

Cato Handbook *for* Policymakers

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53. Cultural Agencies

Congress should

- eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts;
- eliminate the National Endowment for the Humanities; and
- defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

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, by what rationale are its residents 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.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), an “independent” agency established in 1965, makes grants to museums, symphony orchestras, 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, “light.” That wasn’t the title or a typo. That was the entire poem.) The NEA’s fiscal year 2016 budget was \$148 million.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)—with a FY16 budget of \$148 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 49-year-old Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)—with a FY16 budget of \$485 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 to local public radio and television stations is used to help support National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

Note that the amount of arts funding in the federal budget is quite small. That might be taken as a defense of the funding were it not for the important reasons to avoid *any* government funding of something as intimate yet powerful as artistic expression. Also note how small federal funding is as a percentage of the total arts budget in this country. The NEA’s budget is about 1 percent of the \$17.2 billion contributed to the arts by private corporations, foundations, and individuals in 2014. [According to Americans for the Arts](#), the nonprofit arts are a \$135 billion industry. And [the NEA says](#) that arts and culture contribute \$704 billion to the economy. Surely they will survive without whatever portion of the NEA’s budget gets out of the Washington bureaucracy and into the hands of actual artists or arts institutions. Indeed, when the NEA budget was cut in 1995, private giving to the arts rose dramatically.

In 1995, Congress voted to phase out the NEA over three years. The 115th Congress should revive that commitment and also end federal

involvement with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Subsidies by the Poor to the 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. It's no accident that you hear ads for Remy Martin and "private banking services" on NPR, not for Budweiser and free checking accounts. Columnist Robert J. Samuelson called federal cultural agencies "highbrow pork barrel." Harvard political scientist Edward C. Banfield wrote, "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 long-time book critic, asked, "Why should the struggling young artist be entitled to government subsidy when the struggling young mechanic or accountant is not?"

Politicizing of Culture

James D. Wolfensohn, former chairman of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 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 anymore." 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 NPR and PBS for the production of news programs, including *All Things Considered* and the *NewsHour*. Why are taxpayers in a free society compelled to support news coverage, particularly when it is inclined in a statist direction? Robert Coonrod, former president of CPB, defends the

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 15 percent of public broadcasting revenues now come from the federal government, other sources presumably could take up the slack if the federal government ended the appropriation.

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 inoffensive or even inspiring to the majority of the American people.

Nor can the case against the cultural agencies be based on how much they spend. In FY16, a total of about \$781 million was appropriated for the two endowments and the CPB, a mere morsel in a \$4 trillion federal budget. The NEA’s budget is about 0.1 percent of the total amount spent on the nonprofit 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. As such, it needlessly politicizes, and therefore corrupts, an area of life that should be left untainted by politics.

Government funding of anything involves government control. That insight, of course, is part of our folk wisdom: “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” “Who takes the king’s shilling sings the king’s song.”

Defenders of arts funding seem blithely unaware of this danger when they praise the role of the national endowments as an imprimatur or seal of approval on artists and arts groups. Former NEA chair Jane Alexander said, “The Federal role is small but very vital. We are a stimulus for leveraging state, local and private money. We are a linchpin for the puzzle of arts funding, a remarkably efficient way of stimulating private money.” Drama critic Robert Brustein asks, “How could the NEA be ‘privatized’ and still retain its purpose as a funding agency functioning as a stamp of approval for deserving art?”

The politicization of whatever the federal cultural agencies touch was driven home by Richard Goldstein, a supporter of the NEH, in a 1982

article about the struggle for control of the NEH in the Reagan administration. 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, and curricula. 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.

Separation of Conscience and State

We might reflect on why the separation of church and state seems such a wise idea to Americans. First, it is wrong for the coercive authority of the state to interfere in matters of individual conscience. If we have rights, if we are individual moral agents, we must be free to exercise our judgment and define our own relationship with God. That doesn’t mean that a free, pluralistic society won’t have lots of persuasion and proselytizing—no doubt it will—but it does mean that such proselytizing must remain entirely persuasive, entirely voluntary.

Second, removing religion from the sphere of politics enhances social harmony. Europe suffered through the Wars of Religion, as churches made alliances with rulers and sought to impose their theology on everyone in a region. Religious inquisitions, Roger Williams wrote in 1644, put towns “in an uproar.” If people take their faith seriously, and if government is going to make one faith universal and compulsory, then people must contend bitterly—even to the death—to make sure that the *true* faith is established. If, instead, we enshrine religion in the realm of persuasion, there may be vigorous debate in society, but there won’t be political conflict. People can deal with one another in secular life without endorsing the private opinions of their colleagues.

Third, competition produces better results than subsidy, protection, and conformity. “Free trade in religion” is the best tool humans have to

find the nearest approximation to the truth. Businesses coddled behind subsidies and tariffs will be weak and uncompetitive, and so will churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Religions that are protected from political interference but are otherwise on their own are likely to be stronger and more vigorous than a church that draws its support from government.

If those statements are true, they have implications beyond religion. Religion is not the only thing that affects us personally and spiritually, and it is not the only thing that leads to cultural wars. Art also expresses, transmits, and challenges our deepest values. As the managing director of Baltimore's Center Stage put it, "Art has power. It has the power to sustain, to heal, to humanize . . . to change something in you. It's a frightening power, and also a beautiful power. . . . And it's essential to a civilized society." Because art is so powerful, because it deals with such basic human truths, we should not entangle it with coercive government power. That means no censorship or regulation of art. It also means no tax-funded subsidies for arts and artists, for when government gets into the arts funding business, political conflicts ensue. Conservatives denounce the NEA for funding erotic photography and the PBS for broadcasting *Tales of the City*, which has gay characters. (*More Tales of the City*, which appeared on Showtime after PBS ducked the political pressure, generated little political controversy.) Civil rights activists make the Library of Congress take down an exhibit on antebellum slave life, and veterans' groups pressure the Smithsonian to remove a display on the bombing of Hiroshima. An NEA official [asks grant recipients](#) to support a White House initiative. To avoid political battles over how to spend the taxpayers' money, to keep art and its power in the realm of persuasion, we would be well advised to establish the separation of art and state.

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