraq. Purdum mentioned a story from 1952 about Korea and the Stevenson-Eisenhower presidential campaign. In 1952, there was discussion in the Stevenson camp about whether to visit Korea or not. Apparently the Stevenson campaign decided not to go. I'm not exactly sure why but they decided not to go. Then, not long after that, Eisenhower, who was a great war hero from the second World War, announced 'I shall go to Korea.' And, as Purdum described it, this was a game changer in terms of establishing Eisenhower's political popularity. He was a very popular figure as a general of course, but this was a critical political decision. So, Purdum's point is this issue of when a candidate goes to a war zone is a really important decision and Obama has to think about that and decide that he's got to go.

Newman: He thinks Obama has to go to Iraq?

Salit: Yes. He said Obama's going to have to get himself to Iraq between now and November. He's going to have to make some kind of statement by virtue of going there that closes the deal with the American people about his capacity to be commander-in-chief.

Newman: I don't agree. I don't get the logic of that. Why does he have to go to Iraq? His position on Iraq is clear. His position is that we shouldn't be adding to

the size of the population of Americans in Iraq. In fact, we should be subtracting. So, why does he have to go? Of course, McCain goes to Iraq because he's saying we should continue to pursue this war and this occupation. He says 'I stand behind it. Maybe we should be there for 25 years.' He's got a reason to go.

Salit: Right.

Newman: But I don't know that I'd argue that if I was on Obama's campaign committee.

Salit: The argument is, I suppose, you go so that there is a photograph of you looking presidential in a war zone.

Newman: Yes, but I don't know how that reads if the person who's going has been in opposition to that war.

Salit: Good point.

Newman: It might look a whole lot more consistent if he called for another set of Senate hearings and raised some serious questions about what really is going on over there. That might be a more reasonable thing to do.

Salit: And a more presidential thing to do, as in reinforcing his ability to lead.

Newman: I don't know the actual history of why Stevenson decided not to go. But in my mind, I can reconstruct what might have been the reason. I mean, Eisenhower was Mr. Superman. He had just won World War II.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So if both he and Stevenson went to Korea, Eisenhower gains and Stevenson looks like just another guy who doesn't know anything about combat. Ike is the general. He's saluting everybody. He's got his Ike jacket on. And meanwhile Stevenson's walking around saying 'Where's the latrine?'

Salit: Were you in Korea when Eisenhower visited?

Newman: No. I went to Korea in 1953. Eisenhower went a year earlier.

Salit: Any comments on the Scott McClellan book and its so-called revelations? As Donna Brazile said, the main thing about the book is that the administration has been locked up tight and no insiders have really spoken out and now McClellan is telling a story about an orchestrated campaign to win public support for the war that wasn't based on facts but that was designed to deceive the American people.

Newman: That would be more of a revelation if it was said about the War of 1812, not about this one. Everybody already knows that that's the case. There's no revelation there.

Salit: True.

Newman: So, what's the revelation? There is no revelation. I don't think it's accurate to say that there haven't been insiders who have addressed this. But if I was speculating on where this comes from, I'd have to include in my picture that the McClellan book takes some heat off the Bush administration.

Salit: You think so?

Newman: It seems to me that it puts some of the heat on McClellan. People ask 'Why didn't you speak up when you were there?' In some strange way, it gives a certain degree of credibility to the Bush administration. At least they were consistent.

Salit: Alright, thank you.