



TOUGH GUYS?
Sunday, August 17, 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 17, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: In the discussions about the presidential campaign, there were several references to being tough. "How tough should you be." "McCain is playing tough and rough with Obama." There's a former McCain advisor, John Weaver, who says McCain shouldn't be playing it that way, that he should acknowledge the historic first of an African American contender for the presidency, and then go at him on the issues. If he doesn't do that, Weaver says, his "tough at all costs" posture is going to end up blowing up in his face. But the McCain people who are currently running the campaign have a different view. They say, *We've got to be tough, we've got to project tough and we've got to play tough. And being tough has gotten us close to even in the polls.*

Obama and McCain each appeared at a forum hosted by Pastor Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church who raised the issue of evil. Is there evil in the world, and what do we do about it? McCain says, 'Defeat it.' Obama says, 'Confront it.' Some people in the Obama campaign were concerned that Obama wasn't "tough" enough in his response. Is there anything to say about this "Get Tough" discussion?

Newman: I think there's something of a contradiction there for McCain and the Republicans. For one thing, it raises the question of do you want to be tough, or do you want to win. They haven't confronted that issue.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Bush has been tough as can be relative to Iraq. But we haven't won there. And someone better take a look at that soon. Now, McCain will say, *We haven't been tough enough.* And that may be true. But, we certainly talked tough. You can hardly imagine a president talking tougher than Bush did about the situation in Iraq. But we haven't won. And why haven't we won? It was a stupid decision from the very beginning. Rumsfeld was all about toughness. But not about smartness. Which is what's required for winning. So, yeah, you can be the toughest guy in the land, and meanwhile your opponent is outsmarting you and wins in a decision. The equation of "tough" and "winning" doesn't hold up under careful examination.

Salit: The Republicans are banking everything on there being an equation between toughness and winning. The toughest guy wins. The toughest America conquers. The toughest candidate beats the nuanced candidate. That's another word which popped up in the conversation today, which also interested me: Nuance. "The American people don't understand nuance." "You can't sell nuance to the American people." "We don't want a campaign that's too nuanced." How do you think about the "nuance" question?

Newman: Look, the American people are pragmatists. They want to win.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They don't give a damn about nuance, unless it helps them win. The American people have gotten into the stock market in a big way. What could be more nuanced than that activity? It's nothing but nuanced. But the American people will stick with the market, if it makes them winners. If they're as nuanced as hell, and they lose their shirts, then they're going to look for something else.

Salit: In the political vernacular, nuance = softness.

Newman: And what American is against softness if it wins? Americans have always been pragmatists, and now they're smarter kinds of pragmatists. If what wins is being appropriately soft, then Americans will use that. Americans have become smarter and more attuned to the fact that lots of different approaches can win, and those are the ones you should choose. It's still pragmatism.

Salit: Here's a funny thing. McCain is the big advocate for toughness. He runs a commercial with film of Winston Churchill from World War II saying 'We shall never surrender.' Next you see McCain at a podium saying 'We'll never surrender.' His whole persona is tough, tough, tough. Meanwhile, as was discussed on *The Chris Matthews Show*, McCain is trying to present himself as the "Change" candidate. McCain's people have come up with, by their own account, a pretty nuanced way of challenging Obama for the "change" mantle. Obama owns the "change" brand. And the McCain people are trying to figure out how they can encroach on that. One of the journalists covering McCain said, 'Well, they don't use the word "change" because that belongs to Obama, but now they're using the word "reform" and the concept of reform.'

Newman: What's funny?

Salit: They're doing the very thing you were just describing. They're "against nuance," on the one hand. But they're perfectly prepared to use it if they think they can gain off of it.

Newman: Campaign advisors are paid millions of dollars to come up with nuanced positions.

Salit: Do you agree with Obama's advisors and critics who think that he has to "get more concrete"?

Newman: I don't know what that means. He's not in a position to be concrete. He's not the President of the United States.

Salit: I did a radio show last week with a marketing professor from Minnesota. He's one of the analysts saying 'Obama needs to get more concrete.' He gave this analogy. He said, 'Let's say you're going on vacation and your vacation is three or four months away, and you're thinking of going to Cancun for your vacation. You look at the

brochures and you say, *I want to go to Cancun because the weather is warm and the water is a beautiful blue and there are great tropical bars on the beach, and you can go windsurfing and so let's go to Cancun.* And you start to make your plans to go to Cancun. But, when you're two weeks away from the trip, you're not thinking about those issues. You're thinking about, *Well, how much does the hotel room cost? And, how are we going to get to the airport, and do we need to rent a car or are we gonna be okay using public transportation and what's the size of the suitcase I'm going to bring?* And that kind of thing.' So, his argument is that people – he used some fancy language – when they're "temporally distant" from an event, have one set of criteria that tend to be more general. Obama's message about hope and change works when the election is temporally distant. But, when you get closer to the election, in order to close the deal, people are going to be thinking more about the political analogue to how they're going to get to the airport and whether their suitcase is the right size and that kind of thing.

Newman: That's interesting, but it's something of a distortion of what the actual situation is with this campaign. Because there's only one thing to do, concretely speaking. Vote. What it means for the candidates to be concrete at the end is to say "Vote for me." The "what to do" part of what we're looking at here, is about the campaign, not the presidency. How do we get to Cancun? Call up the airline. It's no more or less concrete than that. The task here is not to say what you're going to do when you're president. It's to say what you're going to do if and when you become president in order to get votes. So concretely, it's taken care of.

Salit: You don't think he should be saying *My education philosophy is that there should only be 12 kids to a classroom and – I'm making this up – and anytime gas goes above \$2.75 a gallon...*

Newman: That's not how Obama's running his campaign. He's saying 'I want to inspire you so you will vote for me. And then we'll do what we have to do. I need the American people behind me. You can trust that I'll do the right thing.' What is the right thing? Well, we'll find out.

Salit: I'd describe that posture as pretty tough.

Newman: OK. And back to McCain. The thing about McCain that is interesting and curious is that McCain did not make his national reputation as a tough guy. That's a part of his appeal. Actually, though, he made his national reputation as being something other than a tough guy. He was for cooperation across the aisle. He was open. He was for hearing what's best from the other side. Those aren't tough things to do. Some people might even perceive them as wishy-washy things to do. So, that's who he is. But now they're trying to transform him into a tough guy. Why? Because now he wants to court the Republican right. He wants to maximize the value of his relationship to Bush. So they've got a contradiction on their hands.

Salit: In other words, McCain's the guy who sat down with Ted Kennedy on immigration, the guy who got with Russ Feingold and does the McCain-Feingold bill...

Newman: George Bush is a tough guy. Not John McCain. McCain's a straight shooter, that was his whole image. And arguably, that's the opposite of being a tough guy.

Salit: McCain's "biography" as a war hero and his having been a POW and the whole story of his experience in Vietnam... isn't that a part of his tough guy image?

Newman: Yes and no. They use it as part of a tough guy image. But I think something else comes across in that story, too. He suffered and that makes him a pitiable guy. I'm not questioning what he went through. I'm sure it was unbearable, in many respects, and he is a tough guy for what he put up with. But he was in a prison camp and people respond to his suffering as much as his strength.

Salit: We saw Condi Rice.

Newman: We did, indeed.

Salit: She was trying to be the tough guy. *Meet the Press* host David Gregory justifiably asked her after several rounds of tough-sounding statements about Russia and Putin, 'What leverage does the United States have in this situation?' Her answer, which is probably accurate is, 'Russia's desire to be integrated into the international community and to function as a more modern state.'

Newman: My picture of what actually happens when Condi shows up to talk to Putin, not the idealized one they talk about on *Meet the Press*, but the actual scene, is that they meet, they embrace, they chat about how things are going and she says *Vladimir, what the hell are you doing to us? You're messing up your image! What's going on here? The issue is not whether you've gone too far relative to sending troops to Georgia. The Georgians are a pain in the _____. We know that. But it's a bad play for you! So cut it out.*

Salit: Put another way, *We've been trying to clean you up.*

Newman: *And you go and mess this up.* And so she goes to Putin on those grounds. And he says something like, *Alright, we'll back off by Monday. And you can have the credit for getting us to do it. We won't give it to the French.* Putin says, *You've been our best friend.* And they have a few glasses of vodka and that's that.

Salit: And then she goes on *Meet the Press* and she says 'They promised to do this by Wednesday and they didn't do it. And it comes to Thursday and they didn't do it...' I hate to say this because it's probably sexist but nonetheless, her complaints had the sound to me of *I told you to pick up your socks. You didn't pick up your socks. I told you to hang your coat up in the closet, but you didn't...*

Newman: Well, talking that way on *Meet the Press* sets her up to take credit when Putin finally starts behaving.

Salit: Good point, good point. Thanks.