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Stop Funding Artistic Circuses

Since the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities were founded in 1965, their appropriations have grown from \$2.5 million each to \$158 million for the arts and \$151 million for the humanities. The two agencies have become a major cultural force.

They have done some fine things during these 15 years. The Endowment for the Arts has financed museum exhibitions and catalogues that would have been impossible without it. The Endowment for the Humanities has aided educational programs connected with exhibits, and the editing of documents like the Adams Papers. Yet both agencies have also been sailing dangerously off course. With the appointment of new directors by the Reagan Administration, there is a chance to change more than personnel.

The aims and standards outlined in the original legislation have been steadily compromised. Grants to artists, writers, composers and scholars have become minimal. The Endowments' programs are increasingly used to serve social and political policy first. More and more grants are dispersed according to geographical and ethnic formulas.

The N.E.H., for instance, has stretched the concept of humanistic research to pay for classes in films on the struggle of women office workers to improve their lot. The Expansion Arts Program of the N.E.A. — described as "a point of entry" to minority, blue collar and rural cultures — plainly has more political than esthetic significance. Such policies undermine the mean-

ing of arts and humanities. They should be reversed.

A report on the Endowments prepared for the Reagan Administration by the Heritage Foundation, and the recent report of the Rockefeller Foundation's Commission on the Humanities, agree: the focus should be on arts and humanities programs in the elementary and secondary schools as well as on support for leading cultural institutions. In short, de-emphasize artistic circuses, reaffirm quality and competence.

The argument against "elitism," which has been used to justify the current trend, is misleading. To suggest that excellence is an unworthy standard attacks the essence of art and scholarship. It serves only to cover up the politicization of programs. They are not being misused for heavy-handed propaganda; the American way is more benign. Democracy gives everyone a piece of the action and the ideal is to elevate all. But the effect is to level all, and to turn levers for excellence into patronage.

It is not possible, politically, to spend every endowment dollar on only the worthiest projects; to get approval for spending a dollar on excellence may require spending another 20 cents on some compensating "political" objective. But at the moment, alas, 40 cents, 80 cents — more and more every year — is being spent unworthily. Such wastefulness gains a spurious respectability as it becomes entrenched.

The answer is not to eliminate the Endowments, or to cut their funds, but to redeploy them.

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The Quarterly, 1 (Summer 1983) compliments,

M. E. Bradford

Subsidizing The Muses

MR. EVANS—Our first speaker, who is going to address historical development of this issue, has been both a practicing *litterateur* as a widely published author and critic, and has written a number of books and articles bearing on these subjects, and has also been associated throughout his career with the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was a grantee of the National Endowment in 1970; he was the Endowment's senior research fellow in 1977, and in 1980 became the senior advisor to the National Endowment for the Humanities transition team for the Reagan Administration. So in these various capacities, he has had a chance to observe the Endowment, participate in its activities and ponder its role. To begin our discussions with an historical overview of these questions, it is a great pleasure for me to present Professor Melvin E. Bradford.

DR. BRADFORD—Like most of the political institutions developed by and within the framework of the United States, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts did not come into being as a consequence of unequivocal corporate commitment to large-sounding, abstract propositions (Truth, Justice, Equality, Beauty, Peace, Love—you know the list), but issued rather from a fortuitous conjunction of history and rhetorical circumstances.

From the earliest days of the Republic there had been, of course, a school of thought represented by important Americans who, from time to time, called for the sponsorship of art or scholarship by the general government. On a few occasions where the specific objective of the funding proposed was to encourage piety toward "the American things" (the kind of "veneration" which Madison defines in *Federalist* 49), Congress has voted money for murals, paintings, monuments, buildings, monographs, and editions of significant papers. But until 1965 and the establishment by law (20, USC, 951 *et seq.*) of the National Endowments (within a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities), the official attitude of the American government toward humane letters and artistic

creation had been one of distant respect.

The pattern was established at the very beginning of our national experience, in the Great Convention of 1787, when his fellow Framers would not allow the enlightened James Madison to provide for a National University in the text of our Constitution — refused him even though George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson supported the same idea. For, as most of the Framers recognized, the arts and humanistic disciplines raise questions of value and taste. They create a context for evaluation and choice. And for a polity so internally various, defined by agreement on procedures, not purposes, a federal system which leaves to society in its component parts the task of defining the proper ends of man and of his life in this world, a scheme for "pouring" a cultural mandate "in from the top" was almost as explosive as a plan for imposing upon our recalcitrant multiplicity a national, "established" church. Hence, the difficulty of creating American equivalents for the British Academy or Arts Council or the French Ministry of Culture and Communication (or the *Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique*).

As private persons we have always agreed with James Madison that "learned institutions ought to be the favored objects of every free people." But until the United States had left behind its origins in hostility to remote and arbitrary power (*the* primary prescription of our Revolution), that agreement could not be translated into a Federal policy for educational or cultural largesse. The Fathers had been suspicious of every kind of consolidation — including the aesthetic variety. In the politics of culture, we have, therefore, more resembled West Germany (or even the Austrian Empire) than the ancient and relatively homogenous societies of Great Britain and France.

For 180 years of our national existence, questions concerning high culture had been the exclusive province of society — but not the state — of what we now call (in language that I find ominous) "the private sector." It is, of course, true that from 1932 onward some tentative steps toward government intervention in behalf of art

and scholarship, literature and performance, were taken by the New Deal. But the rationale for these initiatives was never normative, as support for art or learning, but rather circumstantial, as employment for the under-utilized talents of writers, painters, and musicians. Moreover, the WPA programs were often politicized, and argued in the minds of many against, not for, further Federal adventures in the sponsorship of culture. Observing the rigors of Socialist Realism as imposed on Russian writers, where in Robert Frost's phrase, sponsorship by the state meant for the artist a choice of "death or Pollyanna"; and remembering that from the time of Maecenas, or *le roi de soleil*, ministers of culture cum propaganda have almost always set a price on their favors, many American poets and scholars in the late 1930s wondered at what the modern equivalent of the "Sabine Farm" might cost them in the way of intellectual integrity.

Then came World War II and a pause in the exertions of the American government in behalf of culture. But with the high tide in expansion of federal power under the Great Society, with the onset of a massive federal program in science and technology under the auspices of the National Science Foundation (founded 1950) and other agencies, with the impact of the 1958 National Defense Education Act and an organized campaign on the part of powerful learned societies, and, finally, with a growing fear among educated Americans that, in the wake of Sputnik, tax money was being applied so as to create an imbalance in the intellectual life of the nation, the rhetorical situation of the advocates of an American ministry of culture had turned around. The occasion for lobbying the White House and the Congress was at last propitious. But, for many Americans, historic and circumstantial reasons, a ministry of culture is not what Congress authorized — or has since — or should.

The story of how the cultural Endowments evolved from the proposal stage into legal entities deserves an expansion in detail. For it renders unmistakably how far from what Professor Michael Oakeshott calls "teleological politics" — the kind we connect with *a priori* designs for the transformation of civilized life — were the beginnings of these curious creations. A forthcoming book on the NEH which I have been reading in manuscript contains a useful and judicious account of these events.



Dr. Melvin E. Bradford

Its author, Stephen Miller, argues properly that the *fons et origo* for both the NEH and NEA are to be found in the angry reaction to C. P. Snow's 1959 essay *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, and to the related 1964 *Report of the Commission on the Humanities*. This commission had been formed in 1963 under the auspices of the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the American Council of Learned Societies — an umbrella for 24 separate professional organizations representing the disciplines or concerns within the humanities. It produced the text for the campaign which produced the Endowments — both of them.

Snow's essay provoked all of this activity; it forced humanists to draw lines, to defend themselves, and to organize politically, which led finally to counterattack. For the humanists opened the discussion with observations on the baneful influence of overemphasis on science, and the arts were enlisted as interested parties who had a related claim for redress of grievances. Speaking for them was the National Council on the Arts, established within the Executive Office of the President, authorized in 1964 after John Kennedy's 1963 proposal for a National Arts Foundation was defeated in the House of Representatives. As it turned out, the arts and humanities needed to cooperate with

each other if they were to receive federal support. The humanists had the persuaders, and a momentum which derived from the 1964 *Report*.

But even though the humanists had the rhetoricians, the best lobby to argue for their needs, then as now, it was the arts who had the huge constituency and the glamour. In the end it was the latter interest which carried the day in a sharply divided House of Representatives. For, as the argument ran, only philistines could begrudge the arts a mere \$5 million for three years. When Lyndon Johnson, in his January 5, 1965, State of the Union address called for a National Foundation for the Arts, and his spokesmen (Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island in the Senate, Frank Thompson of New Jersey in the House), that following March 11, introduced a bill to create a National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities, few admitted philistines could be found. President Johnson's language, that it was "essential that the arts grow and flourish" if the Great Society was to be created, was echoed on all sides.

A Democratic Senator from Texas, Ralph Yarborough, spoke of an "American culture pressing forward toward her appointed rendezvous with a golden age." And the irrepressible Claude Pepper of Florida envisaged a future in which support for culture would "purify, beautify and . . . strengthen the soul of America." But the most revealing language connected with this legislation as it appeared on final passage and signing into law (Sept. 29, 1965) is the "Declaration of Purpose" which serves as its prologue and apology. From the perspective of the rhetorician, it is a summary of all that had transpired in effecting the enactment of the bill. I will illustrate in brief.

The "Declaration" begins by positing the importance of high culture, of art and humane learning. But first it defines these concerns as "primarily a matter of private and local initiative." Progress "in scholarship in the humanities and the arts" should engage the interest of the United States *because* it is necessary "to make men masters of their technology, and not its unthinking servant." That it is possible for Americans to neglect "wisdom and vision" or "the realm of ideas and of spirit" — to fail in their "understanding of the past," in their "analysis of the present," and foresight into the future — is assumed; as is the danger of a

"limiting preoccupation with science." All of this qualification implies the argument from circumstance that, as the government has created an imbalance, participated in a mistaken emphasis on the quantitative, so it must now act in behalf of the arts and humanities in order to restore the normal, balanced relation of the components of the nation's intellectual life.

And the inference follows that, since the federal power, because of our international responsibilities, is going to continue to lavish money in encouraging science, the necessity for corrective spending in the humanities and arts will also continue, but not so far as to offend against the primary responsibility of state, local and private institutions for the well-being of our cultural life.

Finally, the obligations of the United States in leading the Free World — obligations which oftentimes preoccupy us with science and technology — are themselves restraints upon that preoccupation in that we cannot hope to exercise "world leadership" on the basis of nothing more than "superior power; wealth, and technology." If we are to keep the respect of our allies among the civilized nations, we must keep our intellectual house (and our priorities) in order — another circumstantial argument for the National Endowments.

NEH and NEA grew rapidly after they opened their doors in 1966. The former spent \$11 million in 1970-71 and had a budget of \$72 million (plus \$7.5 million matching funds) for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1976. NEA expanded at about the same rate. After some fluctuation, the Endowments now receive over \$130 million each — though the increases in their levels of support seem to have levelled off. In these 17 years the political problems for NEH and NEA have been built into their creation, in the idiom which persuaded the nervous Congress to say Yes to such a fateful innovation. The rhetoric of "consciousness-raising" in the 1964 *Report*, the promise of reaching the general public with music and drama and ideas, conflicted directly, and from the first, with a desire to emphasize excellence and to allow artists and humanists to define what that excellence might be.

Particularly with the humanities did the rhetoric of the "quality of life" and "enduring values" play into the well-meaning but misguided hands of Senator Pell, Congressman

Yates, Mrs. Joan Mondale, and other cultural populists. Only by gestures, such as its recent emphasis on teaching in the humanities, and through a careful exposition of the link between informed choice and liberal arts training, may NEH accommodate the populists and still preserve its integrity. Dr. William Bennett's recent combination of the Public Programs and Special Programs divisions of NEH into a new office of General Programs is a step in the right direction — as has been his allocation of resources away from the tendentious, the time-serving, and the topical, which had come to spend almost 50 per cent of the NEH budget.

For an overemphasis on contemporary problems, without a long view of history and a sense of limits will, in an American institution, invariably descend into partisan politics. And a majority of American people are unwilling to sponsor with public funds partisan activities only barely disguised as creativity and scholarship, whatever their political flavor.

Moreover, for three hundred years, most humanists have been savants — Spengler's "Faustians" and Swift's "projectors" — contemptuous of any version of the general will except for the one which they alone understand. Therefore, they are citizens of the Republic of Letters, and not of particular commonwealths: thus deracinated when they prescribe for the present or speculate on the future. As a counter-culture, they will attract only hostile attention. If NEH were allowed by its friends in Congress to be primarily academic, if it were seen in analogy to NSF and not in comparison with NEA, perhaps some of this confusion of roles might be avoided.

The National Endowment for the Arts has a major problem which connects with its principal strength. It has almost become a slave of its constituencies, and of the insistence of the Congress that it define the arts so broadly that the number of these constituencies has multiplied more rapidly than its resources. Artists — all varieties of artists — are an *aristoi* of sensibility as well as of craft. Since the beginnings of modernity, they have enjoyed a sense of superiority that is a reflex of their alienation, their desire to transcend the mundane world through the experience of beauty.

I connect their characteristic behavior, their practice *vis a vis* the rest of their community, with the hero of James Joyce's *Portrait of the*

Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Daedalus. Congress and the White House listen annually to orchestrated versions of Stephen's sacrilegious prayer to Icarus, "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" — and then pile on top of their response to such impiety irrelevant outbursts of egalitarian social theory: for percentages of various minorities, of women, of regions, districts, and states. Intellectual confusion as to the nature of art, as performed or created, is implicit in their extraneous concerns, and must be handled with tact. For a change in the "Statement of Purposes" is unlikely, and the effort to produce such a change would be precarious, for both Congress and the Endowments.

Indeed, given the history I have just summarized, and some studied reflection upon it, I would recommend very few changes in the authorizing legislation for either of the National Endowments. I am uncomfortable with the evidence of bias that continues to come out of the various evaluating panels. Many of them reflect a point of view within a discipline that is too narrow to be indulged.

Furthermore, I have my personal doubts about the value of the various state programs. Their independence and consequent triviality are sometimes a cause for concern, but they are a reflection of the Federalism which prevents government cultural activities from expanding into the kind of Orwellian monster envisioned by Michael Mooney in his recent philippic.

For reasons of prudence which derive from the special qualities of artists and humanists as citizens, it is important that we *not have* an American ministry of culture; that we recognize Henry VII's hiring of Polydore Vergil to "invent" a Tudor history is more likely as a model of state patronage than Alfred the Great; and Jack Lang or Melina Mercouri more representative as ministers of culture than Andre Malraux; and therefore better that 90 per cent of the funding for artists and humanists continue to come from private sources and from state and local governments.

For this awareness and this practice are a protection against the future heating of the fires of ideology under the aegis of art or the mantle of learning — from an American version of President Mitterrand's recent conference in Paris which he expected "to prepare for the moral rejuvenation of the world." Combined and

enlarged and released to indulge their neophilia, the champions of such a cabinet-level post might well get power over it and draw up a "great plan" for progress in the arts and humanities, put away the circumstantial rhetoric of the present and do mischief on a mighty scale.

Artists and humanists must not be allowed to have *all* of the influence over the national consensus on the role which they should play in society. Private persons who have some notion of the arts and the humanities, of the role of the Endowments and the history of honorable patronage are, in their informed support of culture, a check upon such a possibility, and a guarantee that the historian or poet who is neither alienated nor radical nor a part of one of the established networks may, despite the condescension of his politicized peers, have a

chance to develop his skills. That is, if such contributors at the same time acknowledge that even the art and learning which may make them uneasy are a needed criticism of life in our time — a token of genius or beauty which at the same time lifts the heart.

Such thoughtful patrons are, for a free society, always in short supply. The National Endowments are a symbol of the importance attached to the products of imagination and reflection in the United States — and a token of the government's sense of responsibility in correcting cultural problems which it helped to create. But they are, together, a symbol which leaves the primary responsibility outside of their sphere, with a temperate and generous people who will decide on questions of value for themselves.

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Monday, July 16, 1984

N. E. X.
The Washington Post

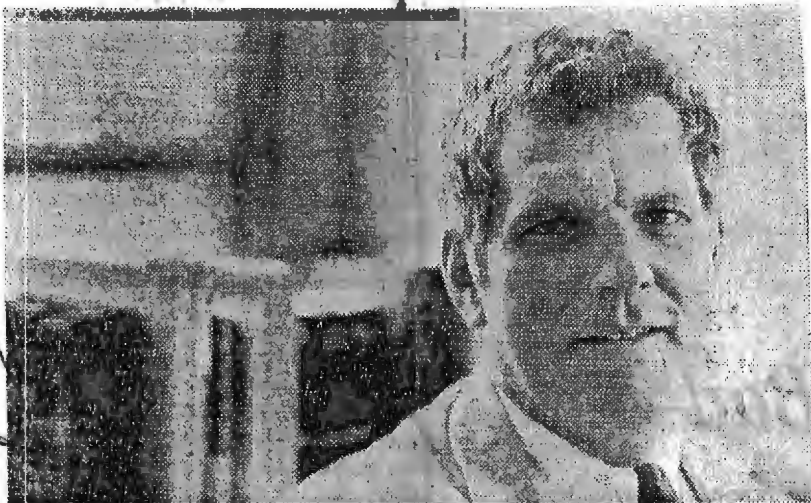
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QUIZ:

How much did the number of people employed by law firms nationwide increase between 1977 and 1982?

(Answer below)

THE FEDERAL REPORT



By Vanessa Barnes Hillan—The Washington Post

NEH chairman William Bennett favors traditional humanities courses.

Humanities Endowment Tilting Toward Classics

By Norman D. Atkins
Washington Post Staff Writer

When the faculty of Bethany College voted last year to require all first-year students to take a new "Origins of Modern Western Culture" course, it asked the National Endowment for the Humanities for \$39,000 to help develop it.

If the proposal had been made 10 years ago, the endowment probably would have turned it down. "It used to be you almost had to reinvent the wheel to get funding," said Daniel Cobb, dean of the faculty at the small liberal arts college in West Virginia.

But over the past two years, the endowment's priorities have shifted dramatically. Its education division has developed new funding guidelines designed to "undergird [college humanities] structures already in place" and place less emphasis on experimental courses.

The strategy has forced schools to rework the way they prepare funding proposals and, according to some, has helped to shape the debate over humanities education beyond the reach of the education division's \$19 million annual budget.

The new approach fits in with NEH chairman William Bennett's goal of returning the traditional humanities curriculum—history, literature, languages, philosophy and the classics—to the center of a student's education. But it also has drawn criticism for being elitist.

The changes have been implemented by Richard Ekman, who Bennett hired to head the education division in 1982. Ekman, who worked for the endowment from 1973 to 1978, said that when he returned he was surprised to find that the division remained preoccupied with curriculum innovations.

He says he had watched many schools like Bethany—which in the late 1960s relaxed its requirements that students take courses in a wide range of academic fields—now moving back toward a more traditional curriculum.

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In his first move, Ekman surveyed schools to determine what they considered their priorities for the 1980s. He said he kept hearing the same answers: that schools wanted to improve students' expository writing, widen their understanding of history and other countries, and provide them with an appreciation of the intrinsic value of the humanities.

But, Ekman said, the schools didn't turn to NEH for help because they saw the endowment as "a vehicle for deans and others to put off ideas that were crackpot." At that point, he said, he decided "the federal government should not be sponsoring things colleges or schools themselves do not think is important. Experimentation should be tried by the school itself."

For instance, the endowment decided to support the Bethany proposal, Ekman said, largely because the new course had the faculty's stamp of approval, assuring that it would become part of the school's long-term curriculum. Now when officials review proposals, he said, "we ask what's the likelihood of continuation."

For instance, when the faculty of Spelman College, a predominantly black women's liberal arts school in Atlanta, recently approved a new required course in world civilization, NEH awarded the school \$31,300 to help it shore up its library resources in that area.

"It may not sound fresh and exciting," Ekman said, "but we're in the business of improving instruction, and improvement isn't always newness."

The division's other priorities emphasize this philosophy.

It heartily supports the development of introductory courses because Ekman estimates that 87 per cent of college classwork in the humanities is done at the introductory level.

The division recently gave the University of Oregon nearly \$300,000, according to a proposal synopsis, to support "freshman seminars that will emphasize increased critical writing, more faculty involvement with student work, rigorous class discussion, and analytical skills to be taught by distinguished humanities faculty members."

In addition, Ekman has tried to encourage high schools to take similar steps. Under his tenure, the budget of the education division—one-seventh of the NEH budget—has been increased by \$5 million a year, and almost all of that has been given to secondary schools.

The endowment is about to announce a \$390,000 grant to 12 Pennsylvania colleges to conduct summer humanities institutes for high school teachers statewide. John Ratte, headmaster of Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Conn., said a program like this "is one of the best things the government is doing with our tax money."

But there are some members of the endowment's constituency who are concerned about the shift. Jay Kaplan, executive director of the New York Council for the Humanities, said that the policy change encourages "a canonical interpretation of the humanities which turns our understanding of the humanities to something akin to a museum of tradition."

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