



I LIKE THE MASHED POTATOES

Sunday, June 29, 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 29, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: A question that some progressives are concerned with is how to relate to Obama's candidacy. They say he's moving to the center on some political issues and what you saw on the George Stephanopoulos show today were different responses to that. George interviewed Ralph Nader, who's running for the fifth time for the presidency. Why is he running? Because, he says, Obama is not giving voice to the set of issues that are the bedrock of American progressivism. And how do you keep Obama's feet to the fire? Nader says you run for president in order to do that. There was also *The Nation* magazine represented by Katrina vanden Heuvel who says 'Obama has certain shortcomings, no question about that, but how do you respond to that? You build your movement and you leverage him on issues, but you also give him a lot of room to run his campaign.' And then you have Arianna Huffington, who wants *The Huffington Post* to leverage Obama because there are issues that she wants to keep in the forefront to keep pressure on Obama. So, those are the alternatives. What do you think about how these progressives are talking about trying to ensure that Obama, if he wins the election, is attentive to a progressive agenda?

Newman: Of the two major candidates, one of whom is going to win, he is the progressive candidate. He's obviously more progressive than McCain. I think what you're describing is obfuscation.

Salit: Obfuscation?

Newman: Yes. The most sensible thing I heard on the Stephanopoulos show was the idea that if he abandons his anti-war position, that's the thing that could get him into serious trouble.

Salit: Because that's why he won the primary.

Newman: Yes. That's why he's where he is. That's where the campaign came from, historically. There are other issues, of course. He can change positions on some of those. But he can't change his position on the war.

Salit: I don't think he will.

Newman: He might say, *A withdrawal has got to be done responsibly. You can't just come in to Baghdad at 5 o'clock in the morning and say to everybody 'pack your bags, we're leaving.'*

Salit: That won't work.

Newman: But he can also say, *I'm the President of the United States and I'm withdrawing U.S. troops.*

Salit: Yes.

Newman: *And I'll do it as I damn well see fit. But I'm withdrawing them. We're getting out of here.*

Salit: McCain won't say that.

Newman: No, McCain's going to say *We'll stay as long as it takes to win. If that takes five years we'll stay, if it takes ten years, if it takes 50 years, whatever it takes...*that's been his position. And in general, it's been the U.S. position. The other stuff is in some ways, silly.

Salit: The silly stuff, I'm going to call it an obsession here – the obsession of the progressive movement – is how you “watchdog” Obama.

Newman: OK. But it's still the case that the bottom line dynamic is that this will be a “party vote” election. Barack Obama has his particular views. McCain has his. But those things are not at the core. The core issue is it's a party vote on the war. The Democratic Party, I believe, has come around to being against the war.

Salit: Right.

Newman: The Republican Party is, at a minimum, ambivalent. McCain is standing up for the Bush position in the context of that ambivalence. So that's the election. Each party will present you with a name on the ballot and people will choose “war” or “peace.”

Salit: I don't know if this is a political question or a psychological question, or some combination of the two. Why is the Left so concerned with making sure that Obama hews to a “progressive” line?

Newman: They have their credibility to be concerned with. They're not really talking about Obama's credibility. They're talking about their own. They want to support Obama, which seems reasonable.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And they want to support him because he's the candidate who is against the war. Are there other issues? Of course there are. And, I'm sure they're getting pushback from some of their supporters who say 'Why are you supporting a Democrat?'

Salit: Yes, they are.

Newman: And the answer, for some, is *Well, he's so much better than the Republican candidate that we're obliged to support him.* But then some readers and followers say *If that's your position, how is your position any different than the Democrats' on critical matters?* You know how the Left is.

Salit: Yes, it's obsessed with itself.

Newman: And the Left is not gigantic, so it doesn't take a gigantic number of disgruntled readers to kick up a fuss.

Salit: And, they're concerned with their credibility as leftists.

Newman: I don't think Obama's hurting on that score. He's run a very credible primary campaign. He got the nomination. He's a very strong contender. Like Jay Leno said, 'Obama's critics say show me one thing he's accomplished. Answer: He's run a successful campaign to become the Democratic Party nominee for President of the United States.' That's not bad. It's better than Nader has done in recent years.

Salit: I would say so. Some independents that I've talked to are upset about Nader's candidacy because they feel that since Nader gets a certain amount of airtime that the perception will be that Nader represents independent voters in the United States of America. There's concern about that because they feel it's a misrepresentation.

Newman: I say get all the people who you speak to about this to write a letter to George Stephanopoulos and say that to him. Write a letter and say, *By putting Nader on your show you make it seem as if you think he's the head of the independent movement. He's not the head of my independent movement. Jackie Salit is the head of my independent movement. How come she's not on your show?* That would make a difference.

Salit: Another thing some independents say is, 'We support Obama. We supported Obama in the primaries. We voted for him, we campaigned for him, we got independents out to vote for him in the open primary states. And, we have issues that we want him to be attentive to that have to do with political reform, government reform, reform of the political process.' They ask 'How hard do we push him during the election campaign?'

Newman: I don't know why that appears to some people to be such a hard question. You go to dinner all the time and you say 'I like the mashed potatoes. I don't like the radishes.'

Salit: Right.

Newman: That's a thing that we do all the time.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, you write Obama a letter or you call him up or you send him an email, and say *Here are the things that we'd like you to push harder and these are the things we really like about you.* What's so hard about that? I don't quite get that. Why is that hard?

Salit: I think it's a question of how to get the voice right, of being strong, but not having some overblown notion of laying down conditions. So, people will sometimes say, 'If he doesn't support certain issues, does that mean we shouldn't support him?'

Newman: I'd say, *No, I am supporting him. Remember? I said I like the mashed potatoes. I support them. I want them. I don't like the radishes. What's the problem?*

Salit: Let me put this another way. Some independents say 'We want to get Obama elected. We like Obama. But we also want to build our movement.' And they ask 'Does it hurt the building of our movement if we support him for president but he doesn't come out strongly in support of the expansion of open primaries?'

Newman: That remains to be seen. But here's one point to keep in mind. Everyone says that he's going to do all kinds of things now because he's got to come back to the center to win the election, right? I presume if one is willing to say that, one can be equally willing to say when he gets elected president, if he does, he'll be open to doing other kinds of things.

Salit: That's sensible.

Newman: Will he be willing to do the things that you're suggesting?

Salit: I'd say it's a gamble, but we need to pursue it.

Newman: Yes, it's a gamble. And yes, we need to pursue it.

Salit: Going back to the Left. *The Nation* has to sell magazines and *The Huffington Post* has to keep people coming to its website and Nader has to run because he thinks he's the only pure person in America. There's a certain notion of purity operative here, that there are certain hard and fast definitions of what it means to be progressive and if you don't stick by those things no matter what, then that says something about your integrity.

Newman: That sounds like a comic book version of American politics. Nobody really believes that. Nobody really acts that way. It's funny. The critics say, often with a lot of attitude, 'You know how the game is played. Everyone just puts out what's most expedient.' And then these same critics say, 'A terrible thing happened. Obama put out something that was expedient.' Well, wait a second. There's a disconnect there. If you acknowledge that's what people do in these situations, then all you're pointing to is people doing it in these situations.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Presumably they mean to say, *That's what people do in these situations. But I'm critical of people doing that in these situations.*

Salit: Right.

Newman: Well, OK, fine. But that's how it is, not just for them and not just for Obama or McCain. But often, virtually always, that's what politics is. That's what American politics is. And on this issue of changing positions, in my mind, the American people watch the Stephanopoulos show – those that do look, and it's not all that many people – and they say, *I'm confused. What did Obama switch from? What did McCain switch to?* It becomes incomprehensible. When did he switch? Did he switch before or after this time?

Salit: That debate between Rahm Emanuel and Tim Pawlenty was incomprehensible in just that way. They go on about endless minutia about changes in positions and you have no idea what they're talking about.

Newman: So one guy finishes off by saying 'So it turns out that McCain is the real switcher.'

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And the other guy says, 'No, it turns out that Obama is the real switcher.' Well, what's a "real switcher" and who even knows what that means?

Salit: Well, it's time for us to switch off. Thanks, Fred.