



HEALTHCARE: THE FINAL ACT

Sunday, March 14, 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, March 14, 2010 after watching selections from "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "The Charlie Rose Show," "PBS NewsHour," "On the Record With Greta Van Susteren" and "Meet the Press."

Salit: Maybe we could unpackage some of the endgame discussions about the healthcare drama which is coming to the "final act."

Newman: It seems to me it's the final act of a play where all the scenes are the same.

Salit: Are they?

Newman: I don't really see any differentiation between the scenes in this act. But maybe you do, so you can tell me about it.

Salit: Well, if you take what Doug Schoen said on Fox News, in a kind of dramaturgical forecast of what happens after the final act, maybe this is where it gets different, because it's about the political fallout. There's going to be a vote and something's going to happen and it's either going to pass or it's not going to pass.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: So now the plot of the play shifts to what happens if it passes and what happens if it doesn't pass.

Newman: Didn't everybody know that all along?

Salit: They did. But presumably there's a difference between knowing it all along and it now being the moment when it's going to happen.

Newman: Didn't everybody know that all along, too?

Salit: Yes. Now, Obama and the Democrats seem confident that even with all the ups and downs, even with the continued ambivalence on the part of the American public about healthcare reform, that they're going to A) get something done and B) that it's going to be a net-positive at the political level for them. Obviously, they think it's a net-positive at the policy level. We saw Nancy Pelosi giving that speech to Charlie Rose about how good policy is good politics. But, at the political level, they think they can make this thing work for them.

Newman: No matter what happens in Congress? I don't think so. What they're saying, in effect, is if it passes we can make it work for us and if it fails, we can't. So back to my question. Didn't they know that all along?

Salit: They did.

Newman: That's why I keep asking myself, what's the big deal? It's time to vote. Either Obama is going to win or he's going to lose.

Salit: If I had to answer your question, I would say the vote is about more than whether healthcare is going to be reformed, and even more than whether the Democrats are going to maintain their majority control in the midterm elections.

Newman: It's about whether the president, who seems to be something of a leftist, who controlled both the House and the Senate, could pass what is, by any reasonable account, a center-left bill.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And that's a big political issue. Because he should be able to. But it's questionable whether he will be able to.

Salit: How much of the uncertainty is about the narrative and whether Obama has had a good narrative? Or is it really just about the numbers?

Newman: I don't know. But at this point, it's all about the numbers. The two are connected, that's obvious. But, comprehensive healthcare reform hasn't had a great narrative in the American political history.

Salit: That's true. FDR avoided it like the plague. And it almost killed the Clinton presidency.

Newman: But, Obama's really invested in it. It's kind of the classical centerpiece of the Democrats' left-center narrative, and Obama, for a variety of reasons, chose to try to go there first.

Salit: To further establish his Democratic Party credentials.

Newman: And he's having, roughly speaking, the same kind of problem the Democrats have always had in getting that narrative through.

Salit: There was no bipartisan consensus here.

Newman: Well, you could say Obama had to change his overall strategic plan midstream because he thought he could win it with bipartisan support.

Salit: But he couldn't.

Newman: No, and ultimately it turned into the bare knuckles politics that are customary in DC. Ironically, the best thing he has going for him now is that a loss on this bill is going to have an impact on all Congressional Democrats in November. So because of that, they're going to be more inclined to give him the votes he needs.

Salit: That certainly is an added incentive. Survival at the polls always is.

Newman: That could be enough to get him over the top given that the bipartisan effort failed.

Salit: Since the Republicans decided that a strategy of obstructionism was better for them politically than cooperation.

Newman: They sort of had to, because of how badly the Republican Party is doing. Did Obama know that and decide to play it this way anyhow? Could be. He's bright enough to have thought it through that far. Is it also possible that he's just naïve? It's possible. Psychology is a speculative sport, after all.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Of the pundits I see regularly, David Brooks is the one I feel closest to attitudinally, and he says 'You'd like to think that the Obama people thought this through and decided to go this route.' That's what you'd like to think, namely that they have numbers which indicate that they can win at this point. I can't imagine that those are strong numbers, though.

Salit: Well, my guess is that from this point on, the news coverage is going to resemble what happens at a sporting event. Play by play, and that sort of thing.

Newman: If I was a media person, I'd stop covering this. I'd protest and not cover it anymore, and just say, Decide something already, you're the Congress. When you decide something, we'll come back and cover you. Until then, no coverage. That would be principled, I think.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So what do you think?

Salit: I'd like to think that the Obama people A) did this for his standing with the Democratic Party; B) somewhere it ran off the rails of what they were expecting, but they have it back in hand and C) they want to get it done so they can move on to other things – like the economy. I think they ended up getting more bogged down in it than they thought they would. But, it was what it was, and now they're trying to finish the job and move on in time to recover from whatever it is they need to recover from in time for the midterm elections. Once it's done, they can press the case against the Republicans around job creation and economic recovery. I'm presuming they think that

they can put the Republicans on the defensive about that, whereas they've been on the defensive on the healthcare issue for months.

Newman: Well, the problem now is that it is actually harder to put the Republicans on the defensive, given what's happened with healthcare.

Salit: And how does that work, do you think?

Newman: Well, the Republicans will say We have the pulse of the people. We proved this with the healthcare thing. And we're closer to where the American people are at on the economy, too.

Salit: Well, that will be the next round of political theatre, Fred. Thanks.