



THE INDEPENDENT PARALYSIS

Sunday, January 10, 2010

Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, January 10, 2010 after watching selections from "PBS NewsHour," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and "Hardball with Chris Matthews."

Salit: They say Harry Reid, the Senate Majority leader, had a bad week. Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd is not going to run for re-election. Harold Ford might challenge Kirsten Gillibrand in New York. Other Senate Democrats are retiring. The early January talk about 2010 is that the Democrats, who've had a 60 vote, filibuster-proof majority in the U.S. Senate, are going to lose that. They won't lose majority control, but they'll lose practical control. Now the pundits are asking what happened. Just a year ago, the Democrats won the presidency and huge majorities in Congress, sweeping into office with talk of a new political alignment. But, here it is a year later and, as Amy Walters from *Hotline* said, the Democrats are nervous. They're going into the 2010 election and they're nervous. They don't know what's out there. Of course, the Republicans are nervous, too. On the one hand, if you do a state by state analysis, you see lots of opportunity for Republican pick-ups, +as they're called, for narrowing the Democratic majority in the House, eliminating the 60 vote majority in the Senate, etc. But, as some pundits have noted, if you take a closer look, the Republicans are in trouble, too, because the Tea Party movement, (which as far as I can tell is a new name for an old movement, the conservative movement) is leveraging for a more right-wing agenda inside the Republican Party. The concern is that's going to produce Republican nominees who are too conservative to win in swing districts. So, while it might look good for the Republicans on paper, if that base is active in the primaries, it will make the Republican Party unviable. So, is that, in electoral map+terms, a fair characterization of what's going on?

Newman: I think it's the same old picture.

Salit: The same picture as before Barack Obama was elected?

Newman: Don't you think?

Salit: Maybe. But maybe what's making the commentators nervous is the idea that it's different. Gwen Ifill asks, "What does this all mean for Obama?" And Amy Walters says, "Well, here's the fundamental issue, she didn't use the word contradiction, but that's what she meant. Obama ran his campaign with a message of post-partisanship and he won popular support with that message" but

Newman: Oh, that's nonsense. You don't really believe that, do you?

Salit: Well, he ran his campaign with that message. Whether it was serious or not is another matter.

Newman: What did it mean that he ran on the basis of no partisanship? It means that he wanted everyone to vote for him.

Salit: That's true.

Newman: Well, that isn't a political position.

Salit: OK.

Newman: That's never meant anything. The country remains split about 50/50.

Salit: It is.

Newman: You could consider why the country's split 50/50. But, 50/50 is simply the political epiphenomenon. That's the reality we've had now for some time. Bush and Gore tied, remember? So, what are we talking about here? Nothing has really changed in recent years.

Salit: Except that there are more independents.

Newman: Yes, there are more independents. And, there are all kinds of things to look at, politically and historically speaking. But, the epiphenomena called "the voting patterns" mean nothing. That's why the reporters are nervous. Because they're making things up. This "nonpartisan" thing with Obama is absolute nonsense. Nobody wants post-partisan. People want partisan. On their side.

Salit: That was where Amy Walters went with her argument and maybe she'd agree with you. She said, "The problem for Obama is that he projected as post-partisan, but, there's no such thing as post-partisan."

Newman: Of course not. There's no such thing structurally. How could there be?

Salit: There can't be, if you have a party system.

Newman: Given the structure of the party system, what would it mean to make Washington nonpartisan?

Salit: Going into 2010, what are the things that you see that you might call political trends of interest? We've mentioned some. The growth of the number of independents.

Newman: Right.

Salit: Presumably that's a sign that there is, at least, a constituency for post-partisanship. There is a potential movement that wants to

Newman: Wants to what?

Salit: Be able to find solutions to problems that don't get endlessly tied up in partisan drama.

Newman: Everyone wants to solve problems. And how do they want to solve problems? In their own way.

Salit: In their own way.

Newman: There we go. This is the understanding of three-year-olds.

Salit: Maybe we are a nation of three-year-olds.

Newman: Well, actually, we're a nation of ordinary people who aren't divided politically, but for a partisan system. And it's been partisan since 1800, last time I looked. By the way, did you know that James Monroe, our fifth president, was elected unanimously? He had no one running against him.

Salit: No, I didn't.

Newman: Yes, I just heard that yesterday. Where'd I see that? On some quiz show.

Salit: The only thing I know about James Monroe's

Newman: 's is the doctrine's

Salit: 's Other than the doctrine is that there's a high school in the Bronx named after him that my dad went to.

Newman: See, if you're old enough and you watch enough quiz shows, you learn all of these things.

Salit: So, I'd ask you the question that Gwen Ifill asked some of her panelists. What does this mean for Obama?

Newman: What does what mean for Obama?

Salit: This situation, the 50/50 split. I assume it means he needs to figure out how to get 50% plus 1 in 2012.

Newman: That's what it's always meant. As I read him, I think Obama is holding off on even thinking about what it means for him, because that's one of the advantages you have in being the incumbent. You can start your campaign later than the other guys.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They are actually obliged to start earlier.

Salit: Because they're the challengers.

Newman: Yes. They're the challengers. So, Obama can wait for them to come at him, and formulate his response then. Until that point, things have reached something of an equilibrium state.

Salit: I know what you're saying. It's kind of like things play out because the structure and the partisan divide is what there is.

Newman: Well, there is content to this, Jack. I mean there was a time when this country was dominantly Democratic. For an extended period of time.

Salit: That's true.

Newman: But today, it's the early stages of some kind of independent turn, which means things swing, which means 50/50. That's what it is. Obama will run as a Democrat. Will he win? Probably. Most incumbents do. Will he win with anything resembling the hoopla of the first time? No. Obviously not. I'm not trying to make light of what you're doing in asking these questions. But, I don't think this is the stuff of what needs to be understood in our world today. I think there are bonafide issues, but I don't think that they regularly or easily translate into electoral results, either micro or macro, in a way that's informative. I think they translate in a way that's completely epiphenomenal.

Salit: Meaning on the surface.

Newman: You want to look at the education issue. You want to look at the health issue. You want to look at our foreign policy. There really are people who are out to blow up the United States. I mean, these are serious issues. But, in some ways, ironically, this structural thing is on our side.

Salit: What do you mean by that?

Newman: Meaning, on our side as independents. Because it's kind of reached a point where, in terms of the electoral scene, I'm inclined to think it can't go on like this indefinitely. Maybe it can, I don't know. But, for the moment if I were giving a name to this phenomenon, I'd say it should be called the Independent Paralysis.

Salit: Really?

Newman: That's kind of what we're looking at. Which doesn't mean a lot of things don't go on. It doesn't mean that people aren't still dying in Afghanistan. But electorally, in one sense, there's nothing much going on. Now, insofar as there is anything that's going on, it's stuff happening with independents on the ground that were enormously familiar with, but they never talk about. That's very small.

Salit: It is.

Newman: Too small for the big people we watch on TV these days to know or see. But we see it. We know it. Does that mean it's more important than what they're talking about? No. It just means that it has some modest element of importance while what they're talking about has none. So, our stuff is more important than theirs for that reason. I don't know how you feel about that, if you feel good about it or bad about it.

Salit: I feel differently on different days.

Newman: But that's life. What can I tell you?

Salit: Well, you and Frank Sinatra agree on that. There are two things that I'm thinking about from this conversation so far. One, your point, that there's kind of an equilibrium that exists.

Newman: Everybody knows that.

Salit: At the same time, which you also observe, things can go on forever like this.

Newman: I'm not so sure. Maybe it can go on forever. Or, maybe this is the end state of American experimental democracy with parties.

Salit: And?

Newman: Maybe we're in an endless spin into independent paralysis. I'm hoping it's other than that. We're both working to see if we can do something about that.

Salit: We are.

Newman: Have we accomplished that so far? Well, I don't know how to appraise that. An African American man was elected president and it's related to that. But does anything happen off of that?

Salit: Not so far. Let me ask you a question about the term you used independent paralysis. I want to break that down a little bit. The system is in a state of paralysis.

Newman: Electorally.

Salit: Electorally. Independents are the reaction to that paralysis? The way out of that paralysis?

Newman: No, they're the electoral form of that paralysis.

Salit: They're the form of that paralysis because independents are the swing element that goes back and forth.

Newman: That's what it means to swing.

Salit: So, in essence, the paralysis is the 50/50 split and the narrow margins of who controls what for some period of time, determined by what the independents do and that total thing is the thing we're calling the independent paralysis.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: We've talked about this a million times but I'd ask you how you'd express it at this moment. What's the relationship between moving beyond that paralysis and being able to address progress in education and healthcare and foreign policy?

Newman: But that's the very point. When you say "moving beyond that paralysis," I don't know if there's a functional relationship between that paralysis and engaging any of the real problems or any of the real issues in this country, because that paralysis is so determining of everything. It's a force in opposition to history.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Electoral politics is in a state of entropy. It's paralyzed. This is our constant issue, isn't it, even on the most elemental micro level? We work on the Bloomberg campaign, this campaign, that campaign. Well, how can electoral politics do anything about it? If we are doing electoral politics simply to keep in the game, then where is the game at? Well, all the houses and hotels are on Broadway and Park Place on the Monopoly board. And the dice are gone. Nothing's happening. It's still. It's quiet. But, electoral politics hovers over everything as an important element. But it's fallen into an entropic state. It's played itself into insignificance. Now, we take that to be a potential opening to swing it in the direction of left independents. Maybe we're right. Maybe we're wrong.

Salit: Yes, and others have different ideas.

Newman: In fact, others take it to be organizable substantially to the right. Most people think of it, which I think is most ridiculous, as organizable to the center. The reason I think of that as so ridiculous, is that's where it is already.

Salit: Exactly.

Newman: So what does it mean to move it to the center?

Salit: Nothing. It's already there.

Newman: But is it going anywhere, historically? Are things going to budge off the paralysis? I don't know. What the pundits are saying, in effect, is first the left wins, then the right wins, then things get thrown up for grabs. Everybody's unpopular. Popularity goes down, down, down for everybody. Popularity's up for Bush when he wins, then goes down. Popularity up for Obama when he wins . landslide . then down, down, down. It's in this entropic state. Meanwhile, everyone wants to be independent. And where are the American people en masse? They're 50/50. But 50/50 what? Hard to say.

Salit: Center-right, center-left, lean Democrat, lean Republican. There are a million different ways to describe it.

Newman: Yes. You can take a look at the swing left that independents took by supporting Obama and say *That's a big swing left, that's interesting. We'll try to capitalize on some things.* But everybody knows that a year from now, it will swing the

other way. Where will it wind up? Well, some people would say it's going to wind up left or right. But, that's not knowable. It might wind up left. It might wind up right.

Salit: It might wind up swinging.

Newman: And meanwhile, life goes on, not only for the individual but for the country. I think if Axelrod and these people in the White House started thinking about their 2012 campaign at all, they might be giving some initial thought to how they retain the presidency with the country paralyzed. They're asking themselves: How do we turn that into a set of accomplishments?

Salit: That we can sell to the American people.

Newman: That we can sell to the American people to get one more vote than the Republicans. That's kind of an interesting challenge. He has the incumbency. That's still a good thing to have. He still has a modicum of popularity. He's still black.

Salit: And he's still well-regarded.

Newman: He's still known as a bright enough guy.

Salit: He's serious, he's bright, he's working hard.

Newman: I think, ultimately, that's where they'd go to sell him. I think they're going to go to his intelligence, that he's worked hard, that he's done as good a job as you could expect anybody to do. I think they'd run him on that basis. And he'd probably win on that basis. Because most people will vote on that basis, it seems to me. Given the whole world situation, why would you want to change in the middle?

Salit: Yes, keep the same hand on the tiller.

Newman: Keep the same hand on the tiller. He's not going to do anything ridiculous. That's clear.

Salit: Such as?

Newman: He's not withdrawing the troops from Afghanistan. If he had done that, if he had gotten troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan, it would have turned 2012 into an interesting war vs. anti-war vote. Now, how would that come out?

Salit: 50/50.

Newman: There you go.

Salit: If you're a Republican strategist sitting in the room right now with a potential candidate, what's the best Republican argument against Obama? If the Obama strategy is he's smart, he's hardworking, he's done the best he could, what's the Republican argument?

Newman: Well, it's hard to say. You haven't told me who they're going to for their candidate. But, I would guess they're going to go to someone who looks as much as possible like Obama.

Salit: A moderate Republican.

Newman: Something like that.

Salit: Like a Tim Pawlenty or one of those guys.

Newman: And how would he or she do? Ahhh. I don't know. It's hard to say, except in general, it's going to be close to 50/50.

Salit: As you see things right now, in that context, is there a rationale for an independent candidacy that's not a fringe candidacy, but something of a Perot-style campaign?

Newman: If someone has billions of dollars to spend you can always crank something up. But, in general, I don't think there's any room at all for a populist uprising, ironically, though you'd think that there might be because of all this swinging. But the swinging is a very narrow swinging. Money is the issue in this regard. How much money? A lot. Probably twice as much as Perot was willing to spend...

Salit: ò in 2012 dollars.

Newman: If you're asking what I take you to really be asking, namely, is there the probability three years down the road that there's going to be any logical third way+ position that's going to emerge, I think not. I find that almost unimaginable. But, you know, history is the queen.

Salit: And how do you think about an anti-ideological third party candidacy?

Newman: What do you mean?

Salit: Well, not to overly identify with the Unity 08 concept, but this idea that you look for a fusion ticket, a viable fusion ticket where you draw somebody from the liberal+ Democratic side of the aisle and somebody from the Republican conservative+ side of the aisle.

Newman: I think it has virtually no chance at all. I think the Obama model is a better model of what can break through, namely someone in one of the major parties who has something extreme about them. Americans are extremists, so this is a hard time for Americans since the basic structural arrangement in play is not extremist. Look at the leaders in the Democratic Party. They're against extremism. So a good solid extremist like Obama ò

Salit: ò who has fairly traditional positions ò

Newman: Yes. And that was something we were fully aware of when we supported Obama. But you have to support him anyway because we're playing off of history. Historically speaking, it was meaningful that the country elected its first black president. But, if the question is, can anyone beat Obama in 2012, you'd have to use the Obama model to do it.

Salit: I liked your comment earlier that one way to describe the paralysis is that it's working against history. And, I don't know if this is too metaphysical, but do you think history is . you might not like this language . trying to move forward, or, is moving forward?

Newman: Don't worry about history. History doesn't give a damn about American election law.

Salit: Or what sentence structure I use to describe it.

Newman: Right. It's rather oblivious to all of that.

Salit: Fair enough.

Newman: So, feel free to say anything you like.

Salit: OK. But, it can't be healthy for a civilization to have its fundamental political infrastructure working in opposition to history.

Newman: Well, it's not healthy. It's obviously not healthy. But human beings, not infrequently, both on a macro and micro level, create things which they can't turn off and which aren't healthy for them. It's not such an unusual thing to do.

Salit: Well, Happy New Year.

Newman: And to you, too.