

By Betsy O'Donovan

DURHAM — **David Price**, who represents North Carolina's Fourth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, also holds a doctorate in political science at Yale University and is a professor of public policy and political science at Duke University.

This excerpt of an interview on Thursday has been edited from a longer transcript.

The Herald-Sun: I was reading a piece that Kyle Scott and Troy Kickler wrote that argued that the Republican presidential candidates completely misunderstand federalism, and it made me start thinking about our odd national obsession with the founders. I'm particularly interested in the ways we invoke their intentions, and when and why, and I wondered whether you might have any insight.

David Price: It really is striking how much the tea party types, to the extent you can generalize, they talk about the Constitution but seem not to realize very few historians or constitutional scholars would share their sense of Constitutional history — not just the original document or debates, but also the precedents since then that have interpreted the document.

The fact of the matter is, you'd never know this from their rhetoric, but the motivation for the Constitution was the weakness of government, to correct the weakness of government under the Articles of Confederacy. The founders sought to achieve what they called "energy in government." That was [Alexander] Hamilton's phrase. The notion was that you couldn't flounder around with the states having veto power. You had to have a constitutional system that would let power be exercised.

They were also attentive to power being checked and balanced, and that's where the three branches of government come from, and the elaborate interdependence of those branches.

The founders weren't interested in unchecked power, but the whole point of the constitutional

exercise was to strike a better balance, to have a government that could function as a national government that could not be hampered by the states but at the same time be sensitive to the people.

I used to tell students, if they wanted to understand American constitutional structure, they had to read the Federalist Papers, but if they wanted to understand American politics, they had to read the Anti-Federalist Papers. That's the best nutshell I can give of the period we're in now. The viewpoint characteristic of the anti-federalists has taken hold on the Republican right, and that is characterized by the tendency to blame government for everything that goes wrong, the tendency to see conspiracy all over the place, the tendency to stigmatize power, not to understand the responsible exercise of power, but simply to pay no attention to the need that any society has for effective government.

H-S: The thing that's so striking, I think, is that absolutely everyone in American politics seems to claim to stand directly in line with the founders' intent, but — well, this is a fundamentally different world. Should we really be wrapped up in the idea of being direct heirs to the framers? Is that even a worthwhile argument?

Price: It's not an argument that is conclusive, usually. Let's put it that way.

It's very hard to prove. In fact, it's impossible to prove.

I think it's inevitable that we do think about it. They're historical figures whom we admire and so, especially in stressful times, it's natural, probably, to try to extrapolate. We do that a lot now with FDR, not just with the founders, but with Lincoln, FDR, the presidents who took us through tough times.

There is a kind of mindset. Think about Madison, for example, the main author of the Federalist Papers Madison had a very fine sense of how to balance energy in government with appropriate checks and safeguards, and that's a worthy model, I think, of what we constantly should be doing to ensure that government doesn't operate beyond its proper bounds.

It's useful to think about that, to try to internalize the way great thinkers address these things.

H-S: I was listening to an interesting interview on "The Diane Rehm Show" this week and a guy from The Heritage Foundation [Editor's note: it was actually Jonathan Wiseman, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal] was talking about the way we idealize the Works Progress Administration. He pointed out that the WPA emptied towns, gave guys pickaxes and shovels and told them to go build the Hoover Dam, but these days a road project would be a handful of guys with a lot of heavy machinery. So, does it handicap us when we think we can find solutions in the past?

Price: It can, but it can help us find models and inspiration. What was the point of the WPA? It was to stimulate economic activity, to let people who were out of work, who were desperate, to help them put bread on the table, to directly put them to work. It was also a way of getting some needed projects done in ways that would have ripple effects through the economy.

I happen to think construction still works that way. I think that's why what the president has proposed, with the emphasis on schools and highways and bridges, is the way to get things done.

It's not as labor-intensive; there are differences. You've got to take notice of those, but when people say, "We can take lessons from the New Deal and efforts that worked and didn't," I still think that's a useful exercise.

H-S: I promised to keep you no more than 20 minutes, and I don't want to run over our time. But I guess what I want to know, at last, is what you think about the idea that our culture, in which the talking point and the sound bite are so crucial, has inherited anything from the founders. The Federalist Papers, for example, were pretty much the opposite of a sound bite.

Price: We do still take inspiration from them, and I don't think it's just because they were founders. I think it's because they were a particular kind of founders, very much aware they were building for the future. They didn't want to tie things down with too much detail, too much anticipation of what would be required.

A lot of countries have constitutions that are dozens of pages long, if not hundreds. Our Constitution is a bare-bones document. It's a very spare document with the actual implications and interpretations left for future generations.

There are certain firm principles, and the Bill of Rights added other principles to what the drafters had created, so there are some fixed values and fixed prohibitions in the document, but I think it's a remarkably open-ended one and one that leaves, as I said, the blanks to be filled in by future generations.

H-S: So, one last question. How should Americans think about the founders, and this idea that all legitimate political ideas emerge from the founders' intent?

Price: I have a talk I give to school kids about the American flag, and I say, "What other country's flag ever changes?"

We have 13 stripes and that never changes, but that field of stars, it changes. I can remember when it was 48.

That's indicative of the way our Constitution needs to work. We have fixed principles and values we were founded on, but we need to understand that democracy is a work in progress. That Constitution existed with slavery, with prohibitions and requirements in voting, and with women before suffrage.

We had a lot of growing to do, and we still do. That's the way to think about this, and that will not satisfy the people who want and need answers to everything, because it's not always clear how to balance the ledger.

A dynamic, expanding country with challenges to meet, you've got to have some sense of balancing the fixed truths and values and the need to be open to the future and expansive, and to find new ways of achieving things. That's the best I can do. That's a political challenge that

every new generation has to meet.