



## C'EST LA VIE

Sunday, December 6, 2009

*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, December 6, 2009 after watching selections from "The Charlie Rose Show," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and "The McLaughlin Group."*

**Salit:** Barack Obama is conflicted about Afghanistan and his Afghanistan policy. Many commentators said they saw that conflict in his West Point speech, and that in expressing that, he brought himself into line with where the American people are at on Afghanistan, which is conflicted. On the other hand, some said that this is contrary to what the history, tradition, and culture of America going to war or expanding war is supposed to be like, namely that you can't be.

**Newman:** Can't be what?

**Salit:** Conflicted. Ambivalent. Is Obama ambivalent about expanding the war in Afghanistan?

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** OK. And he's ambivalent because it's unclear whether there's a winnable strategy there, it's unclear what winning means? What's his ambivalence?

**Newman:** There's virtually nothing that can be counted as a success there. I've been saying for a long time that what was needed from the start was essentially a police action against the terrorists. There's no military action that can be successful there. If we're after Al Qaeda, they're probably not there. And if they were there a week ago, they're not there now because we're sending in 30,000 more troops. They went off to Pakistan, just across the road, and they'll stay there until July of 2011.

**Salit:** When we leave.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** Presumably Obama knows that's a real possibility.

**Newman:** Everyone does.

**Salit:** So the decision to go to war or to expand the war – we've already been at war for eight years – rather than convert to a counter-terrorism strategy, which we know some people were urging him to do, is based on what, do you think?

**Newman:** Politics.

**Salit:** Politics meaning domestic politics?

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** And, in the simplest terms, the domestic politics of it are to play to the center-right because the left won't desert him.

**Newman:** In chess terms, it means he'd rather delay the path of the knight than of the bishop, meaning he would like to cool out the hawks. He thinks the left will stand still for this position and the right will cool out some.

**Salit:** The right will cool out. The right in the country or the right in the Democratic Party?

**Newman:** The right in the country. And, if he does get out in July of '11, he'll be out in time for the left to forget about this before the presidential election. After all, you can almost certainly predict that in July of 2011, he'll have a victory. No matter what happens, it's going to be declared a victory.

**Salit:** He's got time with the left and he wants to cool out the right. So he "rolls the dice" on it, as somebody said. "Rolling the dice" basically means that you send in 30,000 more troops and what you're doing is building up Afghanistan's capacity to conduct its own police operations.

**Newman:** Right. That's what you're saying.

**Salit:** Yes. That's what you're saying you're doing. And you'll blow up any Al Qaeda and Taliban networks that you can get your hands on while you're there...

**Newman:** In my view, Al Qaeda won't be there.

**Salit:** So, you'll go after the Taliban.

**Newman:** You'll go after the Taliban. You'll have some battles. We're going to lose some people. It's very sad, very bad. We'll also kill some people. I find that very bad also. We'll essentially maintain roughly the status quo and then in July of '11, we'll say *We're bringing everybody home. We've done as much as we can. We've won. Karzai, carry on from here.*

**Salit:** Then what's the problem with that strategy?

**Newman:** No problem. Does there have to be a problem?

**Salit:** Some commentators seemed to think that there is a problem. I'm leaving aside the moral problem of war. Dexter Filkins of the *New York Times* said, 'Being in

Afghanistan is like walking through the Old Testament. It's a country that's been broken and shattered. You can't make anything happen in 18 months.'

**Newman:** You can get pregnant and give birth in 18 months.

**Salit:** That's true.

**Newman:** I don't agree that there's a problem. I think it was an OK speech by a good orator about a situation that simply doesn't merit a lot of passion. It's a response to Al Qaeda because they're bad guys. But there's nothing much to say about it.

**Salit:** Other than it's become Obama's war.

**Newman:** It's been his war from the get-go.

**Salit:** Unlike Iraq.

**Newman:** Exactly.

**Salit:** So he's basically taking responsibility for it and trying to finish it.

**Newman:** And now he's going to wrap it up. This is how he's wrapping it up.

**Salit:** David Brooks of the *New York Times* saw, to use his term, the "emotional" side of this. Obama is trying to project a "sense of limits." Our goals are limited, our time is limited, our commitment is limited, the results we're expecting are limited. This is what we're doing. Brooks is suggesting that there's some problem with that being the framework.

**Newman:** What is that problem?

**Salit:** He doesn't explain it, but I guess what he's saying is that's not how America goes to war. America goes to war the way we did in World War II.

**Newman:** I think the president of the United States is in a better position to say how the United States goes to war.

**Salit:** Than a columnist for the *New York Times*.

**Newman:** Well, yes, given the fact that Obama decides how it's done. In some ways, this whole debate is a non-event.

**Salit:** You might not like this question because it's a contrary to fact conditional, but if the right were less mobilized against Obama and the left were more mobilized, would Obama do something different with the situation?

**Newman:** No.

**Salit:** He would not. So, when you said earlier that this strategy is a political choice, it's not as if another set of circumstances would produce another set of choices?

**Newman:** No. Who are the Republicans going to run for president in 2012?

**Salit:** I don't know.

**Newman:** Well, he's not worried about Sarah Palin.

**Salit:** No.

**Newman:** I suspect she favors nuking the entire Middle East.

**Salit:** Yes, since she can't see it from her living room.

**Newman:** If the Republicans ultimately decide to come to their senses and go more moderate, whoever they run for president will take roughly the same position on Afghanistan that Obama is taking. So, what's to worry about?

**Salit:** What are the risks for Obama then? The guy from the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass, says, 'The risk is, what happens if you get to July 2011 and none of the Afghan capacity has grown?'

**Newman:** But that doesn't matter. The troops are going to be withdrawn because they succeeded. Failure is not a possibility.

**Salit:** But Haass is saying, 'What if it doesn't succeed?'

**Newman:** What would happen to count as not succeeding?

**Salit:** The Karzai government falls apart and the Taliban controls more territory? Though even if the Karzai government does fall apart, the Taliban won't gain control over more territory while U.S. troops are there.

**Newman:** Yes. And do you think everything succeeded in Iraq? Iraqi soldiers and police are being killed morning, noon, and night in Iraq.

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** So are we reconsidering whether we really did succeed in Iraq with the surge? There's not a word of that. You don't try these things and fail. You always succeed. All Obama is saying, in effect, is that by this strategy, we're going to do as much as we can to help eliminate the Taliban and build up the Afghan army and police by July of '11. How can you fail at that?

**Salit:** You can't because you've done all you can do. And that's what you've said you're going to do.

**Newman:** He's not going to give a speech in July of '11 saying we killed every Taliban member in the history of the world. He's going to say, *We did all that we could. Things are somewhat stabilized. We slowed down the momentum of the Taliban...*

**Salit:** *And we're getting out.*

**Newman:** *...and now we get out. Goodbye.*

**Salit:** Sounds like a plan.

**Newman:** It's a modest proposal. If you're strategically willing to accept war – which all the critics do, left and right, except for fringy anti-war people like myself – it's going to satisfy everybody. What does he have to worry about, you ask? Jobs.

**Salit:** Yes. What the economic indicators are showing is that the downturn in jobs, the job depression, is slowing down. We're not in a job recovery, but the depression is slowing down. Presumably, everybody takes that to be a good sign because you have to do that before you start to cross over to the other side.

**Newman:** In general, that's true. If you're down 10 runs, you have to score 3 before you can score 10.

**Salit:** Exactly. So where do they go from here on the jobs front? As many people have pointed out, they haven't spent any stimulus money on job creation. They spent stimulus money on saving the banking system. The popular will for spending additional stimulus money, putting the country further and further into debt, may be pretty weak. How does Obama think about that?

**Newman:** He's going to do several modest things. He's going to pass a modest health bill and make modest moves with unemployment insurance.

**Salit:** Extend benefits, keep the safety net in place.

**Newman:** By the time the next election comes around, he'll claim – and probably correctly – that he's done what he could do because it was a very deep recession and that SOB George W. Bush and the bankers got us into it. So we did all that we could do. And now give me four more years and I'll show you prosperity.

**Salit:** Not a bad argument.

**Newman:** It's sensible, if modest. But he's a progressive man, a moderately progressive man. He has related to the war in Afghanistan as if it were a necessity. Why? Because

we got attacked and we had to do something. Everyone believes that. So he's having his war of necessity. People say he's not passionate about it. Why would he be passionate about it? He's pissed off about it because some guys got together and schemed to blow up the World Trade Center. And they pulled it off. We had to do something. We didn't do, in my opinion, what we should have done which is an intensive and extensive police action and get the masterminds, as in Osama bin Laden. We didn't do that. We got some of his lesser people. Then, we stupidly sent them to Guantánamo where we punished them illegitimately. So that turned much of the world against us, even though everybody hated these people as killers, but they were effectively turned into victims. I guess we'll get them out of Guantánamo eventually. We'll put them on trial, which will take forever. And somewhere down the road they'll be punished. The whole situation is botched, in my opinion. But everybody agrees that we have to smack somebody in the face because they messed with us. So, we'll do something which may or may not be that, but we'll call it that.

**Salit:** And then we'll finish it.

**Newman:** Yes. And we'll even mess with a few people who probably had nothing to do with it, like Saddam Hussein. But who can say that he doesn't deserve it? He's a bad guy anyhow, so what the hell. And, to make a bad joke, c'est la vie.