By background, two years ago David Price and I founded the Humanities Caucus to focus Congressional attention on the vital role of the humanities in our culture. The greater our challenges in the world, the more important it is to support institutions like the NEH and promote mutual understanding through exchange programs and visa policies that encourage interaction between foreign and American students and scholars.

The humanities have many aspects, the most critical from a policy dimension being to bring perspective to issues of the day. To understand our times we must understand the challenges our ancestors confronted in earlier eras and our neighbors face today in disparate parts of the globe.

I do not have the wisdom of this scholarly throng, so let me just frame a hypothetical situation and ask for your advice.

What if in a singularly great country a new president comes into office after a divisive election which produces questions of legitimacy requiring a handful of judges to determine the outcome. And what if this newly ensconced president is suddenly struck with an unprecedented challenge - an attack on his country, its financial infrastructure, implicitly its culture, by a relatively small group of extremists led by a martyrdom-seeking figure plotting from a far-away, mountainous redoubt?

Would it be helpful for this president to have read Greek tragedy – Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides? Or perhaps Greek mythology – tales, for instance, of Oedipus?

Would it be helpful to read Thucydides? The story of Melos comes to mind. Early in the Peloponnesian Wars the Athenian assembly voted to send a fleet of ships to conquer the island of Melos whose people had decided to remain neutral rather than support Athens against Sparta. A day or two later the assembly reconsidered and a fast ship was sent to order the fleet to return. Thirty years later the issue was revisited. The fleet was sent again, this time without remorse. The men on the island were killed and the women and children subjugated. Thucydides recounted the episode without pontification but the moral was clear: the traumas of war had callously degraded Athenian values.

Would it be helpful to read Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*? It took generations for Rome’s strength to ebb and Pax Romana to unravel. Could a 21st Century superpower find its status eroding more quickly, particularly if it lost its discipline and philosophical moorings?

Would it be helpful for officials in charge of security policy to review the tactics of an early South Carolina patriot named Francis Marion – a.k.a. the Swamp Fox – who successfully took on one of the best trained armies of the 18th Century – the British – by using unorthodox, asymmetric tactics: sneak attacks followed by retreat to the swamps?
When it comes to intervention, would it be helpful to question whether there are 20th Century lessons of relevance? Does not resistance to the US involvement in Vietnam and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan demonstrate once again the extraordinary power of nationalism, the desire of people to control their own destinies and make their own mistakes? If a playwright in Czechoslovakia, a shipyard electrician in Poland, a pope in Rome armed only with faith could stand up to Soviet armies, might not there be lessons for any occupying power, even if that power perceives itself to be well-intentioned, devoid of imperial motivations?

Would it be helpful for policy makers to seek meaning in the visual arts? Does not, for instance, Mauricio Lasansky’s Holocaust series, currently at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, provide a powerful reminder of the moral imperative: “Never Again?”

And does not Hannah Arendt’s philosophical treatise, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, describe how easily two of the more advanced cultures in human history became ideologically captive to “-isms” of hate?

In attempting to understand what institutional approaches lessen the prospect of sparking baser instincts, would it not be relevant to review American history and our commitment to the rule of law? Are we more likely to facilitate or restrain future episodes of man’s inhumanity to man if we part with our heritage and so inflate a doctrine of American exceptionalism that we provide ourselves the right to ignore accepted international norms and law when it suits us? Are we so strong, so wise, and so well intentioned?

If we find law inconvenient, should we not expect others to adopt a similar stance? Is there anything more pseudo-realistic than refusal to advance the rule of law?

Are we more likely to win or widen the War on Terror if the only country ever to have used atomic weapons were to employ chemical-plumed warheads or bunker-busting tactical nukes in an effort to slow another country from developing weapons of mass destruction? More perilously, would our preemptive resort to such weapons legitimize their future use by a long-memoried people against us or our allies?

Philosophically, would it not be wise to raise as front-and-center considerations abstract notions of justice, fairness and the common good? For instance, in crafting tax and spending policies as they relate to domestic priorities as well as humanitarian concerns abroad, is this not an appropriate time to recall the 19th Century injunction of Jeremy Bentham and the British utilitarians to pay heed to concern for the greatest good of the greatest number?

And as the Executive establishes policies on domestic surveillance and prisoner detention, might it be helpful to be mindful of the Fourth Amendment as well as the role defined by the Constitution for the first and third estates?

Finally, is literature not more relevant to understanding the social fabric of world politics than the treatises of neo-con chest thumpers?

For years I have suggested to students that Laurence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* provides more geopolitical wisdom than balance of power strategists.

Set in inter-war Egypt, each of Durrell’s four books chronicles the same series of events from the eyes of a different participant. While the events repeat, the stories are profoundly different. The implicit
moral is that one set of eyes, one set of interactions, is insufficient to gain a full grasp of what is happening around us. Likewise, in world politics one country’s perspective is not enough. The view and views of others matter.

Here, I am honored to note the presence today of a member of the Administration who has had the backbone to stand up both for law and for history – the Archivist of the United States, Allen Weinstein. Every society has a Santayana, a scholar or sage who suggests that failure to study the past invites repetition of previous mistakes. But how can we fully understand the past if our public records are over-classified and kept from public view for overly long periods of time? Weinstein has put his job in jeopardy by objecting to what he sees as closed-society techniques – efforts by the Executive branch to thwart timely public access to government records.

Why does this matter? Decisions of governments in an era of weapons of mass destruction are profound because of their lack of precedents as well as their consequence. No prior generation has ever had responsibility for managing weapons that could destroy life on the planet. In an era of escalating destruction and accelerating change, history gallops at a pace which requires immediate scholarly attention. The more government attempts to shield itself from public review, the more it endangers society.

In graduate school I was a student of revolution. Until the 19th Century, the meaning of revolution related principally to the Latin roots of the word, which trace back to the revolving of a wheel. In wheels of historical fortune, change generally involved a return to a social circumstance that existed before. Now the unprecedented is increasingly an element of the challenges of life. This is why it is so critical to chronicle the immediacy of decision-making if society is to learn from its own actions.

Let me conclude with one observation, one notion, and one encouragement. The observation is that America has never had greater leadership in business, the arts, in literature, science and every field of academia. The singular leadership exception is politics where powerful institutions are steered by inadequate helmsmen.

The notion is that of all the learned disciplines, the humanities tap and expand the imagination the most. Literature, art, history, religion and philosophy give meaning to our concepts of justice and goodness and shape our sense of beauty. They have never been more important to life on the planet because thought patterns that lack idealism and a sense of the other cannot comprehend a global dynamic. And thought which has not been imbued with imagination cannot cope with rapid change, especially when it has so many unprecedented elements.

Without reference to the guide posts of the humanities, society loses its soul. It becomes rudderless in the seas of societal change.

Finally, an encouragement. Politics today is superficial, increasingly characterized by an opportunistic desire to satisfy interest groups rather than advance the common good. Now is not a time for public indifference or scholarly cave sitting. Leaders in the humanities have a duty to provide perspective so that citizens can choose their public officials wisely and insist on accountability if the stewards of their government fail to uplift civilized values.

Thank you.
Good afternoon. I am glad to be here with you—glad to be here with my friend and colleague Jim Leach—first, to bring you a very brief progress report on some of the work on the Appropriations front of the Humanities Caucus, and then to offer some comments that I hope and believe will complement what Jim has just said about the areas of public life and public policy where we really do need the insights and the involvement of a revitalized humanities community.

You know about our caucus, and you know that we work on a number of fronts. As an Appropriations Committee member, I try to particularly watch some of those items and the subcommittee that handles the National Endowment for the Humanities, inexplicably, the Interior and Environment Subcommittee. We marked up that bill two days ago. The budget request could be a lot better; it could also be a lot worse. We are past the days, thankfully, where there is a determined ideological band that is attempting to bring down arts funding and, to some extent, humanities funding. But we really are in a mode—I guess a holding action is a way to put it—and that is certainly what we have going at the moment. The President’s budget for next year recommends level funding for the NEH at $141 million. We, once again, are advocating for a modest increase of $15 million. I hope we can pull that off later in the process but for now the Appropriations Committee has basically approved the President’s request.

Many of you know about our efforts. It is great to have our Archivist here, and I join in the commendation of his work. Many of you know about the effort we undertook with the National Historical Publications and Records Commission last year. A small federal program, it has the essential function of preserving and publishing our nation’s documentary sources. It has been the primary source for the publication of the papers of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and George Washington. And yet, the President last year proposed to zero out funding for the NHPRC. That is an item where a group like ours really can make a difference, I think. First of all, making sure members of Congress know that this exists and secondly, getting a critical mass of support for restoring this modest budget item. We got the program put back into the budget by the Appropriations Committee last year—unfortunately, we have to do it all over again this year. Once again it is not in the President’s budget. We are hoping for an appropriation of $12 million. You will need to stay tuned on that. You will also need to contact your own members of Congress and anybody else you can influence to make certain that people understand this is a program very much worth preserving and enhancing for that matter. This is a vital piece of our work and it deserves support.

I came to Congress from academic life. My training was a mixture of the humanistic side of political science and the social science side, I suppose, political science being a very broad-ranging discipline. I taught political philosophy and always enjoyed that. During my first teaching experience at Yale, with bright freshmen, we actually read through Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian Wars*. This was when the Black Panther trial and other adventures were out there on the campus and the demand for relevance was heard. There is not a person in this room who hasn’t heard that demand. It is a somewhat
intimidating demand sometimes—not something we always should cater to, I would say. But sometimes there are times when we should rise to that challenge. In any case, that challenge was in front of me as a new teacher—the students insisting that we could discuss Thucydides at any time. We really needed to be discussing the Vietnam War and the Black Panther trial, and all these things. The proposition I made to the students was, “Yeah sure, these are extremely important things, and we should be discussing them, so let’s do it this way. Let’s discuss these issues today, and then let’s meet on Saturday morning for a supplementary class and, at that point, we’ll go through Thucydides.” And to my shock, they readily accepted that offer. That tells you something about just how good those students were. As a matter of fact, I have never matched the intensity of teaching in those years. It really underscored for me the value of what I was doing for its own sake—the enjoyment of it—also the relevance: the kind of light that the humanities shed—in this case the great political philosophers on other areas of learning, national life, and national policy. So, we know that liberal learning carries its own value and shouldn’t be subjected in every instance to an instrumentalist kind of test. But as a matter of fact, probably none of us would suggest, on the other hand, that we are simply limited here to some kind of aesthetic appreciation. We know as a matter of fact, the humanities do illumine all areas of life and, in particular, they illumine all areas of learning and professional training; and we have to work at that business of illumination. It is extremely important. It is extremely worthwhile and the connections are waiting to be made.

I know about this firsthand from my own teaching experience because when I came to Duke, I not only taught political philosophy, but also was given the assignment of putting an ethics course together for the new public policy program. Students were studying mainly decision theory, economics, policy analysis, and other fields. But the founders of the program (this being right after Watergate) had a sense that there needed to be an ethical component, although it wasn’t quite clear what that should look like. So that was my assignment and I became part of a seminar, generously underwritten by the Ford Foundation, meeting every month up at the Kennedy School: people from all over the country figuring out what ethics and public policy should be all about. It was a very, very rewarding and exciting experience.

But that challenge of relevance was, of course, still there. I was thinking about this and about this appearance here today when I was driving around my district last Saturday morning. I heard a National Public Radio interview; some of you probably heard it. Scott Simon was interviewing Joseph Badarocco, a professor at the Harvard Business School. He was talking about a literature course he had taught as part of the business curriculum, and about how they had gone through these great works of literature with these business students. Scott Simon asked the question all of us would dread at the end of the interview: “Any indication this course is working?” And here was the professor’s response: “What’s interesting is that about twice a year, maybe three times a year, I’ll get an e-mail from somebody who took the course a while ago who is continuing to read books, who wants to ask me a question that’s come up at work or in their life that relates back to a particular story. These books engage people, trouble people, and that’s why they remember the story. One student said, ‘I’ve been thinking about this, and I think my father really was Willy Loman.’” Now, if Willy were an utter alien character—if he were easy to dismiss as a freak—the whole exercise of discussing these stories wouldn’t work out very well. He would be an odd specimen in a dish and the class would forget him. But, of course, it connected the literature and the life experience, and perhaps the connection was far clearer ten years later than it was at the time. At which point, Scott Simon says, “Professor, thanks very much for being with us,” and the interview was over. But I had that experience, and I will tell you it is extremely satisfying. I had a burden of proof on me, a burden of proof from students and fellow faculty members to defend: “Why are we reading John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin and Brian Berry

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and Michael Walzer and these philosophers?” In fact, we are not just doing case studies. We are actually reading some philosophy and then we are attempting to translate that into reasoning about public policy dilemmas—what can justice mean in this situation?—or other public interest questions. And the connections were not always evident, and the skills of the instructor were not such as to always make them evident. But, I must say, it is extremely satisfying, again, like the good professor, to have a student say ten years later, “You know, I’m really glad we went through John Rawls. I’m glad we had this course along with everything else we had, because I find I go back to those ideas and those challenges in my real life work.” You can imagine how satisfying that is. But it is satisfying not just in terms of a professor’s ego; it is also satisfying because we believe in what we do. We believe that the way we have spent our careers and have invested our time and effort really does have that broader importance, that broader relevance, and it is great to see that affirmed.

I want to make a couple of suggestions in closing, moving from my academic experience to what we’re involved in right now. There are a couple areas of great relevance that I think we do need to think about and take on. One has to do with this current emphasis on education for economic competitiveness, similar in some ways to the kind of post-Sputnik surge in science and math education that we saw when I was coming along. Now it takes the form of a lot of alarm being raised about where our students are in science and math and languages, and often it would appear that “no child left behind” in some cases means leaving the humanities behind. Reading, of course, is central to the program of accountability and testing, but in too many school situations, the arts and humanities are being crowded out as not-so-directly related to these measures of performance.

Tom Friedman wrote an interesting column—again, you have probably seen this—but let me just remind us of it. You know, we are doing lots of things that can be improved upon in American education, and certainly in this area of international competitiveness. There is reason for alarm with some of these statistics about math and science education. But we of all people should know better than to idealize the kind of education and training that is going on in some of these countries that we regard as our competitors. And, interestingly enough, leaders in those countries recognize that. Tom Friedman says, “Both India and China, which have mastered rote learning, and have everyone else terrified about their growing armies of engineers, are wondering if too much math and science, unleavened by art, literature, music, and humanities, aren’t making Indira and Zel dull kids and not good innovators. Very few global products have been spawned by India and China. Innovation,” he goes on, “is a synthesis often of art and science,” and then he concludes with a quotation from an Indian business leader: “We need to encourage more incubation of ideas to make innovation a national initiative,” says Azim Premji, the chairman of Wipro, one of India’s premier technology companies. “Are we as Indians creative? Going by our rich cultural heritage, we have no doubt some of the greatest art and literature. We need to bring that same spirit into our economic and business arena.”

So, is the glass half full or half empty? There are weak elements of American education, and we sometimes feel beleaguered, but the firm footing that the humanities have in American education is a strength, a strength in all sorts of ways, including our economic strength and our economic competitiveness, and our ability to innovate and create. So we should never forget that, and our educators should never forget that this humanities component, even if you are arguing from the ground of this economic challenge, is absolutely central. It is a competitive advantage, and we would be foolish to let it go.

Finally, as to the work of the Congress, I was just hearing a moment ago about the plans that you had for having the Baroness Mary Warnock come over and talk to you about her work with the House of

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Lords, and I’m sure you are sorry that she wasn’t able to come because of her duties in the House of Lords. But I have just been learning a little bit about what she’s doing over there, and about the way that she and other moral philosophers in some cases actually sit in Parliament and in other cases, have a conduit into the deliberations of policy makers that is really much more impressive and influential than what we have in this country.

There is a lot of talk these days about a funding squeeze in American research—and I am one of those who is decrying that—but you know there is also an ideological squeeze. There’s something wrong when a politically appointed press aide in his or her mid-20s can shut down what a senior NASA scientist has to say about climate change. And some of this does involve not just scientific integrity, but also the humanities and the kind of values that we need to bring to public policy. The Terry Schiavo debate in the U.S. House of Representatives was an utter disgrace, enough to bring despair on anybody in this room, I would think. The debates on cloning and the debates on stem cell research are not much better. You might say, “Well, theology is being brought to bear on policy making.” You know what kind of humanities deliberation and discussion and understanding I am talking about. I’m talking about not just theology and philosophy, in a kind of ideological manifestation, but theology and philosophy with depth and reflection and subtlety. And I think our current political woes, and the ideology that affects so much of our discussion and debate, is a product of inadequate theology, inadequate philosophy, more than the absence of those things. So that is a double challenge, not only to do a good job of establishing the relevance of these areas in the humanities, but also to instruct and educate and deliberate in those realms with a strong conscience, but also with subtlety and discrimination and understanding and openness. That is what you are doing and I admire you for it. Thank you.