



**2011 John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities
Remarks by the award recipient David Price
Oct. 21, 2011
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
Durham, NC**

I am very grateful to the North Carolina Humanities Council for the generous citation and for the 2011 John Tyler Caldwell Award. I am honored more than I can say to join the list of distinguished past recipients. This award means all the more to me because I knew John Caldwell and had the highest respect for him as a teacher and educational leader, a champion of liberal education, and a warm and engaging human being whose counsel and encouragement meant a great deal to many people, including me. It's good to see Dr. Caldwell's sons, Chuck and Andy, again, and I'm pleased they could join us. I want also to thank all of you for being here, Dick Brodhead for his remarkable lecture, and Tom Ross for such a generous introduction.

As for the kind words said about me, I will simply recall my experience as a divinity school student being interviewed for a Kent Fellowship to undertake graduate study. One of the interviewers was Hans Frei, a theologian of great distinction. At one point he asked me how two well-known theologians might approach a particular issue. I took something of a leap, opining that although these thinkers started from quite different premises, they might actually come to the same conclusion on this particular issue. Professor Frei leaned forward: "Mr. Price!" he exclaimed, "I think you are exactly right! But I'm not going to ask you to explain it, because I'm afraid you would mess it up."

So tonight I will try not to risk "messing it up." I do want to speak personally, however, about three "connections" I have experienced with and through the humanities, connections between what I have read and researched and taught in American political thought and ethics and what our country is now experiencing. That is the best way I know to express my indebtedness and gratitude to those who initiated me into historical and philosophical studies and to convince you, if anyone here needs convincing, that what you are dispensing – whether by teaching or writing or interpreting, or supporting those who do – connects in a powerful, sometimes transforming, way with the challenges and dilemmas we confront in daily life.

I've strayed pretty far from the academic vineyards, but I can still say that nothing gives me greater satisfaction than when former students tell me how much something that happened in my classroom or around the seminar table influenced or benefitted them. We all have debts of this sort: for me they include Peter Walker and E.P. Douglass, who first introduced me to American intellectual history as a Carolina undergraduate; William Lee Miller, who introduced me to Reinhold Niebuhr and other social ethicists at Yale Divinity School; and political and social theorists such as Frederick Watkins, Roger Masters, David Calleo, Sidney Ahlstrom, and Staughton Lynd at Yale's graduate school. I always enjoyed the humanistic side of political science – political theory – more than its behavioral or institutional aspects, although I suppose in retrospect it is fortunate that I always kept that dual track of teaching and research on Congress and American politics going!

The first connection pertains to what one might call the "Antifederalist moment" we are now experiencing in American politics. I used to tell my students that if they wanted to understand our constitutional history they should read *The Federalist*, but if they really wanted to understand American politics, they should read the Antifederalists. American revolutionary thought, as Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and others have pointed out, was distinctive in its juxtaposing of power and liberty –

with little sense that power might serve or expand liberty, or that governmental power might counter power in other realms. The inclination rather was to see the power of government and the liberty of citizens as fundamentally opposed. This proved to be problematic as a governing principle and, after six perilous years under the Articles of Confederation, the drafters of the Constitution sought to strike a new balance between what they called “energy in government” and the checks and balances that would keep that government within its proper bounds.

The Antifederalists were having none of it. In considering the proposed government, one of them wrote to a Boston newspaper, we “ought to look upon those who are to put it in motion as our enemies – to be careful what we give, to see what use it is to be put to, and where to resort for a remedy if it is abused.”¹ The Antifederalist legacy has positive aspects, including the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution. But the extreme anti-governmental strain’s continuing impact is decidedly mixed – often leading to a misdiagnosis of whose power we should be concerned about and throwing up ideological obstacles to the practical and judicious use of governmental power. The Tea Party movement is only Antifederalism’s latest manifestation, ironically posing as the defender of Federalism and the Constitution. Understanding the historic power of Antifederalist themes in American thought can help us understand the appeal such ideas have to a major segment of America’s population and how, at least for now, they have gained sway over one of our major political parties.

The second connection also harkens back to a recurring strain in American political thought, a “communitarian” strain that has often provided a counterpoint or corrective to the dominant themes of liberal individualism. The roots are Puritan and Transcendentalist, but the fuller articulation came in the Progressive era with thinkers ranging from philosopher Josiah Royce to pioneer sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, to Herbert Croly, W.E. B. DuBois, and John Dewey. These thinkers caught my attention early on and led me to make the late 19th—early 20th century the centerpiece of my teaching and writing in American political thought.

Communitarian thought invokes values and assumptions that exist in some tension with those central to the American liberal tradition: our interdependence as well as our autonomy; responsibilities as well as rights; identity, solidarity and obligation as well as freedom and voluntarism. It thus has serious implications for how we think about our common life and about public policy. This realization shaped the approach I took in the 1970s as part of the young faculty group launching what is now Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy. My assignment was to figure out what the ethics offering should look like in a new-model public policy curriculum—after Watergate, our director, Joel Fleishman, was fairly certain there should be such an offering! Working with like-minded colleagues across the country, with the help of a foundation grant that Joel secured, I decided that at the graduate level we should add an ethical component to policy analysis. This meant examining concepts of human well being and the public good prominent in our philosophical and moral traditions—liberty, justice, the public interest, community--and trying to discern their implications for public policy. One’s thinking about affirmative action will be powerfully shaped, for example, by whether one sees college admissions as a contest among meritorious individuals, or as a mechanism for compensating individuals for past deprivation, or as an instrument for meeting the needs of the community, and of sub-communities, for trained leadership. I thought then, and I think now, that the communitarian tradition can bring unique insights, and often a needed corrective, to our policy debates.

The third connection involves what also must be regarded as a dissenting strain of thought, a sensibility at odds with prevailing views, although the text I will cite is among the most familiar in the American lexicon:

Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.²

Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural--words all the more remarkable for being uttered after almost four years of civil war, words that lead us to reflect on the perils of self-righteousness in politics or of absolutizing our own ideology or cause.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that Lincoln's words "put the relation of our moral commitments in history to our religious reservations about the partiality of our moral judgments more precisely than, I think, any statesman or theologian has put them."³ Lincoln expressed the moral commitment against slavery in uncompromising terms, along with his determination to "finish the work we are in." But there followed the religious reservation, the recognition that ultimate judgment belonged to God alone, the refusal, even in this extreme instance, to presume an absolute identification between his own cause and God's will.

We may express our sense of human fallibility, and our relationship to powers and purposes that we sense are larger than ourselves, in theological or non-theological terms. But the sensibility, the warning against pride and self-righteousness, is surely rooted in our religious and literary traditions. It counsels a kind of humility in political life whereby we decline to claim ultimate sanction for our own ideology or political cause and reject the pretensions of those who do make such claims.

I doubt that I need to argue very strenuously for the relevance of humility or of the "religious reservation" to today's politics. In citing this and the other two clear and present "connections," I mean to suggest and illustrate the ways that the study and reflection we undertake, particularly in the humanities, can illumine our personal lives and our shared history as well; it has worked that way for me. I am grateful for the opportunity to express my indebtedness to those who awakened my interest and deepened my understanding, and to commend and encourage as strongly as I can those who carry on this work today. Thank you.

Notes

- 1 - Cecilia Kenyon, "Introduction" to Kenyon, ed., *The Antifederalists* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. lxii.
- 2 - Philip Stern, ed., *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (New York; Modern Library, 1940), p. 841.
- 3 - Quoted in William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Second Inaugural: A Study in Political Ethics* (Bloomington, IN: Poynter Center, 1980), p. 8.