

Washington, D.C. - Tim Funk, Charlotte Observer

Iraq. Religion in politics. And the 2008 presidential primary calendar. All headline-grabbers. And all areas where Rep. David Price, 65, of Chapel Hill has taken a lead.

The longest-serving Democrat in the N.C. congressional delegation, Price sponsored a House resolution -- along with Democratic Rep. Brad Miller of Raleigh -- directing President Bush to submit a detailed exit plan for Iraq. A Baptist with a divinity degree from Yale, Price also contributed to a recent book, "One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and Politics." And the former Duke University political science professor is taking heat from New Hampshireites as head of a Democratic Party Commission that wants other states to join the opening round of 2008 primaries.

Price recently spoke with the Observer. An edited transcript:

Q. Do you agree with Rep. John Murtha's call to immediately withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq?

"Brad and I have a more developed approach: an exit strategy, with the focus on both exit and strategy. The present situation permits an initial drawback. But we also want a full plan going forward. Bush has never given a strategy, much less an exit strategy. (His) policy failures can become a rationale for not being able to leave. And that's dangerous thinking because our presence there -- perceived by many to be permanent -- is part of the problem. We've got to let it be known we have a plan to disengage. We need to leave in a way that minimizes loss of life and gives the Iraqi government a decent chance."

Q. Are Democrats divided on Iraq?

"Yes. We were divided on the vote to go to war. (Note: Price voted against invading Iraq). And we're not all of one mind on the exact shape of an exit strategy. However, there's a lot that unites us. Up to now, the more important division has been between those who buy into 'stay

the course' and those who have been saying, 'We need a plan for turning the country back over to the Iraqis.' Democrats overwhelmingly are on the exit strategy side. Now some Republicans are coming our way."

Q. What do you say to the president and vice president, who think you're emboldening the enemy?

"It's a smear tactic. A smear tactic questions your opponent's motivation and sometimes his patriotism. Instead of coming to grips with arguments, it's a way of dismissing the argument. And, substantively, it's nonsense. I'll take a back seat to nobody in supporting these troops and pressing for equipment to make them safe."

Q. A recent Pew Research Poll found that only 29 percent of Americans see the Democratic Party as friendly to religion. Explain that.

"Basically, conservative churches -- or a certain number of them -- have cast their lot with the Republican Party and vice versa. (In the 1950s and '60s), most Southern Protestant churches didn't focus on a social message. Most focused on individual morality. A very common criticism, which I shared in, was that that was only part of the gospel. Now, ironically, those churches have mobilized. And not on behalf of the kind of causes that we had in mind."

Q. How do you fix the Democrats' image with religious voters?

"I don't have to strain to establish a (religious) connection. All I need to do is talk about where I came from and where I am now. And there are millions like me. I often say in a roomful of Democrats, 'What made you a Democrat? What made you politically active?' It often has to do with religious and moral convictions."

Q. But there's been a hesitancy among Democrats to talk about that.

"In this (recent gubernatorial) campaign in Virginia, (winning Democrat) Tim Kaine found a way. It wasn't a matter of his advisers telling him, 'Go out and talk about religion.' Tim Kaine happens to have a story about his mission work in Honduras, and how it changed his life. So he talked about that. We all have our own stories. Especially in the South. I always quote (evangelical writer) Jim Wallis, who said, 'Where would we be if Martin Luther King had kept his faith to himself?' We all need to ask ourselves that question."

Q. Your Democratic commission will recommend that two to four states join Iowa and New Hampshire in the early voting. How about North Carolina or South Carolina?

"South Carolina would be high on the list. The criteria for choosing will focus on racial, ethnic, regional diversity. South Carolina's already got a good place (a February primary). It may decide that's good enough. Or it might take advantage of this opening."

Q. Why should the current calendar be changed? "Because we have two states dominating at the beginning. Both are fine states -- I admire their retail politics tradition and the kind of vetting they give candidates. But they do have something of a monopoly. The idea is to have a more diverse set of states. South Carolina is quite different from Iowa and New Hampshire."

Q. Is it frustrating that North Carolina seems to have absolutely no influence on who the presidential nominees will be?

"Yes. If North Carolina could look at a single date for both a presidential and a non-presidential primary, we'd be in a stronger position. The other thing we'd like to do on this commission is move the beginning (of voting) from January to March and then get a better spread of contests through the season. A state like North Carolina that didn't want to go at the very front end would still have the prospect of having some impact if it was better paced."