



A COMMENTARY ON A COMMENTARY ON A COMMENTARY ON A COMMENTARY...

Sunday, August 3, 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, August 3, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: A description of the current dynamic in the presidential race put forth by a number of panelists in the Stephanopoulos discussion, most notably David Gergen and Jake Tapper is this: The Republican Party, Bush, the Bush policies are entirely discredited in the minds of the American people. Question: Is Obama, as Gergen says, an acceptable alternative? Gergen likened the situation to 1980, when Ronald Reagan ran against Jimmy Carter, who was very unpopular at the time. Voters didn't like Carter. But they were still trying to make up their minds about whether or not Reagan was acceptable. Gergen says that's kind of roughly what you're looking at today. Consequently, Obama's mission, under these circumstances, is to make himself acceptable. Do you think that's a fair characterization of where the presidential race is at?

Newman: Yes. But there's nothing in that characterization. It's empty. It's like reciting the alphabet. What's the alternative?

Salit: An alternative would be that the American people have already decided that they want change and Obama and the Democratic Party offer that, consequently, the question of Obama's "acceptability" is already resolved.

Newman: Nothing's resolved. The election's not until November. It gets determined when it gets determined.

Salit: You're quite right. The conventions of the major parties have to be completed. The vice presidential running mates have to be selected. The debates need to take place. And the election needs to be held.

Newman: You got it.

Salit: Gergen echoes a point that he credited to Hillary Clinton, namely that when the Republican attack machine gears up, Obama is vulnerable. Her argument was that she is less vulnerable because she's been through the mill with them so many times. And Obama has unspecified and untested vulnerabilities, so when the attack machine gears up, Obama takes a hit. Gergen says, 'That's what we got a look at this week.' Obama goes to Iraq, Afghanistan,

Israel, Palestine and Europe. He has a successful trip. He comes back. He's nine points ahead in the polls. Then you get a week of the Republican attack machine going after him. By the end of the week he's dead even with McCain. Is there an insight there of any kind? Or is it just another "day in the life" in American politics?

Newman: Obviously, a question that comes to mind in light of what you're describing about the polls is where is Obama really? And the next question becomes, what in heaven's name does that mean?

Salit: OK.

Newman: Look, I'm really vulnerable to the Republican attack machine. If they started talking about me, I'd become less popular than I currently am, which is already pretty unpopular. These things tend to lose meaning at a certain point in the process.

Salit: "These things"?

Newman: They're talking about the polls, but they are not talking about where the American people are at. Because the American people are more than bright enough to realize that at some point, relatively soon, they're going to indicate where they actually are at. And so this is all emptiness. I wouldn't be shocked to find out that you and I are the only two people who are even watching the talk shows. I have no proof of it, but I could probably find a poll that would prove it. The commentators and the candidates say their sentence over and over and over again. And at some point in the process, even what appears to be on its face a meaningful sentence, loses its meaning. Logically speaking, if you preface a sentence with the words, "I know," and you keep adding "I knows," you keep producing meaningful sentences. But psychologically speaking, at some point rather early on – surveys show that if you add six "I knows" – nobody has the foggiest idea of what the sentence means. You've just transformed something that was meaningful into something that is empty. The talk shows exhibit this characteristic in this period. Not to say that they shouldn't be on the air. I'm not even saying that there aren't some things which are interesting. But the thesis of what they're saying is essentially meaningless. If you look for meaning in it, you won't find it. Maybe there's a quip that will strike your fancy. But the big statements that they're trying to make are not big, they're empty.

Salit: One of the narrators, maybe Stephanopoulos, said 'This was the most contentious week of the presidential campaign yet.' I was surprised. Because it seemed like nothing happened this week. But that aside, let me go to something smaller. The so-called "flap" about Obama's remark 'I don't look like the presidents you see on the dollar bill.' McCain says 'Uh oh, you're playing the race

card, it's the race card from the bottom of the deck.' Donna Brazile says 'Wait a second, this is not playing the race card. Obama is black' and, to use her term 'race is the elephant in the room.' She says what Obama is doing is trying to talk about these issues in a way that is normalizing. When he says 'I'm not like all the presidents you've seen on the dollar bill,' it's his way of trying to inject some humor or some grace or some non-tormented remark about being black into the campaign, and that's a healthy thing.

Newman: You can just as easily interpret the remark by Obama to be his way of taking the attention off of race.

Salit: In what way?

Newman: He's saying 'I don't look like these guys on the dollar bill.' Well, Abraham Lincoln didn't look like George Washington either. Nor did Andrew Jackson. So that's a way of taking the focus off of race.

Salit: True enough.

Newman: If Obama is making the point that we all look different, then arguably, that's a way of trying to take the race issue out of the campaign, whatever that means, exactly. However, you might take it out of the campaign. But, to the extent that you do, you make your campaign less about America. Because race is an issue in America. And it's the American presidency for which they're running. I mean, what if Obama or McCain got up and said, *Let's leave the economy out of this.* Hello! What do you mean, leave the economy out of it? What do you have then? John McCain!

Salit: Indeed.

Newman: But, I don't think the statement is uniquely interpretable as bringing race into the campaign. I think it could be equally correctly characterized as a way of getting race out of the campaign.

Salit: That's a very good point.

Newman: Another person might say, *Well, that just shows how audacious Obama is. Because it's probably going to be a long time, even if he wins in November, before his picture goes on a dollar bill.* So, you can make it out to mean anything you want it to.

Salit: Let's go back to what you were saying about these kinds of pronouncements being empty, having no meaning. A feature of the presidential race this year, at the earlier stages, is that the campaign was filled with

meaning, beyond even who was going to be elected president, that this is the “turning of the page” in Democratic Party politics, that it’s about a change in the direction of the country. As Joe Klein said on *The Chris Matthews Show*, ‘The pendulum swung so far in one direction, to the right, under the Bush administration, it couldn’t go any further and now things are swinging back.’ And, so the whole season has been loaded with meaning, as in “it’s a watershed election,” if not yet a Watergate election. So, is the emptiness that we’re talking about a function of that it’s August, that the big events – the vice presidential selection, the conventions, the debates – haven’t happened yet and they’re roughly 3-4 weeks in the future and we’re really just looking at “dead time” until things pick up and become “meaningful” again, or...

Newman: ...Don’t accuse time of being dead. It’s these people who are talking about it in a dead way. Time might not exist, but it’s not dead. They’re dead.

Salit: OK. One way you can interpret the “big picture” that I described to you at the beginning is to say, *Alright, after all the tumult and all of the “turning of the page” narrative, we know what this thing is. It’s a kind of thing that happens in American politics. It happened in 1980 and now it’s happening again. It’s a different set of circumstances, but it’s a kind of thing that happens and it has these characteristics, etc. etc.* Put that up against the idea that this election is a different phenomenon. Yes, it’s a presidential election, a president is going to get elected. But it’s also something other than that, or something bigger than that or something more historic than that. How do you think about those two interpretations?

Newman: I think about them as follows. One extraordinary and interesting feature of the world and how we as human beings see, is that we have to deal simultaneously with the most extraordinary of events, filled with history, even as we savor the taste of our next jelly bean.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, that’s an existential feature of who we are, what the world is and what that relationship looks like. That’s how I think about it. There are some people who work overtime to deny that existential reality. I try not to.

Salit: And denying that existential reality is to say, it’s only about the jelly beans or it’s only about history?

Newman: There are numerous ways of denying it. You can make jokes about it. You can reference other moments in history which probably have nothing to do with it.

Salit: That's a big one.

Newman: You can be indifferent to it. You can do an infinitude of things. But, there's nothing to do about it. It is just what it is. So, should we not have these talk shows? These shows are as much a part of "how it is" as anything else.

Salit: How much do they have to do with what's going to happen at the Democratic Party convention or what's going to happen in the election?

Newman: It doesn't make a difference. Just like the speculation about the so-called "Bradley Effect." The pundits are discussing whether there is an undercurrent of racism that's going to come out when people actually go to the voting booth. Well, how could it not be operative? Are people suddenly going to take all their racism and put it in a small doggy bag and leave it at home when they go to the polls? What exactly are they going to do with it?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: What's really meant is, is it going to be an identifiable and measurable factor? Well, I don't know. It depends on how you measure things after the election. Are there no patterns? There are. But the patterns are variously interpretable and the discussions of the patterns will be as subject to existential reality as the discussions that happen 60 days in advance of the elections. It's an old philosophical point that I'm making here. It goes back very, very far, at least to Plato. It is that there are limits to how much you can say about reality. Because there's no alternative to which you can compare it. Which doesn't mean people haven't talked about reality. They talk endlessly about reality.

Salit: They do.

Newman: But in the final analysis, it seems to me, whatever "in the final analysis" means, you can simply say what it is that you're saying. It's a rather interesting feature of reality.

Salit: That there's no alternative to it.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: I was going to comment on Donna Brazile's remarks about Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, but it seems hard to go to after your last observation.

Newman: What did she say about Britney Spears?

Salit: The panel was discussing the Paris Hilton/Britney Spears commercial that McCain put out which likens their celebrity to Obama's. Jake Tapper says, 'Well, they were trying to depict Obama as a ditz.' And Brazile says, 'A what?' He says, 'A ditz.' She says, 'Are you saying that because they're blond?' He says, 'No, I'm saying that because they're stupid.' And then everybody else on the panel – all men – laughed. Here's what struck me. I liked Donna's response. Here's how I read it. She wasn't prepared to let Paris Hilton and Britney Spears be degraded as idiots simply because they are women and blondes and I liked that. I'm not a fan of either Paris or Britney and I probably would be the first person to make a joke about their being ditzzy. But, you know how it is... it's not just what's being said, but who's saying it in what context that counts. And in that environment, I liked that she did that. It was unscripted and the easy thing to do would have been to let it pass. But she didn't.

Newman: It did strike me, too. Actually, when she said "A what?" and Tapper said "A ditz", she could have replied, "*What makes you think I know what a ditz is?*"

Salit: That would have shut the guys up, for sure, Fred. Thanks.