



SLICK ABOUT OIL?

Sunday, July 6, 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, July 6, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: We saw Senator Joe Lieberman today on John McCain's behalf trying to minimize the differences between his candidate and Obama. Lieberman tried to make out the case that Obama's position on the war is moving closer to John McCain's. Obama made a statement earlier this week about his plans to go to Iraq to meet with the generals on the ground and said he's going to "refine" his strategy. Then there was a hullabaloo about his saying he's going to refine his strategy. *What does this mean? Is he changing his strategy? Is he no longer talking about an exit from Iraq? What is the real meaning of this?* Obama held a clarification press conference several hours afterwards where he said the mission, from his vantage point is that this is not a war that we should be involved in and we need to get out. But Lieberman emphasized a different angle. He said 'Here's what Obama is saying. He's concerned about the safety of our troops. Yes, we're all concerned about this. But this week Obama says he's concerned about the "stability" of Iraq.' Then Lieberman argues, 'Well, that's John McCain's position.' Basically Lieberman is arguing that Barack Obama has taken John McCain's position on the war, and, if that's the case, why not vote for John McCain? He's the more experienced war leader. He's the more experienced person in foreign affairs. He can deal with national security concerns more effectively.

Newman: Question: Do most Americans believe that American troops remaining in Iraq has something, or anything, or a great deal to do with American security? That would have to be the case if Lieberman's argument made any sense at all, right?

Salit: Right.

Newman: Who believes that? I can't imagine somebody in their right mind believing that. I don't get it. The "connects" are all confused. I think what Ted Koppel said on the Stephanopoulos show is closer to what people whose views on these matters I respect have said, like Alan Greenspan. It's all about oil. Was Saddam threatening U.S. access to oil? To some extent. Was he in possession of weapons of mass destruction? The evidence for that hasn't held up at all. So, how do those things all hang together? I don't get it. Long term, is it about the oil? Yes. But for the moment the debate is about when we remove combat troops. But what Obama is saying is the issue is what the troops we have there are doing. That's the mission issue.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Someone could say “I think we should have 300,000 troops in Iraq, but they should all be on vacation in the resort areas,” and the reasoning being offered is that confused. Who cares whether Obama’s position is coming closer to McCain’s position? What’s that supposed to mean? What’s the relevance of that? Five years ago the Bush administration established the mission. The mission was to have a war in Iraq. If troops are there to conduct a war, then Obama is saying that the war has been ineffective and hurtful and has not improved the American position. He wants to change the mission. We read last week that five major oil companies, all of which are Western companies, two of which are U.S. companies, cut deals for future oil access with the Iraqis. Presumably, that means America has an interest in protecting oil production there.

OK, let’s take one soldier. He or she is over there, and they are fixing a bayonet and heading towards a building to go kill someone. Now, if you take that same soldier, have her or him over there standing in front of an oil refinery to make sure that someone from Al Qaeda doesn’t come and blow up the oil refinery, that’s still having an American troop there. It’s the same soldier. But it’s a different mission and it means something different. I really don’t understand what it is that McCain is saying. He seems to be saying that the surge worked because fewer American troops are being killed.

Salit: They’re trying to make the point, I guess, that this reflects well on the underlying mission.

Newman: How does it reflect well on the underlying mission? Was the mission to have fewer American troops killed? If that was the mission, why go in at all? You’ll have no casualties. I don’t get the logic. What if we had 10 times as many troops killed in the most recent period of the surge, but they captured or killed Osama bin Laden? Is that a success or a failure by virtue of the current McCain argument?

Salit: I presume McCain would consider that a success.

Newman: I don’t know. I’m asking you to tell me how his logic works, because my starting point is that I don’t know how his logic works.

Salit: Fair enough. I think he would say that’s a success because the mission is to stabilize the region. That was the point when Lieberman says, ‘Ahhh! Now Obama is saying the mission is to stabilize the region.’ He’s saying that Obama has bought in on the McCain rationale for the war, because it is in American interest to stabilize the region.

Newman: What does “stability” mean in that part of the world?

Salit: Also fair enough.

Newman: Does that mean guaranteeing U.S. oil company profits in Iraq? Is that what stability means in that part of the world? What does it mean? It can't just mean how many American troops are or aren't killed in Iraq because you could just take everybody out and none will be killed. No, the issue is maintaining U.S. control of oil production in that area. But, Obama won't talk about that directly.

Salit: I didn't think the debate between Lieberman and Jack Reed was the greatest debate I've ever heard, but I thought that Reed was effective in making the point that Obama is talking about redefining what the mission is, what U.S. interests there are and what comes next. How you refine your tactics and strategy and how you stage your troop withdrawals are practical and tactical decisions that flow from the mission.

Newman: I'm not disagreeing with you. I'm just saying there's something crazy in the logic. I think Obama has a strong point to make here, although I think he could make it more clearly if he would be more honest. The success of a mission isn't about how many troops are killed. It has to do with what they're killed for. That's what a mission is. That's how you frame a mission. The whole question of the mission is so obscured because the Bush administration went out of its way to obscure it with this nonsense that they came up with: The mission is because Saddam has WMDs. The next day, the mission is to get rid of Saddam Hussein because he's a bad guy.

Salit: The next day it's to build democracy in the Middle East.

Newman: And now the mission has turned into having the fewest number of troops killed. But it really makes you think the whole thing is a lie because the mission has to do with maintaining "stability" for oil. And, we're obviously not there to keep the prices down for the American consumer. The oil industry is making a fortune. That's what our troops are dying for. So what does McCain say to that? 'We can't get out because we want to win.' Why don't we go back to the old Vietnam War maxim. Lose the war, declare victory and leave.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I think Obama should say, *McCain's not being straight because he's part of a party that has done nothing by way of limiting the profiteering of big oil.* If he wants to be straight about the war in Iraq, he should engage that. Why isn't Obama saying that? I guess he's running at the center and you don't do that.

Salit: That's to be expected, in one sense. But a question is: Has the political situation in America taken a turn such that Obama could say something like that?

Newman: About the oil?

Salit: About the oil, yes. Have things turned such that Obama could say this war is about oil and a majority of the American people would stand with him on that?

Newman: And where would the Republican Party go if he says that?

Salit: I guess the Republican Party goes to: *We've been telling you all along. He's wild-eyed left-winger. And he has no intention of "reaching across the aisle" even though he says he does.*

Newman: The point is not to reach across the aisle. The point is to reach from Washington in the direction of the American people. That's the point, which I thought was Obama's point, which is why he was so wildly popular during the primary. McCain's going to keep pushing him by saying *You're really a flaming leftist*, which he's not. He's not a flaming leftist.

Salit: I agree with you. I also don't see how it makes you a "flaming leftist," which has all these pejoratives associated with it, to say that this war is about the oil. Alan Greenspan wasn't accused of being a flaming leftist when he said that.

Newman: I quite agree. But he wasn't running for President of the United States. In a way, with both McCain and Obama moving towards the center, what you get is the usual presidential mish mash. You don't improve the relationship between the right and the left by making a mish mash in the middle because all that leads to is the Democrats saying, 'We really are the middle,' and the Republicans saying, 'No, we really are the middle' and you start having the exact same fights again, only they all claim that they have moved to the middle.

Salit: The same fights that the country is saying we want to get beyond.

Newman: Exactly.

Salit: Thanks, Fred