

15. Cultural Agencies

In a society that constitutionally limits the powers of government and maximizes individual liberty, there is no justification for the forcible transfer of money from taxpayers to artists, scholars, and broadcasters. If the proper role of government is to safeguard the security of the nation's residents, by what rationale are they made to support exhibits of paintings, symphony orchestras, documentaries, scholarly research, and radio and television programs they might never freely choose to support? The kinds of things financed by federal cultural agencies were produced long before those agencies were created, and they will continue to be produced long after those agencies are privatized or defunded. Moreover, the power to subsidize art, scholarship, and broadcasting cannot be found within the powers enumerated and delegated to the federal government under the Constitution.

Thus, Congress should

- **privatize the National Endowment for the Arts,**
- **privatize the National Endowment for the Humanities,**
- **defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.**

The National Endowment for the Arts, a \$172 million "independent" agency established in 1965, makes grants to museums, symphony orchestras, and individual artists "of exceptional talent" and organizations (including state arts agencies) to "encourage individual and institutional development of the arts, preservation of the American artistic heritage, wider availability of the arts, leadership in the arts, and the stimulation of non-Federal sources of support for the Nation's artistic activities." Among its more famous and controversial grant recipients were artist Andres Serrano, whose exhibit featured a photograph of a plastic crucifix in a jar of his own urine, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which sponsored a traveling exhibition of the late Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs. (Thanks to an NEA grantee, the American

taxpayers once paid \$1,500 for a poem, “**lighght.**” That wasn't the title or a typo. That was the entire poem.)

The National Endowment for the Humanities, with a fiscal year 1995 budget of over \$179 million, “**funds** activities that are intended to improve the quality of education and teaching in the humanities, to strengthen the scholarly foundation for humanities study and research, and to advance understanding of the humanities among general audiences.” Among the things it has funded are controversial national standards for the teaching of history in schools, the traveling King Tut exhibit, and the documentary film *Rosie the Riveter*.

The 27-year-old Corporation for Public Broadcasting—FY95 budget, \$293 million—provides money to “qualified public television and radio stations to be used at their discretion for purposes related primarily to program production and acquisition.” It also supports the production and acquisition of radio and television programs for national distribution and assists in “the financing of several system-wide activities, including national satellite interconnection services and the payment of music royalty fees, and provides limited technical assistance, research, and planning services to improve system-wide capacity and performance.” Some of the money provided local public radio and television stations is used to help support National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service.

Poor Subsidize Rich

Since art museums, symphony orchestras, humanities scholarship, and public television and radio are enjoyed predominantly by people of greater-than-average income and education, the federal cultural agencies oversee a fundamentally unfair transfer of wealth from the lower classes up. *Newsweek* columnist Robert J. Samuelson is correct when he calls federal cultural agencies “highbrow pork barrel.” As Edward C. Banfield has written, “The art public is now, as it has always been, overwhelmingly middle and upper-middle class and above average in income—relatively prosperous people who would probably enjoy art about as much in the absence of subsidies.” Supporters of the NEA often say that their purpose is to bring the finer arts to those who don't already patronize them. But Dick Netzer, an economist who favors arts subsidies, conceded that they have “failed to increase the representation of low-income people in audiences.” In other words, lower income people are not interested in the kind of entertainment they're forced to support; they prefer to put their

money into forms of art often sneered at by the cultural elite. Why must they continue to finance the pleasures of the affluent?

Corruption of Artists and Scholars

Government subsidies to the arts and humanities have an insidious, corrupting effect on artists and scholars. It is assumed, for example, that the arts need government encouragement. But if an artist needs such encouragement, what kind of artist is he? Novelist E. L. Doctorow once told the House Appropriations Committee, "An enlightened endowment puts its money on largely unknown obsessive individuals who have sacrificed all the ordinary comforts and consolations of life in order to do their work." Few have noticed the contradiction in that statement. As author Bill Kauffman has commented, Doctorow "wants to abolish the risk and privation that dog almost all artists, particularly during their apprenticeships. 'Starving artists' are to be plumped up by taxpayers. . . . The likelihood that pampered artists will turn complacent, listless, and lazy seems not to bother Doctorow." Moreover, as Jonathan Yardley, the *Washington Post's* book critic, asked, "Why should the struggling young artist be entitled to government subsidy when the struggling young mechanic or accountant is not?"

Politicizing Culture

James D. Wolfensohn, chairman of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, recently decried talk about abolishing the NEA. "We should not allow [the arts] to become political," he said. But it is the subsidies that have politicized the arts and scholarship, not the talk about ending them. Some artists and scholars are to be awarded taxpayers' money. Which artists and scholars? They can't all be subsidized. The decisions are ultimately made by bureaucrats (even if they are advised by artists and scholars). Whatever criteria the bureaucrats use, they politicize art and scholarship. As novelist George Garrett has said, "Once (and whenever) the government is involved in the arts, then it is bound to be a political and social business, a battle between competing factions. The NEA, by definition, supports the arts establishment." Adds painter Laura Main, "Relying on the government to sponsor art work . . . is to me no more than subjecting yourself to the fate of a bureaucratic lackey."

Mary Beth Norton, a writer of women's history and a former member of the National Council on the Humanities, argues that "one of the great

traditions of the Endowment [for the Humanities] is that this is where people doing research in new and exciting **areas**—oral history, black history, women's history to name areas I am familiar **with**—**can** turn to for funding." When the **NEH** spent less money in the mid-1980s than previously, Norton complained, "Now, people on the cutting edge are not being funded any more." But if bureaucrats are ultimately selecting the research to be funded, how cutting-edge can it really be? How can they be trusted to distinguish innovation from fad? **And** who wants scholars choosing the objects of their research on the basis of what will win favor with government grant referees?

Similar criticism **can** be leveled against the radio and television programs financed by the CPB. They tend (with a few exceptions) to be aimed at the wealthier and better educated, and the selection process is inherently political. Moreover, some of the money granted to local stations is passed on to National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service for the production of news programs, including *All Things Considered* and the *MacNeil/Lehrer/NewsHour*. Why are the taxpayers in a free society compelled to support news coverage, particularly when it is inclined in a statist direction? Robert **Coonrod**, the executive vice president of CPB, defends his organization, saying **that** "about 90 percent of the federal appropriation goes back to the communities, to public radio and TV stations, which are essentially community institutions," Only 90 percent? Why not leave 100 percent in the communities and let the residents decide how to spend it? Since only 14 percent of CPB revenues come from the federal government, other sources presumably could take up the slack if the federal government ended the appropriation.

It must be pointed out that the fundamental objection to the federal cultural agencies is not that their products have been **intellectually**, morally, politically, or sexually offensive to conservatives or even most Americans. That has sometimes, but not always, been the case. Occasionally, such as during the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, the agencies have been used to subsidize projects favored by conservatives. The brief against those agencies would be the same had the money been used exclusively to subsidize works **unoffensive** or even inspiring to the majority of the American people. The case also cannot be based **on** how much the agencies spend. In **FY95** the two endowments and the CPB were appropriated less than \$650 million total, a mere morsel in a \$1.5 trillion federal budget. (The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Endowment for Children's Educational Television get \$23.5 million more.) The **NEA's**

budget is less than 5 percent of the total amount spent on the arts in the United States.

No, the issue is neither the content of the work subsidized nor the expense. Taxpayer subsidy of the arts, scholarship, and broadcasting is inappropriate because it is outside the range of the proper functions of government, and as such it needlessly politicizes, and therefore corrupts, an area of life that should be left untainted by politics.

The **politicization** of whatever the federal cultural agencies touch was driven home by Richard Goldstein, a supporter of the NEH. Goldstein pointed out,

The NEH has a ripple effect on university hiring and tenure, and on the kinds of research undertaken by scholars seeking support. Its chairman shapes the bounds of that support. In a broad sense, he sets standards that affect the tenor of textbooks and the content of curricula ____ Though no chairman of the NEH can single-handedly direct the course of American education, he can nurture the nascent trends and take advantage of informal opportunities to signal department heads and deans. He can "persuade" with the cudgel of federal funding out of sight but hardly out of mind.

The cudgel (an apt metaphor) of federal funding has the potential to be wielded to influence those who run the universities with regard to hiring, tenure, research programs, textbooks, curricula. No one has ever penned a more vivid case against government funding of the arts and humanities. That is an enormous amount of power to have vested in a government official. Surely, it is the kind of concentration of power that the Founding Fathers intended to thwart.

Suggested Readings

Banfield, Edward C. *The Democratic Muse*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Grampp, William. *Pricing the Priceless*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Kauffman, Bill. "Subsidies to the Arts: Cultivating Mediocrity." *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* no. 137, August 8, 1990.

Kostelanetz, Richard. "The New Benefactors." *Liberty*, January 1990.

Lynes, Russell. "The Case against Government Aid to the Arts." *New York Times Magazine*, March 25, 1962.

Samuelson, Robert J. "Highbrow Pork Barrel." *Newsweek*, August 21, 1989, p. 44.

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