



MCCHRYSTAL: HE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

Sunday, June 27, 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, June 27, 2010 after watching selections from "PBS NewsHour," "The Charlie Rose Show," "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week."

Salit: I want to talk to you about the McChrystal story, about General McChrystal being relieved of his command in Afghanistan. But, I want to stay on some combination of a speculative and maybe even a dramaturgical level. I know you don't know the players and you weren't in the room when the *Rolling Stone* interviews were being done. But that said, I'm looking to talk to you in the category of imaginings. So, there's a reporter from a national publication, embedded, as they say, with General McChrystal and his staff in Paris and they're there for days on end, because they were stranded after the Iceland volcano cloud grounded flights all across Europe. And, within hours of the *Rolling Stone* reporter's arrival, they're talking about their criticisms of the civilian leadership, the Vice President, the State Department, with respect to the war. At least a few commentators describe the trash talk as "egregious." So, here is the speculation and imaginings question. What are these guys looking to do here? They know this is on the record, they know the tape recorder is going, etc. What's going through their minds in this scene in the hotel room in Paris?

Newman: My imaginings?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: They're looking to come home. They're looking to get fired.

Salit: OK.

Newman: And maybe they had too much to drink? But, you have to figure that they knew what would happen. As you said, they knew this wasn't off the record. Apparently, that was very plain.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, they wanted out. And I would presume they wanted out because, among other things, Afghanistan looks like a loser.

Salit: It looks like a loser for the U.S.

Newman: Perhaps to McChrystal. And to some others as well, including unfortunately, the Taliban.

Salit: So, in our speculative imaginings, presumably they've tried to make that case through "official channels"? If this were a play, is there an earlier scene where McChrystal's team goes to meet with the president or the Secretary of Defense, and says *Hey man, we can't pull this thing off*. But nobody listens?

Newman: I have no way of knowing that, obviously. At the level of imaginings, I would imagine they made some effort to do that and they were unsuccessful.

Salit: And, what's the case that they make, do you think? Before they get on the "trash talk to *Rolling Stone*" road. What does that conversation look like?

Newman: Hard to say. President Obama, at least publicly, says that he's very open to differences of opinion. Maybe that's not the case. Or, it might just be that he's not open to differing opinions on things that he's already done, namely selecting the particular people who are part of the civilian team. He just might not want to hear negative things about them from the military.

Salit: And, maybe I'm just asking you now to summarize things that have been said by others, but what's the basic case that says a fundamental strategy of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan can't win, can't be successful?

Newman: I'm not a military person, nor am I an advocate for our war in Afghanistan. But, I hear from the experts that it's very hard to conduct an effective counter-insurgency because the Taliban is too integrated with the civilian population. There are very clear restrictions placed on what the military is allowed to do.

Salit: On the rules of engagement.

Newman: On the rules of engagement, yes. Specifically with respect to actions that produce collateral harm to the civilian population. And moreover, there's a long history of Afghanistan resisting invasions and/or takeovers by foreign powers.

Salit: Alright, so they tried to make that case. And I guess the case is some version of *Either you have to change the rules of engagement so that we can more directly engage the enemy which is going to result in greater civilian casualties, and maybe even greater U.S. casualties, because of the extent to which the Taliban is so embedded in or part of the population – or we have to get out*. In my imaginings, at least, that's the case that they made. In other words, you can't fight this on middle ground. Let us go in or let us get out, that kind of thing. And so, in Act I, Scene 3, they make their case but they don't impact. And then they're in Paris and they're hanging out in the hotel room and this is the U.S. military high command, so they're not staying at some fleabag hotel on the way to the airport. They're at the Westminster, in a suite, it's nice and elegant, and they're ordering room service, you know, café au lait and brioches and beer at 30 Euros a pop. So, I'm really asking you to imagine – is there a scene where they're sitting around the hotel, they've had a couple of drinks, they know the *Rolling Stone* reporter is coming and they say *Let's make the play. We're going to go on the record and this thing is going to work its way back up the food chain and disrupt the civilian leadership*. Or something like that.

Newman: That seems like one possible scene. And, from what I gather, McChrystal runs a more renegade-style ship than General Petraeus, so that's also probably indicative of the kind of culture that McChrystal creates.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, it might not even be that unusual to trash talk or vent or whatever. What is unusual is that they're doing it despite the fact that there's some degree of recognition that they will get called on the carpet for it.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Put another way, it wasn't going to gather very much moss.

Salit: True enough. That kind of talk was going to produce a rapid succession of events.

Newman: Then, there's the idea that the high command of our armed forces are generally less sympathetic to Democrats than Republicans. So, was that a factor? Well, it probably was on some level. I don't know that it was self-conscious. But it was probably operative.

Salit: Yes. They seemed to want to test Obama's resolve. Not surprisingly, the post-removal discussion includes observations that this is about more than Afghanistan. It's about first principles of the United States Constitution, civilian control of the military.

Newman: That's for sure.

Salit: And that Obama had no choice but to do this. Do you think that's true?

Newman: I guess. That's the formally correct opinion, and it's formally correct for me also. I have no way of knowing whether he could have safely said, *Don't ever do it again*. The formally right thing to do is what he did.

Salit: This is really a side question, but in the Charlie Rose discussion with his panel of experts, one guy says 'He had no choice but to do this,' referring to Obama, and then in the next sentence, he says, 'It was a courageous thing to do.' I was struck by that, and I wanted to ask you, if you are doing something, this or any other kind of thing, if you are doing something because you have to do it, can it also be courageous to do it?

Newman: I guess you can do it courageously. Namely, decisively and quickly. That question that you're asking seems semantical to some extent though it's a fair question. But, in some ways, it seems like a setup because the whole thing seems a little bit academic.

Salit: In what sense?

Newman: Everyone did what they did knowing that it would probably have these consequences. And it did have these consequences. So, it's sort of an exercise in utter predictability.

Salit: I appreciate that because this whole affair does have that quality to it. On one hand, it's presented as this great drama, and it is. In American history, it is dramatic when a president relieves a general of a command in the middle of a war. It doesn't happen that often. But when it happens, it is a dramatic event. And, at the same time, as you say, this one does have a quality of everything that happened along the way seeming to be very predictable. I feel like someone's already writing a script for a Hollywood movie called "McChrystal" and they've already cast it. Maybe Bruce Willis is going to play McChrystal.

Newman: Well, it might seem like a movie because it's about the military. Military movies are very popular for a reason.

Salit: Which is?

Newman: It's all about doing the right thing.

Salit: OK, you can still imagine – but I'll also ask you to put on your political hat. Here's the standard question. How does this impact on Obama? What's the political weight of this for Obama, which always means in politics – does it hurt him, does it help him? Does it increase his prospects for re-election, does it do anything?

Newman: I don't know. But putting Petraeus in to run U.S. operations in Afghanistan seems a plus for Obama since what he's playing overall is centrist politics. And Petraeus is a good choice to bring in. McChrystal seems like someone you might hang out with in Paris. But Petraeus might be better at running a counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. I'm not even sure what that's supposed to mean, since I don't have much of an idea of what it means to run a counterinsurgency, including what kind of cooperation you need from your team. That's what's being said and I accept it.

Salit: Yes. Obama's playing the centrist game.

Newman: Doesn't it seem that way to you?

Salit: I suppose it does. McChrystal was a somewhat riskier choice to begin with.

Newman: So, now Obama is tacking back to the center and Petraeus is very much accepted as a good solid general, and it's a slight concession that Bush's military choices may have been better choices than his own. But I don't think that represents a serious concession, because I think every red-blooded American presumes that Republicans are, in this respect, better at this than a supposedly left-wing, though actually centrist, Democrat. But, the big issue ultimately is what's going to happen in Afghanistan, as everybody is pointing out.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Can they pull it off in Afghanistan? If they do, they will get a lot of kudos, since no one has done that in several thousand years, which probably has to do with all kinds of things, including with what Afghanistan itself is like. It's a very hard thing to do.

Salit: That's why nobody's done it since Genghis Khan.

Newman: And nobody wants to put that much energy into it ultimately. So ultimately, the invaders go away.

Salit: Based on the cost-benefit analysis, to use a business term. Do you think Obama thinks, as part of his overall strategic perspective of wanting to reframe American foreign policy and reposition America in the world, that he has to finish out these wars that he's inherited? Do you think that's how he thinks about it? The fight against Al Qaeda, which is a major strategic concern for us, is much more based in Pakistan now.

Newman: Well, the fight isn't based in Pakistan. Al Qaeda's based in Pakistan.

Salit: That's what I mean, Al Qaeda's based in Pakistan.

Newman: But, the U.S. can't easily engage Al Qaeda there. Pakistan is not only an ally, it's a much higher ranking ally than either Afghanistan or Iraq.

Salit: True. This isn't a simple question, but how do you think he thinks about the Afghanistan question in the context of an overall interest in recalibrating, reorienting American foreign policy?

Newman: I think he's accepted the overall posture of the Bush administration and of the American people to some extent, namely, that we had to go to war in response to the 9/11 attacks. I've talked to you at length about my feeling that it does not benefit the U.S. to have identified those attacks as acts of war, as opposed to heinous criminal acts, because now that we're at war, it makes the circumstances and challenges that much more difficult for us. I think the evidence, perhaps from Korea on down, but certainly from Vietnam on down, is that counter-insurgencies are very difficult, some would say impossible, for the U.S. military. But, Obama is carrying that on. Why? Well, in some ways, he ran for the presidency on the basis of changing everything about the Bush administration, but he never could really mean quite everything because I think he does have a recognition that part of the deal is that there has to be continuity. In some respects, the easiest thing to continue is the war, in some strange way. Obviously he was opposed to our invasion of Iraq, but he's stuck with it. So, he goes to West Point and says 'We're going to get Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, we're going to have a surge, but we're going to do it in this determinative amount of time.' In some ways, that's exactly how not to conduct a guerilla war. But he does, and he has to because he wants to come up with a centrist balance. I'm sure some people advised him not to do that. Had I been there, I would have advised him not to do that. But, nonetheless, it seems a reasonable thing to do.

The course that Obama set for himself is to be an intelligent and compromising left winger. I think that's a very hard position. If you're going to be a left winger, you're going

to take all the heat for it anyway, whether you compromise or not. But, I see he doesn't quite agree with that. Sometimes, it might seem like he agrees with that. But, then he tacks in the other direction. And, it might turn out to be successful overall. We don't know. If the economy turns around and if we somehow or another, deplete the ranks of the Taliban so they throw up their hands, and if the outcomes are such that Obama can justifiably say *We've won on all these things*, people might say *Hooray, fantastic, we've effected change*, then he will have turned out to be right. We don't know. Certainly we're not going to even come close to knowing anything about the success of his strategy relative to domestic politics until we see the results of the midterm elections. The early primaries we've seen are all ambiguous situations with a set of local particulars.

Salit: Absolutely.

Newman: I don't know that they have that much meaning. But, in November we'll know the overall results on who controls Congress and the Senate. Will the partisan pundits and the parties try to spin those events to their advantage no matter what happens? Of course they will. It was a little easier when Bush was the president. His political profile was more definitive. And Obama still has a huge social popularity that lives outside of the more narrow political battles.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: The only people for whom this situation really makes life easier are the hardcore racists because all their racism comes out, but it's under cover of these complicated issues and situations. For everybody else, it's a hard situation to read.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.