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. There are, after all, few things more important or difficult than to bring perspective to problems of the present. To understand our times we must understand the challenges others confronted in earlier eras and 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, Aeschyles, 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 geo-political 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 learning 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.