



## WHO IS OBAMA IN 2012?

Sunday, February 28, 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, February 28, 2010 after watching selections from "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "The Charlie Rose Show," "Tavis Smiley" and "Meet the Press."*

**Salit:** Here's the political backdrop to the Healthcare Summit. The Democrats in Congress decided that with the election of Obama and with their majority control in hand, they could use the healthcare issue to bury the Republican Party. They believed they had the votes, the public will and the momentum and they convinced Obama to go along with their play. And here we are, a year later and that's not the picture. They might have the votes to pass it on a "reconciliation" strategy in the Senate, but far from having killed the Republicans, they've actually helped bring the Republicans back to life. What went wrong for the Democrats?

**Newman:** It seems totally comprehensible to me. In a fight, if you try to use an advantage that you just got, to destroy your enemy, there's always a great danger that you're misplaying it. And that you're going to wind up reviving your enemy. I've seen it a thousand times in prize fights. A fighter thinks he has knocked the wind out of the other fighter and he goes in for the kill. In the process of doing so, he gets knocked out himself. It's not uncommon.

**Salit:** And, since the current environment is one in which the American people are very sensitive to partisan plays, if you pick a fight where your motivation is partisan gain, you can end up paying a price.

**Newman:** It's an interesting situation because on some substantive issues, particularly healthcare, the Democratic Party is to the left of Obama, not the other way around.

**Salit:** True.

**Newman:** So choosing comprehensive healthcare reform as their dominant cause meant that the partnership, such as it is, between Obama and the Democratic Party, was going to be dominated by the Democratic Party.

**Salit:** So, it's not that Obama turned the issue over to Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. It's that it came from them.

**Newman:** Yes. I don't know that Obama fully agreed to that part but I don't think he had much choice. The party did win that "internal" fight.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** And now Obama is obliged to lead this fight.

**Salit:** I'm assuming the Democrats have a Plan B.

**Newman:** Of course. The Democratic Party are not dumbbells.

**Salit:** So, what's their picture?

**Newman:** They know the Republicans might win some battles here, in part, because Obama does not have deep roots. He has superficial roots.

**Salit:** Superficial roots in the Democratic Party. So, he may not be able to coalesce all of the conflicting elements in the Democratic Congress, for example.

**Newman:** Yes. And so he might get hurt, but he should be able to sustain himself even with that. But in the long haul, the Democrats believe the Republicans will take the hit, and they will be badly hurt.

**Salit:** Let me ask you about some different scenarios here. The argument that the Democrats are going to pass a comprehensive healthcare reform package through the reconciliation process...

**Newman:** Which I'm not convinced they're going to do.

**Salit:** Alright, nonetheless, those who are saying they will do it or might do it, make the argument that once they get it done, they can then make the reform package popular with the American people. They recognize that the comprehensive reform package is not hugely popular, but the thinking goes, *We pass the thing, we claim victory – Obama says "I got it done,"* and then they do the work of getting the American people behind the package. They sell what's good about it. Do you see that as a workable strategy?

**Newman:** They might well do that. But, I don't think they're going to make the process any prettier by doing so.

**Salit:** No.

**Newman:** Reconciliation sounds like it can be a seriously dirty process.

**Salit:** Combined with all the horse trading to get people on board. So some Republicans think *The process issue is working for us now, we're going to play the process issue.* It was observed on the *Charlie Rose Show* that Lamar Alexander kept

raising the process issue and Obama kept saying, 'I don't want to talk about process. I want to talk about substance.'

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** The Republicans think they can make the process issue work for them. As John McCain said on *Meet the Press*, 'The American people care as much about the process as the product.'

**Newman:** Well, the Republicans are making it work for them.

**Salit:** And it is amazing how insensitive some people are to this. Karen Tumulty, a major political journalist from *Time* magazine, said the American people don't care anything about process. But we do. We do care about that, we have a sense of fairness and independents care deeply about that.

**Newman:** Both the American Revolution and the Civil War were fought on process issues.

**Salit:** So, that's a huge part of the American value system and of the definition of what it means to be an American.

**Newman:** The word "Democracy" is not the name on a can of peas. It's the name of a process.

**Salit:** Back to the issue of the Republicans winning this round. If the Democrats "lose" to the Republicans in the short term, the Republicans will claim victory for stopping Obama and the Democrats. But, if the thinking on the Democrats' part is even if that does happen, that in the long haul the Republicans will have to take a big hit off of their posture here, what's the big hit? They've won a short-term victory on the process issues. Does their problem kick in when they have to account for what their plan for healthcare is?

**Newman:** It's not a healthcare issue.

**Salit:** It's not a healthcare issue, OK. Then, what's their Achilles Heel in this?

**Newman:** The Republicans?

**Salit:** Yes. How do they take a big hit in the long haul?

**Newman:** The American people are more capitalist than socialist.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** But they're not right-wingers.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** So, if the right wing vision of the Republican Party comes to the forefront, they take a big hit. They lose everything to the left of Sarah Palin. And that's a substantial component of the Republican Party.

**Salit:** In other words, insofar as you can frame the debate as capitalist vs. socialist, the capitalist side will win.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** But insofar as you frame the debate as right wing vs. something to its left...

**Newman:** I don't know if you can define it on issues or ideology, in the narrowest sense.

**Salit:** Right, but Barack Obama was elected President of the United States.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** And that was a statement by the American people that – what?

**Newman:** Well, that's the very issue that's up in the air. It's not clear what that means. People on the left, the sensible people on the left, like you and me, for instance, could make it out to mean that the country has become somewhat more open to that version of leftism.

**Salit:** Obama-style leftism.

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** Pragmatic progressivism.

**Newman:** Whatever you want to call it.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** So, the Republicans' mission became to show that Obama is not that kind of leftist. That his is really an old-fashioned kind of leftism and the American people don't want that. And they're right about that. The American people don't want old-fashioned leftism. And that becomes the debate.

**Salit:** So how is the debate framed?

**Newman:** The framing is "Who is Obama?" But I don't think we're going to find that out until the next presidential election. In fact, I think that's going to be the subject matter of the election.

**Salit:** "Who is Obama?"

**Newman:** Yes. Presuming he runs. And I think that's the plan.

**Salit:** Is there an opportunity here for some kind of direct intervention from the independent movement?

**Newman:** I don't know if the independent movement has the capacity for direct intervention on any issue. It doesn't have the necessary level of organization.

**Salit:** What about in terms of influencing Obama? When you talk about how the 2012 presidential election is going to be about "Who is Barack Obama," part of what that means is a lot of different forces are going to compete to shape that.

**Newman:** Yes. It's going to be easier to do that, as we get closer to that election.

**Salit:** Easier for?

**Newman:** For independents. And particularly for the left independents to try to influence Obama. Strangely enough, with due credit to the people who ran his last election campaign, and as overwhelming as the odds were, the campaign was fundamentally all about the primary. The general election was not a hard election to win. It was the primary that was the hardest part, where Obama was not trying to define himself as a leftist, he was defining himself as a Democrat. But in 2012, it will be easier to influence him because he'll be the Democratic Party's candidate. That will be defined. But he will still have to define himself as a leftist. It could be a quite fascinating election.

**Salit:** That's very interesting.

**Newman:** I don't think we're going to stop trying to influence him before it gets to be that time. But, my guess is that's going to be our biggest opportunity to do this. There are lots of opportunities to do other things. To build the movement, strengthen its networks, develop its leadership, expand its influence. So the stronger we are by the time we get to 2012, the better off we are. And we've already started to work on that moment, as have the Obama people.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** They're working out their strategy for 2012 and so are we. I'll bet Obama feels good about it, too, because in the next election he'll be free from the constraints of the Democratic Party. You can say he's somewhere between a loyal liberal Democrat and something independent and to the left of that. I don't know if he's thought through what to the left of that means, though.

**Salit:** And, it's also dynamical and situational. As you said earlier, there's certain ways in which the Democratic Party is to the left of Obama, like on healthcare.

**Newman:** That's a different context. That's being to the left on a certain issue. But the Democrats are not left of where the country's at. They can't afford to be left of it. They always have to be at the center of it.

**Salit:** And you're saying Obama is to the left of that.

**Newman:** Well, that's how he decided to run a campaign against Hillary Clinton. You have to be to the left of the Democratic establishment to run in that primary, as Obama did. You see, the other issue to clear up here, Jack, and I don't want to get unnecessarily abstract, but the thing about the "process issue" is that it's not an issue.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** That's one of the confusing things about it.

**Salit:** Then what is it?

**Newman:** The only language I can use to describe it is that it's more a practical-critical methodology than it is an issue. Issues, per se, have a capacity to constrain themselves to the borders of what they're about. What is healthcare about, ultimately, if you look at it without invoking this process question? Well, it's about people getting decent medical attention and care. But there's a constraining wall around that as an issue. Process, or what we sometimes call process "issues," by its very nature takes us rather immediately to the question of posture. One way to characterize the posture options are a capitalist posture vs. a socialist posture. I would love it if Obama would host a summit on socialism vs. capitalism. You'd get an intelligent debate from those people because they've all thought about it a great deal.

**Salit:** But it's about a posture, not an ideology.

**Newman:** Yes. Forget the Soviet Union, forget People's China, Joe McCarthy, forget all that stuff. There is a fundamental human posture question which is embedded in that so-called debate between socialism and capitalism.

**Salit:** And the posture difference is?

**Newman:** In some sense, a belief that greed makes the world go round, and so you add the accompanying modifier, namely you have to make sure it doesn't get too greedy.

**Salit:** Versus?

**Newman:** Versus a sense that the American people are decent people and whatever system they have, they want it so people can live decent lives. So I don't even know if I can find the words for it. But it's an attitudinal debate. And it's deep, because attitudes are deeper than positions on issues. When the Republicans say *Let the market work it out*, they have a very strong position there. Because when they say *Let the market work it out*, if you give the most intelligent and moral translation of that, it means, *Let people work it out*.

**Salit:** Let people make choices in the marketplace.

**Newman:** Right. Are people altogether good? No.

**Salit:** And they're not so good as the socialists try to make it out.

**Newman:** Right. But, that's what we've got. The people are the people. The free market advocates accuse the socialists, with some justification, that somehow or another, the relative handful of people who make up the government are better than normal people, and therefore they can make decisions for the rest of us.

**Salit:** That's the big government/small government argument.

**Newman:** Yes. And why would the people who the people select turn out to be any better than the people who did the selecting? There's an argument that if you want to put your faith in the people who selected them, you should become a Republican. So I think the situation we're currently in is fascinating because that question is more at the surface of things than it typically is.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Now which direction will that go in? Will it be submerged again because both of the parties recognize that the party system is at stake? That might happen. Or will it come out even more because both parties think that the party system is weak, and each party thinks that they should use that as an opportunity to kill the other party?

**Salit:** Or do independents create a new force, maybe even a party?

**Newman:** Well, the chips will fall where they may.

**Salit:** Thanks, Fred.