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TEN GOOD REASONS TO ELIMINATE FUNDING FOR THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

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As the U.S. Congress struggles to balance the federal budget and end the decades-long spiral of deficit spending, few programs seem more worthy of outright elimination than the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Indeed, since its inception in 1965, few federal agencies have been mired in more controversy than the NEA. Nevertheless, steadfast partisans of “welfare for artists” continue to defend the Endowment, asserting that it promotes philanthropic giving, makes cultural programs accessible to those who can least afford them, and protects America’s cultural heritage.

In fact, the NEA is an unwarranted extension of the federal government into the voluntary sector. The Endowment, furthermore, does not promote charitable giving. Despite Endowment claims that its efforts bring art to the inner city, the agency offers little more than a direct subsidy to the cultured, upper-middle class. Finally, rather than promoting the best in art, the NEA continues to offer tax dollars and the federal seal of approval to subsidize “art” that is offensive to most Americans.

There are at least ten good reasons to eliminate funding for the NEA:

Reason #1: The Arts Will Have More Than Enough Support without the NEA

The arts were flowering before the NEA came into being in 1965. Indeed, the Endowment was created partly because of the tremendous popular appeal of the arts at the time. Alvin Toffler’s *The Culture Consumers*, published in 1964, surveyed the booming audience for art in the United States, a side benefit of a growing economy and low inflation.²

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2 Alvin Toffler, *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 188.

Toffler's book recalls the arts prior to the creation of the NEA—the era of the great Georges Balanchine and Agnes de Mille ballets, for example, when 26 million viewers would turn to CBS broadcasts of Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. In fact, nearly all of the major orchestras in the United States existed before 1965, and will continue to exist after NEA subsidies are ended.

In spite of the vast splendor created by American artists prior to 1965, partisans of the NEA claim that the arts in the United States would face almost certain demise should the Endowment be abolished. Yet Endowment funding is just a drop in the bucket compared to giving to the arts by private citizens. For example, in 1996, the Metropolitan Opera of New York received \$390,000 from the Endowment, a federal subsidy that totals only 0.29 percent of the Opera's annual income of \$133 million—and amounts to less than the ticket revenue for a single sold-out performance.³

The growth of private-sector charitable giving in recent years has rendered NEA funding relatively insignificant to the arts community. Overall giving to the arts last year totaled almost \$10 billion⁴—up from \$6.5 billion in 1991⁵—dwarfing the NEA's federal subsidy. This 40 percent increase in private giving occurred during the same period that the NEA budget was reduced by 40 percent from approximately \$170 million to \$99.5 million.⁶ Thus, as conservatives had predicted, cutting the federal NEA subsidy coincided with increased private support for the arts and culture.

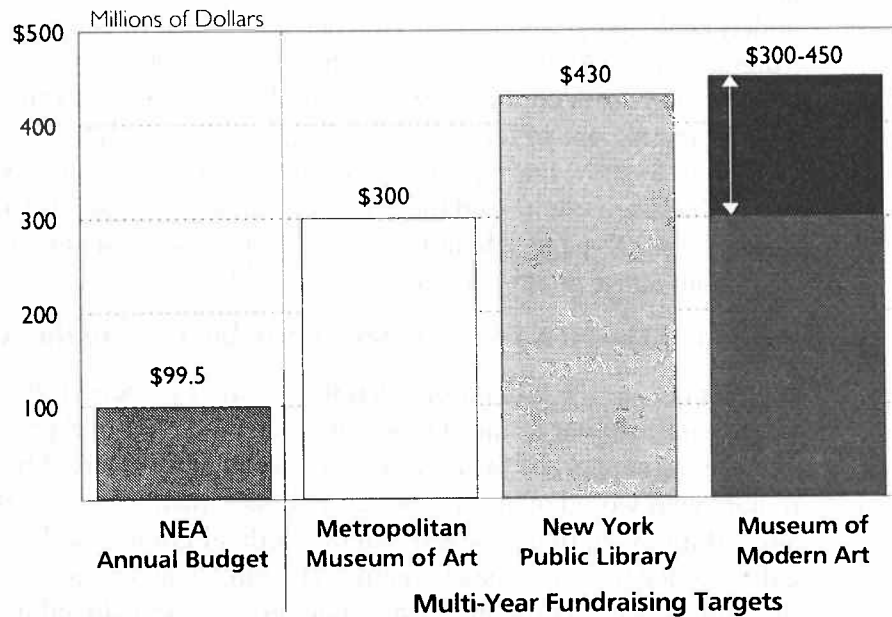
That many major cultural institutions are in the midst of successful fundraising efforts belies the questionable claim of NEA supporters that private giving, no matter how generous, could never compensate for the loss of public funds. As Chart 1 shows, many of these institutional campaigns have fundraising targets many times greater than the NEA's annual federal appropriation of \$99.5 million. In New York City, the geographic area which receives the largest relative share of NEA funding, the New York Public Library is raising some \$430 million (with 70 percent already completed), the Museum of Modern Art, \$300 million–450 million (with 30 percent raised), the Metropolitan Museum of Art some \$300 million (with 80 percent already obtained).⁷ In fact, philanthropist Frederick A. O. Schwartz, Jr., recently told *The New York Times* that “we've entered a period of institutional excitement comparable only to that which occurred after the Civil War until World War I when several of the city's great civic and cultural institutions were built.”⁸

In Great Britain, economist David Sawers's comparative study of subsidized and unsubsidized performing arts concluded that major cultural venues would continue to thrive were government subsidies to be eliminated. According to Sawers's calculation, 80 percent of all London theater box office receipts, including ballet and opera, went to unsubsidized theater.⁹ (Britain's renowned Glyndebourne opera, for example, relies entirely on private funding.)

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- 3 A typical sold-out performance at the Met brings in nearly \$485,000 in ticket revenue, given the average ticket price of \$125 and a seating capacity of 3,877.
 - 4 *Creative America: Report of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities*, Washington, D.C., February 1997.
 - 5 Joseph Ziegler, Testimony before House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 5, 1997.
 - 6 *Giving USA 1996* (New York: AAFRC Trust For Philanthropy, 1996).
 - 7 Judith Miller, “Big Arts Groups Starting Drives for New Funds,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1997, p. 1
 - 8 *Ibid.*
 - 9 David Sawers, “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” *Current Controversies* No. 7, Institute for Economic Affairs, London, 1993, p. 22

Chart 1

Major Cultural Institutions Do Not Need NEA Funds



Source: Judith Miller, "Big Arts Groups Starting Drives for New Funds," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1997.

Even smaller organizations can succeed without depending on the federal government. As Bradley Scholar William Craig Rice argues cogently in *The Heritage Foundation's Policy Review*, "The arts will flower without the NEA." His survey shows that many arts venues can easily replace NEA funding, and suggests a number of alternative strategies for those who might find the disappearance of the federal agency problematic.¹⁰

Reason #2: The NEA Is Welfare for Cultural Elitists

Despite Endowment claims that federal funding permits underprivileged individuals to gain access to the arts, NEA grants offer little more than a subsidy to the well-to-do. One-fifth of direct NEA grants go to multimillion-dollar arts organizations.¹¹ Harvard University Political Scientist Edward C. Banfield has noted that 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."¹² The poor and the middle class, thus, benefit less from public art subsidies than does the museum- and orchestra-going upper-middle class. Sawers argues that "those who finance the subsidies through taxes are likely to be different from and

- 10 William Craig Rice, "I Hear America Singing: The Arts Will Flower Without the NEA," *Policy Review*, March/April 1997, pp. 37–45.
- 11 Derrick Max, "Staff Briefing on the National Endowment for the Arts." U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, p. 29.
- 12 Edward C. Banfield, *The Democratic Muse* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); as cited in "Cultural Agencies," *Cato Handbook for Congress: 105th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1997).

poorer than those who benefit from the subsidies.”¹³ In fact, the \$99.5 million that funds the NEA also represents the entire annual tax burden for over 436,000 working-class American families.¹⁴

As part of the Endowment’s effort to dispel its elitist image, Chairman Jane Alexander has led a nationwide campaign painting the NEA as a social welfare program that can help underprivileged youth to fight violence and drugs. In congressional testimony, she has trumpeted her “American Canvas” initiative “to gain a better understanding of how the arts can transform communities.”¹⁵ But despite the heartwarming anecdotes, claims for the therapeutic use of the arts are not supported by empirical scientific evidence. Studies that claim to show the arts prevent crime are methodologically questionable, due to problems of self-selection. And the arts offer no cure for alcoholism either: Tom Dardis devotes his 292-page scholarly work, *The Thirsty Muse*, precisely to the high occurrence of alcohol abuse among American writers.¹⁶

Reason #3: The NEA Discourages Charitable Gifts to the Arts

Defenders of the NEA argue that the much of its benefit lies in its ability to confer an imprimatur, similar to the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval,” necessary to encourage private support of the arts. NEA officials have asserted frequently that by persuading donors who would otherwise not give, Endowment support can offer a financial “leverage” of up to ten times the amount of a federal grant award.¹⁷ There is little or no empirical evidence to support such claims. The only available study of “matching grants”—those designed specifically to stimulate giving—concluded that matching grants did not increase total giving to the arts. Instead, “matching grants” appear to shift existing money around from one recipient to another, “thereby reducing the private resources available to other arts organizations in a specific community.”¹⁸ Indeed, a study by the Association of American Cultures (AAC) revealed that private funders found major museum exhibits, opera, ballet, symphony orchestras, and public television to be “attractive” for donors without an official government stamp.¹⁹

Economist Tyler Cowen also sees an ominous effect to government arts programs: “Once donors believe that government has accepted the responsibility for maintaining culture, they will be less willing to give.”²⁰ This analysis is consistent with recent public statements from foundation executives that the private sector will not make up the gap resulting from decreases in NEA funding, despite record levels of private giving in recent years. Cowen’s conclusion: “The government can best support the arts by leaving them alone, offering background assistance through the tax system and the enforcement of copyright.”²¹

13 Sawers. “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” p. 22.

14 Heritage Tabulations from 1993 IRS Public Use File.

15 Jane Alexander, Testimony to the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 13, 1997.

16 Tom Dardis, *The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1982).

17 See Jane Alexander, Testimony to the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, May 8, 1996.

18 David B. Pankratz, *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), p. 55.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

20 Tyler Cowen, draft ms. for Chapter 6, “Market Liberalization vs. Government Reaction” in *Enterprise and the Arts*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press, pp. 22–31.

21 *Ibid.*

Reason #4: The NEA Lowers the Quality of American Art

NEA funding also threatens the independence of art and of artists. Recognizing how government subsidies threaten artistic inspiration, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that “Beauty will not come at the call of the legislature.... It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men.”²² Recent critics echo Emerson’s creed. McGill University Management Professor Reuven Brenner has declared: “The NEA’s opponents have it right. Bureaucratic culture is not genuine culture.... It was the unsubsidized writers, painters and musicians—imprisoned in their homes if they were lucky, in asylums or in gulags if they weren’t—who created lasting culture.”²³

Indeed, to many of the NEA’s critics, the idea of a federal “seal of approval” on art may be the “greatest anathema of all.”²⁴ Thus, to maintain its editorial independence, *The New Criterion*, a journal edited by former *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer, has rejected NEA funding since its founding some 15 years ago. In 1983, Kramer was a vocal, principled critic of an NEA program offering subsidies to art critics; his opposition forced the agency to scrap the grants.²⁵

When government gets in the business of subsidizing art, the impact upon art is often pernicious. According to Bruce Bustard, author of a catalogue for the current retrospective on art funded through President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Public Works of Art Project,” notes that the “New Deal produced no true masterpieces.” Instead, as *Washington Post* columnist James Glassman declared, the PWA “stifle[d] creativity,” producing works “that are dreary, unimaginative condescending and political.”²⁶

Cowen notes that the “NEA attempts to create a mini-industrial policy for the arts. But governments have a terrible record for choosing future winners and losers, whether in business or the arts.”²⁷ Government subsidies often can hurt the quality of art by promoting a new cult of mediocrity. Rice has pointed out that the NEA helps the well-connected and the well-established at the expense of less sophisticated—and possibly more talented—outsiders.²⁸ The NEA thereby reduces the importance of popular appeal for the arts, substituting instead the need to please a third-party government patron, and thus driving a wedge between artists and audiences.

In his major comparative study of subsidized and unsubsidized art in Great Britain, Sawers noted that government subsidies actually work to reduce choice and diversity in the artistic marketplace by encouraging artists to emulate each other in order to achieve success in the grants process. Privately funded venues, thus, are more artistically flexible than publicly funded ones. (For example, it was private orchestras that introduced the “early music” movement into Britain.²⁹) In addition, such favoritism endangers funding for otherwise worthy arts organizations merely because “they do not receive a public arts agency matching grant.”³⁰

22 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in *Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), p. 342.

23 Reuven Brenner, “Culture By Committee,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 1997.

24 Laurence Jarvik and Nancy Strickland, “Forget the Speeches: The NEA Is a Racket,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 22, 1995.

25 Hilton Kramer, “Criticism Endowed: reflections on a debacle,” *The New Criterion*, November 1983, pp. 1–5.

26 James K. Glassman, “No Money for the Arts,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1997, p. A17.

27 Cowen, “Market Liberalization vs. Government Reaction,” pp. 2–22.

28 William Craig Rice, *The NewsHour*, debate moderated by Elizabeth Farnsworth, March 10, 1997.

29 Sawers, “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” p. 39.

The threat to quality art from federal subsidies was already crystal clear to Toffler in the 1960s: "Recognizing the reality of the danger of political or bureaucratic interference in the process of artistic decision-making, the principle should be established that the United States government will make absolutely no grants to independent arts institutions—directly or through the states—to underwrite operating expenses or the costs of artistic production. Proposals for a national arts foundation that would distribute funds to foster experiment, innovation...are on the wrong track. They ask the government to make decisions in a field in which it has vested political interests."³¹

Reason #5: The NEA Will Continue to Fund Pornography

In November 1996, in a 2–1 decision, the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a 1992 ruling in the "NEA Four" case of Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes—all "performance artists" whose grant requests were denied on grounds their art lacked merit.³² The Court ruled that the 1990 statutory requirement that the Endowment consider "general standards of decency and respect" in awarding grants was unconstitutional.³³ The congressional reauthorization of the agency in 1990 had added this "decency provision" in keeping with recommendations of the Presidential Commission headed by John Brademas and Leonard Garment.

Without such a "decency" standard, the NEA can subsidize whatever type of art it chooses. As a result, attorney Bruce Fein called the Court of Appeals decision a recipe for "government subsidized depravity" that must (if not reversed by the Supreme Court) force Congress to "abolish the NEA, an ignoble experiment that, like Prohibition, has not improved with age."³⁴ Literary critic Jonathan Yardley, writing in the *Washington Post*, declared: "Only fools—of whom, alas, in the 'arts community' there are many—would argue that the federal government is obliged to underwrite obscene, pornographic or otherwise offensive "art."³⁵

There is no shortage of examples of indecent material supported directly or indirectly by the NEA. Nevertheless, Jane Alexander has never criticized any of these NEA grantees publicly. And the Clinton Administration has yet to file an appeal of the Ninth Circuit's decision. Moreover, no Member of Congress has yet attempted to provide a legislative fix that would require NEA grant recipients to abide by general standards of decency in their work.

On March 6, 1997, Congressman Pete Hoekstra (R-MI), Chairman of the Education and Workforce Subcommittee that has oversight over the NEA, complained about books published by an NEA-funded press called "Fiction Collective 2," which he described as an "offense to the senses." Hoekstra cited four Fiction Collective 2 books and noted that the publisher's parent organization had received an additional \$45,000 grant to establish a World Wide Web site. According to *The Washington Times*, the NEA granted \$25,000 to Fiction Collective 2, which featured works containing sexual torture, incest, child sex,

30 Pankratz, *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy*, p. 55.

31 Toffler, *The Culture Consumers*, p. 200.

32 Diane Haithman, "Did NEA Win Battle, Lose War?" *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1996, p. F1.

33 Affirming opinion of Judge James R. Browning, U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, filed November 5, 1996, in *Karen Finley, et al., v. National Endowment for the Arts*.

34 Bruce Fein, "Dollars for Depravity?" *The Washington Times*, November 19, 1996.

35 Jonathan Yardley, "Art and the Pocketbook of the Beholder," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 1997, p. D2.

and sadomasochism; the “excerpts depict a scene in which a brother-sister team rape their younger sister, the torture of a Mexican male prostitute and oral sex between two women.”³⁶ Pat Trueman, former Chief of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the United States Department of Justice Criminal Division, characterized the works as “troubling” and said the NEA posed a “direct threat to the prosecution” of obscenity and child pornography because of its official stamp on such material.³⁷ Incredibly, the NEA continues to defend such funding decisions publicly. “Fiction Collective 2 is a highly respected, pre-eminent publisher of innovative, quality fiction,” NEA spokeswoman Cherie Simon said.³⁸

The current controversy is nothing new for the NEA. In November 1996, Representative Hoekstra questioned NEA funding of a film distributor handling “patently offensive and possibly pornographic movies—several of which appear to deal with the sexuality of children.”³⁹ He noted the NEA gave \$112,700 over three years to “Women Make Movies,” which subsidized distribution of films including:

- “Ten Cents a Dance,” a three-vignette video in which “two women awkwardly discuss their mutual attraction.” It “depicts anonymous bathroom sex between two men” and includes an “ironic episode of heterosexual phone sex.”
- “Sex Fish” portrays a “furious montage of oral sex, public rest-room cruising and...tropical fish,” the catalog says.
- “Coming Home” talks of the “sexy fun of trying to fit a lesbian couple in a bathtub!”
- “Seventeen Rooms” purports to answer the question, “What do lesbians do in bed?”
- “BloodSisters” reveals a “diverse cross-section of the lesbian [sodomasochistic] community.”

Three other films center on the sexual or lesbian experiences of girls age 12 and under. “These listings have the appearance of a veritable taxpayer-funded peep show,” said Hoekstra in a letter to NEA Chairman Alexander. He noted that the distributor was circulating films of Annie Sprinkle, a pornographic “performance artist” who appeared at “The Kitchen,” a New York venue receiving NEA support.⁴⁰ In response, *The New York Times* launched an *ad hominem* attack on Hoekstra (while neglecting to mention that *The New York Times* Company Foundation had sponsored Sprinkle’s performance at one time).⁴¹

Another frequent response supporters of the NEA make to such criticism is to claim that instances of funding pornography and other indecent material were simple mistakes. But such “mistakes” seem part of a regular pattern of support for indecency, repeated year after year. This pattern is well-documented in the appendix to this paper.

36 Julia Duin, “NEA Funds ‘Offense to the Senses.’ Lawmakers Lip Arts Agency for Aiding Prurient Publications,” *The Washington Times*, March 8, 1997, p. A2.

37 Patrick A. Trueman, Director of Governmental Affairs, American Family Association, Testimony before the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 5, 1997.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Representative Pete Hoekstra, letter to NEA Chairman Jane Alexander, November 16, 1996.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Frank Rich, “Lesbian Lookout,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1997, p. A27.