

Comments Prepared for Delivery

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First, let me describe briefly what it is that the National Endowment for the Humanities does and its relationship with its colleague institution, the Georgia Humanities Council. The mandate of the NEH is to provide perspective derived from history, literature and philosophy and related disciplines to American citizens. We do this in a variety of ways, from support of basic research to preservation activities to public presentations. We are associated with and help fund fifty state and six territorial humanities councils. In this context, Georgia has one of the most innovative state councils and is so very fortunate to be led by Jamil Zainaldin.

To put a frame to both institutions (the NEH and the GHC), it might be helpful to begin with a set of quotations, not from Shakespeare or Frost, Toynbee or Twain, but from statute:

United States Code Title 20, Chapter 26, Subchapter I, Section 951 (sec. 2) ...

“The Congress finds and declares the following:

(1) The arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States ...

(3) An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better

understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.

(4) Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support ... access to the arts and the humanities ... to ... people of all backgrounds ... wherever located ...

Section 952 (sec. 3):

(a) The term ‘humanities’ includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history of criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.”

There have been times that many of us have had doubts about the ability of Congress to rise to national challenges, but this statute strikes me as supremely prescient.

In my 30 years in Congress, I had become increasingly concerned with what this statute describes as “the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.” Whether the issue was arms control or understanding Islam, issues of the family or macro-economic judgments, superficiality seemed too often to trump depth in the political life of the country. Hence five years ago I co-founded the Congressional Humanities caucus and now to my surprise find myself traveling the country as head of the agency whose mandate derives from the above cited statute.

Few subjects may seem duller than concern for public manners. But in the context of American history, where change was wrought in the crucible of debate about the nature as well as the rights of man, little is more important for the world’s leading democracy than recommitting to an ethos of thoughtfulness in the public square.

The concept of civility implies politeness, but civil discourse is about more than good etiquette. At its core, civility requires respectful engagement: a willingness to consider other views and place them in the context of history, philosophy and life experiences.

Comments several months back on the House floor involving advocates on both sides of the health care debate have gathered much attention, but vastly more rancorous, socially divisive assertions are being made across the land.

In recent weeks a Congressman who was one of our most distinguished civil rights leaders has been spat upon; a senior Member of Congress has been subjected to homophobic remarks; and with increasing frequency public officials are being labeled “fascist” or “communist,” sometimes at the same time. More bizarrely, hints of history-blind radicalism – notions of “secession” and “nullification” are creeping into the public dialogue.

One might ask what problem is there with a bit of hyperbole. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan’s observation about the media, the logic is the message.

Certain frameworks of thought define rival ideas. Other frameworks describe enemies.

If 400,000 American soldiers sacrificed their lives to defeat fascism, if tens of thousands more gave their lives to hold communism at bay, and if we fought a civil war to preserve the union, isn’t it a citizen’s obligation to apply perspective to incendiary words that once summoned citizens to war? There is, after all, a difference between supporting a particular spending or health care view and asserting that someone who prefers another approach or is a member of a different political party is an advocate of an “ism” of hate that encompasses gulags and concentration camps.

Citizenship is hard. It takes a commitment to listen, watch, read, and think in ways that allow the imagination to put one person in the shoes of another.

Words matter. They reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify – or cloud – thought and energize action, sometimes bringing out the better angels of our nature, sometimes baser instincts.

Stirring anger and playing on the irrational fears of citizens can inflame hate and sometimes impel violence.

Conversely, healing language such as Lincoln's plea in his Second Inaugural address for "malice toward none and charity for all" and President Obama's call in Cairo for greater understanding between the world's great religions can uplift and help bring society and the world closer together.

The challenge for citizens is to determine whether to identify with those seeking unity in diversity, or those who press debilitating cultural wars and extreme ideological agendas.

But civility is more than about governance. At issue is whether we perceive ourselves as belonging to a single American community with all its variety, and whether we look at people in other neighborhoods and other parts of the world as members of families seeking security and opportunity for their kin just as we do.

Whatever our backgrounds, in politics as in family, vigilance must be maintained to insure that everyone understands each other. Vigorous advocacy should never be considered a thing to avoid. Argumentation is a social good. Indeed, it is a prerequisite to blocking tyranny and avoiding dogmatism. Rather than policing language, the goal should be to uplift the tenor and tone of debate and infuse it with historical and philosophical perspective.

The poet Walt Whitman once described America as an "athletic democracy." What he meant was that 19th Century politics was rugged, with spirited debates about immigration, taxes, and slavery. Things could also get violent. A vice president, Aaron Burr, killed our greatest Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, in a duel triggered by Hamilton's claim that Burr was a "despicable" character.

So, uncivil acts, in this case legal in the state in which the duel occurred, are nothing new. What is new in our social discourse are transformative changes in communications technology, debilitating changes in American politics, and the gravity of issues facing mankind.

In teaching at Princeton and Harvard upon leaving Congress, I developed for lecture purposes a large number of what I termed two minute course in

governance. Let me cite several that point to some of the causes of American angst and division.

Political Science 101: The country over the past generation has been approximately one-third Democratic, one-third Republican, and one-third independent. Basic math tells us that one-half of one-third is one-sixth, so 16 2/3rds percent of the voters nominally control candidate selection in a typical election. But only one in four voters (often a fraction of this figure) participates in primaries where candidates are chosen. Thus, it is $1/4^{\text{th}} \times 1/6^{\text{th}}$, only $1/24^{\text{th}}$ of the electorate that determines who the candidates of the principal parties will be. This 4 percent is socially quite conservative on the Republican side and actively liberal on the Democratic. Consequently, legislative bodies intended to represent a vast cross-section of the American public come principally to reflect its philosophical edges.

Political Science 102: In primaries for president, Republican candidates lean to the right, where the vote is, and then, if nominated, scoot to the center in the general election; Democrats do the same, but begin from the left. When it comes to Congress, however, the scoot to the center is seldom evident. Approximately 380 House seats are gerrymandered to be “safe” for one of the parties. About half of these safe seats are held by Republicans and half by Democrats. With few exceptions, safe-seat members must lean to the philosophical edges to prevail in primaries. Once nominated, there is no incentive for politicians to move to the center, either as candidates or legislators, when their only serious electoral challenge is likely to come from within their party’s uncompromising base. Polarization is the inevitable result.

Psychology 101: An increasing number of issues in Congress are being projected as questions of morality rather than judgment. Advocates of one perspective assume that those with a different view are championing immorality. On the left, the problem is frequently evidenced by those who assume that increasing social spending for almost any compassionate cause is the only moral choice; on the right, by those who assume that the moral values of one or another group should be written into law to bind society as a whole.

Psychology 102: There is something about the human condition that wants to be allowed to make governing decisions at socially cohesive levels where citizens may have impact. Much is written today about globalism but this century is also

about “localism.” To adapt to a fast changing world, one must understand both of these phenomena – the fact, as Tip O’Neill repeatedly noted, that all politics is local and a corollary that all local decisions are affected by international events. The angst of our times is correlated to the concerns of peoples everywhere that their livelihoods are increasingly buffeted by forces outside the control of family and community.

Sports 101: A mid-20th Century sports journalist, Grantland Rice, famously observed that winning and losing are less important than how the game is played. Likewise in politics. The temper and integrity of the political dialogue are more important for the cohesiveness of society than the outcome of any election. In politics there are few rules and no referees. The public must be on guard and prepared to throw flags when politicians overstep the bounds of fairness and decency. As athletes compete to win, they learn to respect their opponents. Is it asking too much for candidates and their supporters to do the same?

Literature 101: In a set of four books published half a century ago called the *Alexandria Quartet*, the British author Lawrence Durrell describes urban life in Alexandria, the ancient Egyptian city on the Mediterranean, between the first and second World Wars. In the first book, Durrell spins a story from the perspective of one individual. In each subsequent book, he describes the same events from the perspective of others. While the surrounding events are the same, the stories are profoundly different, informed by each narrator’s life and circumstances. The moral is that to get a sense of reality it is illuminating to see things from more than one set of eyes. This observation can apply to interactions in a court room or town hall or on the international stage. What America does may seem reasonable from our perspective, but look very different to a European, African, Middle Easterner, or Asian.

Physics 101: Sir Isaac Newton set forth three laws of motion, the third of which affirmed that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction; in shorthand, action equals reaction. Social chemistry can be quite different. In the kindergarten of life, reaction can be greater than action. If, for instance, one were to malign a rival calling him for instance a “bum” or “crazy” or worse, or describe the country in which a person lives as “evil” or “backward,” the reaction might produce effects far greater than the precipitating words envisioned or intended.

Humanities 101: In the most profound political observation of the 20th Century, Albert Einstein suggested that splitting the atom had changed everything except our way of thinking. Human nature may be one of the few constants in history, but 9/11 has taught that thinking must change not simply because of the destructive power of the big bomb, but because of the implosive nature of small acts. Violence and social division are rooted in hate. Since such thought begins in the hearts and minds of individuals, it is in each of our hearts and minds that hate must be checked and our way of thinking changed.

Humanities 102: In Western civilization's most prophetic poem, *The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats suggests that "the centre cannot hold" when "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Citizens of all philosophical persuasions are displaying increased disrespect for their fellow citizens and thus for modern day democratic governance. Much of the problem may flow from the fast-changing nature of our society, but part of the blame falls at the feet of politicians and their supporters who use inflammatory rhetoric to divide the country. Candidates may prevail in elections by tearing down rather than uplifting, but if elected, they cannot then unite an angered citizenry. Negativity dispirits the soul of society just as it raises the temperature level of legislatures.

I have often assumed that in America process is our most important product, and that our Constitutional processes have propelled our history toward greater justice for all.

But we still have systemic weaknesses, particularly relating to the confounding dimension of money in politics, a problem that has just been further complicated by the recent Supreme Court ruling in the *Citizens United* case in which the court has approved direct corporate giving for and against candidates.

It is no accident that just as the gap between rich and poor is widening in America, so is the political gap between powerful elites and common citizens.

Politeness may be an aspect of civil discourse but civility and polite words are not synonymous. Moneyed speech that carries strings may be the most uncivil speech of all. It eviscerates reasonableness in public dialogue and distorts the capacity of citizens and policy makers to weigh competing views in balanced ways.

Many good people enter politics only to find that the system causes the low road to become the one most travelled. Politicians routinely develop conflicts that do not technically rise to a legal standard of corruption because legislated law and now judicial fiat have weakened that standard.

Speech is thus at issue from two perspectives. At one end, uncivil speech must be protected by the Court but filtered by the public and, at the other, corporate “speech” must not be allowed to stifle the voices of the people.

Just as civilization requires civility, democracy demands equality.

Thank you.