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The National Endowment for the Humanities is now taking its turn as the focus of controversy. It's accused of a traditionalist bias in projects related to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing.

Critics say Lynne M. Cheney, the NEH's head, is shunning controversial projects that have been praised by review panels.
A new cultural clash

By Stephan Salisbury
Inquirer Staff Writer

For the last two years, as squalls of controversy battered arts policies of the federal government, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) managed to remain high and dry and remote from turmoil.

But now it appears there’s trouble in paradise.

A public debate has broken out this spring, pitting the government’s pre-eminent agency for funding historical and other cultural projects against large segments of the community of scholars and others who initiate and carry the projects out.

Proposed television documentaries, public exhibitions and other events tied to the 500th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World are the principal focus of this debate.

Critics contend that Lynne V. Cheney, head of the endowment since 1986, has torpedoed several splashy projects solely for political reasons. These critics argue that the NEH is promoting a pre-eminently European and conservative view of the so-called Age of Exploration while cloistering the views of Native Americans and scholars concerned with the effect of European voyaging on non-European peoples.

The NEH rejections have occurred, the critics maintain, despite high marks given the proposals by the agency’s review panels of experts.

The spurned projects all seem to share a nontraditional or multicultural approach and take a less-than-celebratory look at the effects of European expansion into the New World, all reflections of recent scholarship. As a result, some critics argue that the endowment is exhibiting an increasingly conservative bias in its grant-giving in general. Other critics say that the agency fears being drawn into any kind of controversy.

“There are two issues involved here,” said Lois Scharf, executive director of National History Day, a nonprofit organization that sponsors educational programs and seminars for secondary-school students and faculty. “One is the institutional process of the endowment. How does it work? How are grants made? What role does peer review play? What role does the National Council on the Humanities, a reviewing board, play? What role does the chairman play? How political, in the end, should the chairman be?

“The other issue is this broad-ranging intellectual debate going on, particularly in the humanities, over content, perspective … the whole issue of diversity, multiculturalism, globalization … I believe Lynne Cheney has taken a position on the side of the traditionalists [celebrating Europe]. … She is funding or she is not funding according to where she sits on this great scholarly issue.”

The controversial project rejections are few compared with the nearly 370 Columbus-related grants made by the NEH as of July 1990, the date of the most recent computer counts. Each of the rejected projects, however, is a high-profile, big-ticket item aimed at audiences outside scholarly preserves.

“If you kill one big first-rate project, that’s all it takes to send a message,” said Stanley Katz, executive director of the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella association of scholarly groups.

In one instance, 1492 — Clash of Visions, a four-part television mini-series portraying non-European empires flourishing at the time of the Columbus voyages, was denied a $500,000 production and script-writing grant last fall by Cheney. The series, which was supported by an advisory committee of eminent historians, had already received two NEH grants totaling about $100,000, and the production proposal had been lauded by an NEH peer panel and several outside experts.

Nevertheless, in September producer Yanna K. Brandt and others involved in the project were informed by the NEH that the project would not be funded because of its “lack of even-handedness.” The endowment’s letter of rejection said the series downplayed “distressing aspects” of Aztec culture, such as human sacrifice, while highlighting Spanish brutality.

One segment in the series portrays the Aztec and Spanish empires through two characters — a fictional Aztec merchant and Columbus. It is this segment that caused most concern at the agency.

Nancy L. Roelker, a visiting professor of history at Brown University who chaired (See ENDOWMENT on 4-C)
Humanities agency accused of bias

ENDOWMENT, from 1-C
the Clash of Visions advisory committee, said she traveled to Washing-
ton last September to discuss the reasons behind the rejection with Cheney. According to Roelker, Che-
ney complained that the segment "glamorized our Aztec hero" while tainting Columbus with the charge of "genocide." Roelker added that Cheney had argued that Hispanic-Americans would be "up in arms" if the endowment funded the project.

"You see, from our point of view, [Cheney] has got it absolutely wrong," said Roelker. "We’re the people who have the balanced program between the Europeans and non-Eu-
ropians, and she’s the one who has gone off the deep end in a reactionary-
direction.

On the matter of Columbus and genocide, Brandt argued that the characterization belonged to a Spanish America. It’s said.

other television objectivity especially important," be
Hispanic-Americans to
ment’s guidelines for public

Martin said Cheney’s remarks for an unfunded mini-series
Spain and Hispanics in the U.S. It’s about roots, if you will .

In August ‘88, Lisa was told she had been refused funding, despite the fact that peer-review panelists gave the project "glowing recommendations." I was told," Lisa recalled, "that it was turned down at the highest lev-
bles.

Why? "I don’t know," said Lisa.

"We do show that the Spaniards weren’t very nice. We do show pluses and minuses.

Martin, the NEH’s program and pol-
icy administrator, said The Buried Mirror was faulted not for its politi-
cal perspective but because it lacked diversity in its approach. "In gen-
eral, we do not support programs where there’s one point of view," Martin said.

The mini-series has also begun to attract political heat from Republi-
cans on Capitol Hill. On May 15, Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska lambasted the Smithsonian, which funded the Fu-
entes project after the NEH dropped it. Stevens said he had been told the series contained allegations of "genocide" and he characterized Fu-
etes as a "noncitizen" and a "Mexi-
can Marxist," according to the Wash-
ington Post. Smithsonian officials defended the program, which will air on PBS next year.

Douglas Foard, a former NEH staff member who is now secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and a board member of National History Day, said the NEH had grown increas-
ingly cautious in recent years.

"When the present chairman came in, I don’t think she was that familiar with the whole subject of the Columbus encounter. When she found out it was potentially a minefield, I think the agency backed away from

away from the program because it was "clearly labeled "global and mul-
ticultural perspectives on the Columbus quincentenary." Scharf was
amazed by the Cheney telephone call to Van Tassel.

“She did say something to the effect that ‘it will be a cold day in hell before I lift a finger for you again,'" said Scharf.

Sam Gammon, executive direc-
tor of the American Historical Associa-
tion, introduced Nancy Roelker, of Clash of Visions, to Cheney. He got a phone call, too.

"I was being scolded for having such disreputable friends," joked Gammon. "I don’t think [Cheney] holds grudges in the sense that she says, ‘I’m going to get that person.’ She does, unquestionably. As any body would say, ‘You have to be careful about that crowd. They’re a little bit odd.’"

These critical private calls have their public parallel, many believe, in the dispute over Carol Iannone, a conservative, Cheney-
backed nominee to the National Council on the Humanities. The 30,000-member Modern Language As-
sociation (MLA), a group of univer-
sity professors of literature and lan-
guages, is among several organiza-
tions that have criticized the nomi-
ination, saying Iannone is unquali-
fied.

This has led to a barrage of public denunciation of the MLA by powerful conser-
atives such as columnist George Will.

Critics argue that such a charged atmosphere is inimical to the spirit of free inquiry, particularly since the decision-making process at the NEH is shrouded in secrecy. For years, the State De-
partment refused to issue visas to the leftist best-selling author of Terra Nova and The Old Oringo.

But the NEH program officers "thought it was a very nice project and said, ‘Please submit it,'" Lisa recalled. "Then it was rejected. It’s not so much a cul-
turally a history. It’s about Spanish America. It’s also about